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The Independent Woman and "Free" Love

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Emily Toth

The Independent Woman and “Free” Love

I saw a woman sleeping. In her sleep she dreamt Life stood before her, and held in each hand a gift—in the one Love, in the other Freedom. And she said to the woman, “Choose!”

And the woman waited long: and she said, “Freedom!”

And Life said, “Thou hast well chosen. If thou hadst said, ‘Love,’ I would have given thee that thou didst ask for; and I would have gone from thee, and returned to thee no more. Now, the day will come when I shall return. In that day I shall bear both gifts in one hand.”

I heard the woman laugh in her sleep.

—Olive Schreiner, “Life’s Gifts” (1892)¹

IN THIS TALE, Olive Schreiner captures the dilemma of the woman who seeks to be independent, to define herself, in nineteenth and early twentieth-century fiction. If the heroine chooses Love, she loses her independence, her freedom to make any more choices—for romance, marriage, and motherhood confine her to their sphere. If she chooses independence (Freedom), too often she must renounce Love, especially its sexual aspect. A third solution is hardly more attractive: a compromise marriage with a man who, because he is dull or maimed or both, places fewer restrictions on his wife.

These three fates—confinement in traditional marriage, renunciation of sex, or uneasy marital compromise—are the only ones available for the majority of would-be independent women who survive. Tragedy awaits the woman who will accept none of these fates. Olive Schreiner, for instance, uses Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* to dramatize society’s limits.

Lyndall grows up with Em, her female foil—a common literary device, in which other women serve to define the possibilities and limits

¹ Olive Schreiner, *Dreams* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), 115–116.

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of woman's sphere. Frequently, as in the case of Em, the female foil represents the conventional path, that of the wife and mother, and the heroine the new and unusual one, that of independent woman.

While Lyndall is away at school, Em agrees to love young Gregory.

"I will be everything you tell me," she said. What else could she say? Her idea of love was only service.²

Hers is the conventional choice of Love over Freedom, in which the woman subsumes her independence in the man. Lyndall's idea of love is a more unusual, co-operative one: she admires an ostrich hen which bounds by, while the cock broods on the eggs. Lyndall does not find this kind of equal love: the more she develops her own independent qualities through reading and thought, the less likely she is to find a man who will understand her. Nevertheless, she travels with a man ("the stranger") and dies soon after giving birth to a child. Em, whose emblem is a mother hen pecking among the stones, survives.

Schreiner's novel contains most of the ingredients of independent-woman-as-tragic-figure, the victim of a society which defines her according to its conventions, disregarding both her material and psychological rebellions against it. Lyndall rejects not only the economic dependence of marriage, but also the character structure created by that dependence.³

Charlotte Bronte, too, focuses on the incompatibility between love and freedom for women, and the difficulties a lone woman faces when she seeks to meet man as an equal. Her solution is usually the uneasy (for the reader) marital compromise. In *Jane Eyre*, for instance, Jane effects a sort of compromise, an equal relationship with Mr. Rochester, but only because he is blind and needs her as she needs him. It is certainly noteworthy that only a maimed man finds woman his equal.

Potentially the most revolutionary of Charlotte Bronte's heroines is in *Shirley*. The female foil, Caroline Helstone, is weepy, fair, sweet, and passive, wasting away from psychological and physical unemployment. Shirley, on the other hand, is dark, courageous, and an heiress; she refers to herself at times as a man, "Captain Keeldar"; she offers,

² Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (Boston: Little Brown, 1915), 211.

³ I use "character structure" as Wilhelm Reich does, to mean one's distinctive ways of warding off animal instincts: defensive behavior patterns used for repressing impulses and controlling the resulting anxiety. The character structure caused by sexual repression is especially evident in Anglo-Saxon society.

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only half-comically, to fight a duel in Caroline's behalf. She is a hearty, somewhat androgynous creature.

