

NECESSARY ILLUSIONS IN KATE CHOPIN'S «ATHÉNAÏSE»

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There seems to be a certain naiveness and simplicity in Kate Chopin's fiction which often lulls her reader's critical faculty and makes for a child-like, innocent enjoyment of her short stories. But at its core, this naiveness is a cheeky one; Kate Chopin delights in making a fool of us readers; she exploits our gullibility to lead the plot wherever she wishes. Following an inferential conception of communication, I shall first analyse «Athénaïse,» one of her short stories, to establish whether this impression of naiveness is not ultimately deliberate. On the one hand I will try to argue that in this short story, Kate Chopin revels in giving us a certain picture of her characters, only to substitute it later for another. To make such radical changes without alienating her readers, Chopin has to guide our sympathies; in doing so she always operates on the borderline between what is permissible in terms of presenting a story and what amounts to falsifying facts. On the other hand, I will also try to argue that by deceiving us, Chopin ultimately runs the risk of fooling herself and thus of diminishing the quality of her fiction. In «Athénaïse» her technical bravado leads her to obscure wider social issues –specifically problems of marriage– which the text initially addresses; this devaluates the potential quality of the story.

Nowadays linguistics works with different models of communication. In *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, the traditional code model, according to which the speaker encodes information into language and passes it over to an addressee who decodes the message, is substituted for what Sperber and Wilson call the inferential model. According to this model, communication is achieved by the audience's recognition of the communicator's informative intention (23).

The code model's conception of communication is that the information provided by the speaker is the same as that received by the addressee. The inferential

model, however, works in a different way, because it is based on Grice's co-operative principle. According to Grice, what the addressee expects of the speaker is to

Make [his] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [he is] engaged. (Cole and Morgan 45)

Once the addressee thinks he knows the informative intention of the speaker, he will gear the decodification of the message in the direction of this intention, so that information that does not support the addressee's accepted informative intention of the speaker has a high probability of not being taken into consideration.

It is not a question of rejecting one communicative model for the other; both have their share of truth. The interesting thing here is that approaching Kate Chopin's fiction from an inferential model of communication is extremely rewarding. Kate Chopin delights in playing with her readers' inferences, and therefore exploits the fact that readers generally do not question Grice's co-operative principle. They readily believe that the narrator makes his or her conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, etc. Using the referential model and taking as case-study «Athénaïse»'s presentation of Cazeau in «chapter I» as opposed to the rest of the story, I will try to show how masterfully Chopin often fools the reader, exploiting his belief in the writer's co-operation.

The story starts by introducing Cazeau, the main character's husband, who has just been abandoned by her, to the reader: the first thing we hear about him is that

He did not worry much about Athénaïse, who, he suspected, was resting only too content in the bosom of her family; his chief solicitude was manifestly for the pony she had ridden . . . This misgiving Cazeau communicated to his servant, old Félicité . . . (103)

The trusting reader logically infers from this that Cazeau is a brute who deserves no better than being abandoned by his wife; Cazeau obviously does not rate his wife very highly when his mind rests on his pony rather than her, and he discusses his marital problems with his servant.

There follows a mainly physical description of Cazeau, which is a curious mixture of wildness, softness, clumsiness and respectability:

He was tall, sinewy, swarthy, and altogether severe looking. His thick black hair waved, and it gleamed like the breast of a crow. The sweep of his moustache, which was not so black, outlined the broad contour of the mouth. Beneath the under lip grew a small tuft which he was much given to twisting, and which he permitted to grow, apparently for no other purpose. Cazeau's eyes were dark

blue, narrow and overshadowed. His hands were coarse and stiff from close acquaintance with farming tools and implements, and he handled his fork and knife clumsily. But he was distinguished looking, and succeeded in commanding a good deal of respect. (103)

This description does not effect in the reader a change of attitude towards Cazeau's moral status. He may be a good-looking fellow indeed, but mere physical traits are not in themselves significant in moral terms, they do not sufficiently change our judgement of fictional characters. Unless stronger, moral evidence is produced, Cazeau is and remains a brute. Moreover, the ensuing description of Cazeau's surroundings reinforces the impression of wildness we had gained by the description of his physical traits: we have a «big room, with its bare floor and huge rafters, and its heavy pieces of furniture» (103). But wildness is here associated with darkness –the floor rafters and furniture «loomed dimly in the gloom» (103), Félicité is a «restless shadow» (103) –and loneliness–«He ate his supper alone, by the light of a single coal-oil lamp» (103).