Still, Shirley is a woman, and her story reveals that power, religion, and economics are all on the side of men, who fail almost universally to take her seriously. She does finally marry a man who will fulfill her criteria, a man to "command, rule, and guide her"⁴—the Victorian conception of the man as mentor. Yet he hardly seems worthy to rule her, and many women readers agree with Charlotte Brontë's friend Mary Taylor, who wrote of *Shirley's* ending: "You are a coward and a traitor."⁵

Even George Eliot, whose own life was a rebellion, has her would-be independent heroines conform or die. Dorothea Brooke's confinement in traditional marriage with Edward Casaubon in *Middlemarch* is a failure; her second marriage—to Will Ladislaw—is a compromise like those of Charlotte Brontë.

The Mill on the Floss is a clearer meditation on the economic and psychological unemployment of women. Eliot constantly balances Maggie Tulliver's intelligence against her brother Tom's dullness; Tom's many opportunities against Maggie's enforced inactivity (she spends much of the book looking out the window). In Maggie's world, the possibility of Freedom seems embodied only in a man: not in the maimed Philip Wakem, her potential equal, but in Stephen Guest, her cousin Lucy's fiancé.

To Maggie, Stephen represents a "stronger presence," especially in the boat ride which becomes a virtual, yet virtuous elopement: he perceives Maggie's emotional starvation. But her choice of Stephen is the choice of Love, not Freedom, a choice made out of despair and fear, because no independent possibilities are open to her. Rather than see Maggie compromise, George Eliot drowns her.

Women writers of the same period in other countries also show few outlets for the independent woman. Fredrika Bremer (1801–1865), whose travels from Sweden to the United States in 1849–1851 heightened her interest in women's rights, presents renunciation as the lot of the independent woman.

In *The President's Daughters*, she writes of Edla, who studies Plato instead of learning to keep house, to her father's consternation. Yet

⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Dent, 1955), 322.

⁵ Carol Ohmann, "Charlotte Brontë: The Limits of Her Feminism," *Female Studies VI: Closer to the Ground* (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1972), 162.

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Edla is presented as a bitter, plain, unloving creature whose character structure is explained by the governess-narrator: "The life and fate of women are in general too much controlled by exterior law for it to be permitted to them to shape themselves into forms of their own creation."⁶

In *Nina*, sequel to *The President's Daughters*, Edla has settled on Christian self-sacrifice, and wants to spend her life caring for her father and quietly reading, for "Edla lived rather in the ideal than in the actual world" (14). The real world is far more alive and interesting than Edla, who appears to choose neither Freedom nor Love—she rejects her one persistent suitor, yet is not free from the need for approval of a male, her father. Her renunciation of the world makes independence hollow.

The literature of the independent woman is not confined to the West. Especially in the 1920's and 1930's in Indonesia, Western-influenced writers produced many problem novels about the family in transition. Hamidah, a young woman novelist, wrote in *Kehilangan mestika* (the lost jewel) of a girl brought up to independence by her father. When Hamidah's heroine tries to find a teaching job (a latter-day equivalent of governessing), she finds obstacles in custom and religion, and is finally broken by social disapproval.

Like Schreiner's Lyndall, she unites with a man she does not care for; she later consents to his taking a second wife because she is childless. Unable, finally, to endure a *ménage à trois*, she leaves her husband and returns to her village, concluding the novel with these words: "I remained alone, separated from all those who had loved me and whom I loved."⁷ Her choice of Freedom is a melancholy one, a physical renunciation. As Samuel Johnson remarked in *Rasselas*, marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures.

The similarities in theme, plot, and character in these novels are obvious. Women, no matter their personal psychological independence, still suffer from pervasive judgment by caste, i.e., their society judges them by the standards of womanhood—appearance, chastity, wifely and maternal qualities—regardless of their own aims.⁸ Moreover, economic

⁶ Fredrika Bremer, *The President's Daughters*, in *Select Novels* trans. Mary Howitt (New York: Harper, 1845), 24. *Nina* is also in this volume. Quotations are from this edition.

⁷ Cora Vreede-de Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman: Struggle and Achievements* (The Hague: Mouton, 1960), 83–84.

⁸ Many writers, including Kate Millett, have referred to women as a "class." I prefer the term "caste," as a social structure a person is born into and cannot escape.

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independence is virtually impossible. "Liberation" and the choice of Freedom are, at best, partial—and one dimension is almost invariably missing: Sex, the difference between renunciation and tragedy for the unmarried woman.

Kate Millett characterizes well the paradoxical place of woman in man's world:

While patriarchy tends to convert woman to a sexual object, she has not been encouraged to enjoy the sexuality which is agreed to be her fate. Instead, she is made to suffer for and be ashamed of her sexuality, while in general not permitted to rise above the level of a nearly exclusively sexual existence.⁹

This paradox is easy to find in literature: in the references, especially in eighteenth-century fiction, to women as "the sex," yet placing the emphasis on premarital chastity and monogamy; in the dichotomizing of women into lady and tramp, mother and whore; in the dual reactions—pity and rage—directed toward the prostitute.

The novels I have cited are generally asexual as much as they are anti-sexual. The preference for maimed men may express a preference for asexuality, especially with Rochester's blindness in *Jane Eyre*, since lust is the eyesin. Obvious sexual attraction appears vaguely, if at all: Barbara Hardy suggests that the early acquaintance of Maggie and Stephen in *The Mill on the Floss* is the only instance of sexual tension in all of George Eliot's works.¹⁰ In Brontë's *Villette*, there is far more watching than touching. Bremer's Edla is subject to nervous headaches; Brontë's Caroline Helstone to fits of weeping—possible symptoms of sexual as well as social repression. Only Schreiner's Lyndall has non-marital sexual experience, and death is her reward for it.

In none of these works is sexuality integrated into the rest of the would-be independent woman's life. Indeed, because of the double standard and lack of contraception, social independence usually precludes sexual relations with men. Celibacy is more likely than "free love" (i.e., libertinage).

There are, however, a few women writers in this period who do confront directly the conflict between woman's desire for independence and the sexual restraints imposed on her. I will discuss three of them: George Sand, who makes of her life a political statement; Kate Chopin,

⁹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 116.

¹⁰ Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (Fair Lawn, New Jersey: Essential Books, Inc., 1959), 56.

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who confines her sexual rebellion to her fiction; and Alexandra Kollontai, who combines revolution in life and art.

George Sand (1804–1876) is referred to as “the first modern liberated woman” in the title of Samuel Edwards’ recent biography. Her life-style—smoking cigars, wearing men’s clothes, having among her lovers both women and men—is well-known. But less-stressed is the fact that, regardless of her romantic attachments, she always insisted on writing for eight hours a day. According to André Maurois, she failed to do so only when her relationship with Alfred de Musset was nearing its unhappy end, and when she was irresistibly attracted to the composer Chopin.¹¹

Although she appeared to be in search of an ideal Love, she in fact chose Freedom over confinement to Love’s sphere. She treasured both friendship and motherhood: she liked to have even her lovers refer to her as “mother” and to themselves as her “children,” in an apparent attempt to annihilate the mother/sexual-being dichotomy. She may also have perceived that a mother-son relationship can give a woman more power and more autonomy than any other role she plays with a man.

It is impossible to characterize Sand’s works (110 volumes) as a whole, or to see a consistently feminist ideology in them, although her belief that women and men should be equal in love and in law is constant. An examination of a few of her novels reveals both traditional approaches to the independent woman—the compromise marriage, traditional confinement in marriage, and renunciation of sex—and novel ones: the woman’s preference for work over love, and the love of women for each other.

It should be stressed that few women writers have committed so much of their lives to print, and with George Sand autobiographical interpretations are rarely out of place. For example, her love affairs were occasionally simultaneous, and triangular relationships abound in her writings. In *Indiana*, the title character is disappointed in both her rakish lover and her tyrannical husband, and ultimately unites with a dull English cousin, Ralph. This is the compromise solution. In the novel *Jacques*, the triangular situation is resolved in a more unlikely, if not more liberating, fashion: a gallant husband commits suicide so that his wife will be happy with another man.

Marriages of women to men beneath them are common: in *André*,

¹¹ André Maurois, *Lélia: The Life of George Sand*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 190, 261.

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in *Valentine*, in *La dernière Aldini*. These undoubtedly reflect Sand's perception, and that of Schreiner's Lyndall among others, that the superior woman has great difficulty finding a suitable mate. In a triangular situation, indeed, she may have the best of both men.