Although Chopin is here already directing the reader's feelings, the reader does not feel imposed on, mainly because nearly all semantic qualities attributed here to Cazeau are of a physical, not moral character. Cazeau's loneliness is later emphasised by «There [being] nothing else before him beside the bread and butter and the bottle of red wine on the table» (103-104); and his brutishness is further stressed by the fact that it is not him but Félicité who

was occupied by her mistress's absence, and kept reverting to it after he had expressed his solicitude about the pony . . . Cazeau shrugged his shoulders for answer . . . Félicité might have known better than to suppose that he cared. He told her she was a fool. It sounded like a compliment in his modulated, caressing voice. (104)

Further evidence is given about Cazeau's hardness:

Cazeau had many things to attend to before bed-time; so many things that there was not left to him a moment in which to think of Athénaïse. He felt her absence, though, like a dull, insistent pain. (104)

And again:

The marriage had been a blunder; he had only to look into her eyes to feel that, to discover her growing aversion. But it was not a thing . . . to be undone. He was . . . prepared to make the best of it, and expected no less on her part. He would find means to keep her at home hereafter. (104-105)

If I have quoted at length here, it is because I have tried to reconstruct for the reader the pattern according to which Kate Chopin played a trick on me during my first

reading of «Athénaïse.» I want the reader to relive my first reaction to «Athénaïse,» which was to identify Cazeau as the baddy of the story. I have not only quoted all the evidence I could find for condemning Cazeau, but have also included the evidence Chopin can later fall back on to justify the way she started her story off, once the reader has changed his mind about Cazeau and might want to accuse the author of falsifying data in her first chapter. If the reader's reaction is not similar to mine, this essay has failed to prove its point, unless the reader already knows the story. In that case he would know that in the end Cazeau is not such a bad chap after all; the reader's feelings might already have been redirected according to Kate Chopin's wishes.

I shall now follow the story as it progresses, and return to «chapter I» every time I feel Chopin intends the reader's impression of Cazeau to change, to see if these changes can be justified by what the first chapter actually says. The second chapter starts with Cazeau setting out to get his wife back, not out of love, but because «among the many urgent calls upon him, the task of bringing his wife back to a sense of duty seemed to him for the moment paramount» (105). As Cazeau is confirming the reader's negative attitude towards him, the reader will obviously look for some other positive characters in «Athénaïse»: Athénaïse herself and her family, the Michés, are the obvious candidates for such a bestowing of his affections.

In «chapter II» there follows a description of the Michés's house: if Cazeau's home is «huge» and «bare» (103), the Michés's is «large» and «bare» (105). But at the Michés's one can «dance, meet amiable indulgence,» and taste «Madame Miché's gumbo file at midnight, . . . pleasures not to be neglected or despised, unless by such serious souls as Cazeau» (105); so the narrator tells us. Cazeau does not seem to be improving one bit; the Michés might be the alternative the reader is looking for.

But from this point onwards some changes occur: Madame Miché and her son Montéclin are short of stature –whereas Cazeau is tall– and Montéclin appears to be a somewhat dislikeable fellow. His main reason for hating Cazeau is that at some time in the past Cazeau did not lend him some money (106); moreover, as the narrator assures us, Montéclin might be telling the truth about his sister's dislike of Cazeau, when he faces the outraged husband demanding his wife back, but «his taste in the manner and choice of time and place in saying it were not of the best» (107). Suddenly the physical contrast tall/short gains a moral dimension in favour of Cazeau. Further instances confirm our bad impression of Montéclin, who is thus ruled out as Cazeau's good alter ego.¹

1. However, one has to give Chopin the credit of having endowed Montéclin not only with dislikeable features: we are told that Athénaïse had never been so glad to see Montéclin before; not even the day when he had taken her out of the convent, against her parents' wishes, because she had expressed a desire to remain there no longer. (114)

Montéclin might be a coward, a gambler and an impudent fellow, but that does not mean he does not love his sister.

The reader will now probably look for Athénaïse to provide him with the innocence and goodness all the other characters lack, but the narrator quickly dismisses this possibility. The reader feels her reasons for marrying Cazeau to be completely inadequate: they seem to have been custom, comfort and a mere liking for his wild and stormy wooing of her (107). Her position seems to be somewhere in between Cazeau and her family: we are told that she is «tall» –like Cazeau and unlike Montéclin –but she is not «robust,» and the narrator deems it necessary to tell us herself that «about her features and expression lurked a softness, a pretiness, a dewiness, that were perhaps too childlike, that savored of immaturity» (109).