A different approach appears in *Mauprat*, written while Sand was separating from her husband. Edmée is the superior beauty who tames the beast, Bernard Mauprat, raised by his uncles to a life of wickedness and debauchery. Edmée makes Bernard into the new man worthy of her: not by self-sacrifice, but by withholding love—by insisting on herself as autonomous subject and behaving as “une mère véritable.” George Sand admits that the novel is a wish for “un amour exclusif, éternel, avant, pendant, et après le mariage.”¹² Mauprat's love for Edmée, not yet even his fiancée, keeps him from “temptation” for six years, while he is in America with Lafayette. Sexual renunciation is rare in Sand; here it functions as a plea for a single standard of sexual behavior, the “équation pré-nuptiale.”

Elle et lui, Sand's autobiographical portrayal of her affair with de Musset, pictures a world of lively carnality, in contrast with the chaste world of *Mauprat*. Characters speak casually of liaisons and of courtesans. Yet an uneasy dialectic between friendship and desire exists, as Thérèse reveals to Laurent before they have consummated their affair:

Vous m'avez dit cent fois que vous me respectiez trop pour voir en moi une femme, par la raison que vous n'aimiez les femmes qu'avec beaucoup de grossièreté.¹³

Thérèse argues continually for the claims of friendship and spirituality over those of the body: she asks Laurent not to forget that “avant d'être ta maîtresse, j'ai été *ton ami*,” and

ce n'est pas un instant de délire qui m'a jetée dans tes bras, mais un élan de ma cœur, et un sentiment plus tendre et plus durable que l'ivresse de la volupté. Je ne suis pas supérieure aux autres femmes. . . . (98)

Thérèse's definition of a woman includes sex, but does not confine her to the sphere of Love—just as Sand's relationship with de Musset did not last because she refused to make him her destiny, refused to give up her work.

¹² George Sand, *Mauprat* (Paris: Librairie Jules Tallandier, 1963), 29–30.

¹³ George Sand, *Elle et lui* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, n.d.), 51–52. Quotations are from this edition.

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Certainly Sand benefited from the greater freedom of expression in France, but she also contributed her own willingness to expose herself to public scrutiny. Perhaps her most important and most difficult work about the independent woman is *Lélia*. This poetic novel consists for the most part in romantic declamations by Lélia, who has given up love; Tremmor, a worldly ex-convict; Sténio, a young poet; and Magnus, a mad Irish monk. The unexpurgated 1833 edition is almost embarrassing, read as Sand's description of her own unsatisfied sexual longings.

What led to my loving him for so long . . . was a feverish irritation which took possession of my faculties as a result of never achieving physical satisfaction. . . . Desire, in my case, was an ardour of the spirit which paralysed the power of the senses even before they had been awakened, a savage ecstasy which took possession of my brain, and became exclusively concentrated there . . . (cited in Maurois, p. 148).

Lélia's great desire is to learn the pleasure of physical passion, but her character makes this impossible. In a novel containing a wealth of appeals to the senses—scents, kissing, lights, gestures—Lélia remains icy and cold. Hers is both a generalized *weltschmerz*, like those of Werther and Manfred, and a particular woman's sorrow, for men characteristically define her in relation to themselves and find her wanting. Says Sténio, "Qu'est-ce donc que Lélia? une ombre, un rêve, une idée tout au plus. Allez, là où il n'y a pas d'amour, il n'y a pas de femme."¹⁴ Lélia, unfortunately, has no other self-definition to propose.

Her female foil is Pulchérie, a courtesan and her sister, modeled after Sand's lifelong friend, the actress Marie Dorval. Where Lélia is the mind, Pulchérie is the flesh—a character unthinkable for the English or American independent woman. In their conversations, Pulchérie is more accepting of life than Lélia, although she remarks that "amante, courtisane et mère" are

trois conditions de la destinée de la femme auxquelles nulle femme échappe, soit qu'elle se vende par un marché de prostitution ou par un contrat de mariage. (171)

But Pulchérie is capable of realizing and incarnating what Charlotte Brontë could only hint at in *Shirley* and *Villette*: the attractions between

¹⁴ George Sand, *Lélia* (Paris: Michel Lévy, 1869), 58. All French quotations are from this edition, which toned down and supplanted the original 1833 edition.