Athénaïse has to grow to decide between Cazeau and Montéclin. Here we are retrospectively told of her dismissal of the state of marriage as being hateful because she «can't stand to live with a man; to have him always there; his coats an' pantaloons hanging in my room; his ugly bare feet—washing them in my tub, befo' my very eyes, ugh!!» (108). We could sympathise with such feelings, were it not for the fact that Athénaïse is still a child and cannot really be trusted. Up to here our judgement of Cazeau has improved, but not because of any inherent quality of his; it is rather a matter of the other characters not having proved to be up to scratch.

The fact remains that neither Cazeau nor Montéclin are anything near perfection. However, Cazeau will apparently change to the better and this change is one of Chopin's masterstrokes in fooling the reader. The fooling occurs in part three and covers two moments: the first instance takes place during a discussion between the Miché's as to what went wrong with Athénaïse's education:

. . .she would not continue to enact the role of wife to Cazeau. If she had had a reason! *as Madame Miché lamented*; but it could not be discovered that she had any sane one. He had never scolded, or called her names, or deprived her of comforts, or been guilty of any of the many reprehensible acts commonly attributed to objectionable husbands. He did not slight nor neglect her. *Indeed, Cazeau's chief offense seemed to be that he loved her*, and Athénaïse was not the woman to be loved against her will. (111) (my italics)

Here Chopin achieves a very skillful gradation: It might be Madame Miché who laments, but «Cazeau's chief offense» –love– comes so long after the narrator's admission that it is Madame Miché who is uttering this passage, that the clause is invested with the narrator's authority, not Madame Miché's. This represents a very skillful transition to the second instance that definitely redeems Cazeau, when a page later he himself states that «I married you because I loved you; because you were the woman I wanted to marry an' the only one. I reckon I tole you that befo'» (p.112).

Well, he might have told her, but surely Chopin did not give us any such hints in the preceding chapters. Or did she? When at the beginning Cazeau is shown to worry more about his pony than about Athénaïse's welfare, we are told that «This misgiving

Cazeau communicated to his servant, old Félicité» (103). This is not the same as saying that this was what he actually thought. In a way we are here obliquely told that Cazeau's words might not necessarily have to correspond with his thoughts. Also, the narrator tells us that «Félicité might have known better than to suppose that he [Cazeau] cared. He told her that she was a fool. It sounded like a compliment in his modulated, caressing voice» (104). Now here again we have «he told her,» not «he thought.» Besides, who is «she,» the fool he is referring to? Félicité is the person physically next to Cazeau, so it might be her he means. But if his wife really is as important to Cazeau as he claims her to be in «chapter III,» «she» might very well refer to Athénaïse. In this case Cazeau's «modulated, caressing voice» would not just imply a physical peculiarity of his vocal organs, as the initial, merely physical description of Cazeau (103) might make us believe; rather it would express the feeling he harbours for Athénaïse, most probably repressed and unconscious, for he feels her absence like a «dull, insistent pain» (104). But a first reading of the story will probably not result in an awareness of these connections, for the reader's expectations will be geared towards Cazeau's 'badness' after the narrator has initially dismissed him as a bad husband because he prefers his horse to his wife.²

Now the reader feels the way to be paved for a display of Cazeau's goodness. Kate Chopin has Cazeau write Athénaïse a letter in which he leaves to her the decision to come back whenever she wishes, but out of her free will. This acceptance of her freedom closes the frame opened at the end of «chapter I,» in which Cazeau promised himself to «find means to keep her at home hereafter» (105). Chopin has found a way to change Cazeau without letting the reader participate in the process. So much does the narrator identify with Cazeau now, that he becomes her mouthpiece when he tells Montéclin that «Athénaïse is nothing but a chile in character» (116). The reader gets the feeling that it is now Athénaïse's turn to grow up, and when she finally does, the story concludes in a happy end.

But this happy end is a fake. Certain social issues pointed out in the story have not changed; what Chopin has done is identify them as problems, and then forget about them to merely concentrate on the traditional «battle between the sexes.» The only way in which Cazeau has changed—and with no apparent effort on his part—is in that he does not want to force Athénaïse to live with him. But this is just one of the many problems stated throughout the story. In «chapter I» Cazeau «had too many things to attend to before bed-time; so many things that there was not left to him a moment in which to think of Athénaïse» (p.104). At the end of the story Chopin has not given us any clue

2. At this point one must be aware that we are entering the realm of interpretation: as Todorov tells us «every book requires a certain amount of causality; the narrator and the reader supply it between them, their efforts being inversely proportional» (46). Here the narrator does not provide us with causal links between different passages; they are just contiguous; thus it is the reader who is left with the task of providing these links. In a sense the reader has to invest the text with something not to be found in the text, and has to do so at his or her peril.

that this issue has been resolved. Moreover, at the end of «chapter III,» after Athénaïse and Cazeau have had their marital discussion, he walks out to work

and she heard him mount his horse and ride away. A hundred things would distract him and engage his attention during the day. She felt that he had perhaps put her and her grievance from his thoughts when he crossed the threshold; whilst she . . . (113)

As a result, Athénaïse hands the house-keys to her servant and «refused to take further account of the menage» (113). Because of the inequalities between male and female, Athénaïse rejects her position in society as a married woman. Again, the issue is addressed and then forgotten.

«Athénaïse» resembles the ‘and-they-lived-happily-ever-after-story,’ but in the real life of Chopin’s time it was a fact that while men had a public life and recognition to attend to, the role of women was restricted to staying at home and waiting for their husbands to return home. When facing marital trouble, the Cazeaus would mount their horses and ride away to bury themselves in their work, while the Athénaïses would have to stay at home to mull over their problems. In «Athénaïse» the question of social inequality arises only to be swept quietly under the carpet.

There is another passage, this time in «chapter II,» which states the problem in an even more unmistakable way. It takes place when Athénaïse appears in front of her husband to be taken home by him, after her ‘elopement’ to her parents house:

whatever he might feel, Cazeau *knew only one way* to act toward a woman. «Athénaïse, you are not ready?» he asked in his quiet tones. «It’s getting late; we havn’ any time to lose.» She knew that Montéclin had spoken out, and she had hoped for a wordy interview, a stormy scene . . . But she had no weapon with which to combat *subtlety*. Her husbands looks, his tone, his mere presence brought to her a sudden sense of hopelessness, an instinctive realisation of the futility of rebellion against a social and sacred institution. (108-109) (my italics)

«Cazeau knew only one way»; we are here reminded of Cazeau’s clumsiness, and this squares with our previous view of him. But suddenly his clumsiness becomes «subtlety.» Unlike other passages, this is no mere fooling of the reader on Chopin’s part: to understand what happens here we have to realise that Chopin is working at two levels, the individual and the social. In terms of the individual Cazeau’s answer might very well be clumsy, but in terms of the social it is extremely subtle: behind Cazeau’s way of thinking Chopin recognises a patriarchal society that seeks to perpetuate itself and therefore posits its truth as the only possible one. The structures inherent in this patriarchal society are so deeply engrained in their members that the latter feel them to be the way the world is structured. This is why for man –for which Cazeau is here a representative–there

is only one way to act towards a woman; for Cazeau this way is part of the natural order of things. For a split second, Athénaïse and Kate Chopin are able to see the world for what it is, in the light of all its injustice and lies. But this truth is too awful to be constantly born in mind, and so for Athénaïse as for Chopin it relapses into oblivion.

Thus at a personal level Athénaïse's lot seems to improve. But at a social level her plight remains the unchanged: the patriarchal society on which her marriage is based remains untouched; for this neither she nor Cazeau are ultimately responsible. But what about Kate Chopin? Should we indict her for shirking her responsibilities by providing a happy end to this story where according to the evidence put forward there cannot be one? I believe we should not be too harsh on her. First of all, this is just one of her many stories, and one only has to read, say, «The Story of an Hour,» to realise that Chopin can be more critical with her society than in «Athénaïse.» And secondly, while it is true that in this story she ultimately shuns the social implications of the marriage problem, it is also true that what is felt to be insufficient at one point in history can be an act of bravery at another. In our society feminist issues are our daily bread, so much so that in the history of literary criticism the eighties and nineties will probably be remembered as decades of feminism. In these terms Chopin's society was a much more repressed one, so much so that, as the Introduction to *Portraits* stresses,

R.W. Gilder, the influential editor of the national magazine *Century*, refused to publish «The Story of an Hour,» «A Night in Acadie» and «Athénaïse» because he felt they were unethical. (viii)

Thus, while for our twentieth-century mentality it might seem as though Kate Chopin had ultimately shunned vital social issues in her short fiction, in fact stories like «Athénaïse» constituted a manifest challenge to her society.

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