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women. In one conversation, Pulchérie recounts her discovery of beauty in Lélia, and her description is full of sensual detail: the sleeping Lélia's thick black hair falling in her face, seeming to draw Pulchérie; Lélia's clothing, pulled tightly across her breasts, revealing her suntanned flesh; her long eye-lashes, heavy with sleep; the downy hair on her arms; even her beautiful feet and blue veins. To Pulchérie, Lélia is like the sleeping child of her dreams: trembling, she kisses Lélia's arm.

Lélia opens her eyes suddenly, "et votre regard me pénétra d'une honte inconnue" (176). Pulchérie says that she had "aucune pensée impure," and that this was her first lesson in love. The two women then look at themselves in a pool: each thinks the other is more beautiful. Pulchérie tells Lélia: "Oh! tu l'es bien d'avantage: tu ressembles à un homme" (177). Lélia scorns this revelation.

Critics generally scorn to interpret this scene, instead concentrating on Lélia's despair in love affairs with men. But this scene has great importance for Sand's portrayal of the independent woman. Pulchérie is, in fact, far more free than Lélia, for she has not chosen to seek Love: she is open to Freedom, including enjoyment of other women's sensuality and beauty. That she sees Lélia as a man, while they look in the water, is also significant: it is a blending of an ideal androgynous love with the mirror image frequently used in later literature to portray women loving women.

The scene in *Lélia* is but a moment, but an essential one. It raises the possibility of women's total sexual independence from men; it also emphasizes the importance of relationships between women (whether physical or not), a subject still too rarely studied by critics of nineteenth-century fiction.

ALTHOUGH THE AMERICAN WRITER Kate Chopin (1851–1904) led a rather conventional personal life, she raises in her fiction some of the same questions posed by George Sand. She read Charlotte Brontë; she undoubtedly was familiar with Sand's works, and named her daughter Lélia in honor of the novel. Her story, "Two Portraits" (also called "The Nun and the Wanton"), has some affinities with Lélia and Pulchérie in that it shows two diametrically opposed paths for a woman.

Kate Chopin wrote two novels and close to a hundred short stories. In a great number of them, she is concerned with what her critic Per Seyersted calls "a more powerful female realism," and her writing is unique in American fiction of the time. While domestic crises are not

generally the focus of American literature outside sentimental fiction, her major works are about unhappy marriages. While sexuality barely exists for most American heroines, Chopin's Edna Pontellier is a native, white, American woman who eagerly commits adultery. (Foreigners and non-whites were considered less "moral"; for them, sexual experience might be permitted.)

The would-be independent woman is a character throughout Chopin's work. The traditional approaches to the independent woman are not absent from her work, but they are sometimes transformed—and usually with a new view of the sexual relation.

She portrays a number of unmarried women who have, willingly or unwillingly, renounced sex. "Ma'ame Pélagie" in her story and Mamzelle Aurélie in "Regret" turn their affections toward a sister and toward children, respectively; Mamzelle Fleurette in "A Solitary Soul" concocts for herself an imaginary romance with a dead man. All suffer from loneliness, frustration, lack of occupation. In "Fedora," the title figure is a spinster-by-choice who is suddenly and inexplicably attracted to a younger man. But instead of hoping for his notice, she meets his sister and gives *her* "a long, penetrating kiss upon her mouth" (469).¹⁵ The sister is astonished and displeased; Fedora is calm. The author seems to be suggesting that libido will out in some form, common or eccentric.

But Chopin also presents celibacy as a strong, authentic choice leading to Freedom. One of her earliest stories, "Wiser than a God," treats the dilemma Sand faced with de Musset: the conflicting claims of a man and of work. In the story Paula Von Stoltz chooses her studies as a pianist over love for the handsome, wealthy George Brainard. Although he claims that he wants only to share her life, to devote his "whole existence" to her happiness, he reveals his true beliefs when she asks, "Would you go into a convent, and ask to be your wife a nun who has vowed herself to the service of God?" George responds, "Yes, if that nun loved me; she would owe to herself, to me and to God to be my wife" (46–47). Paula goes to Leipzig instead, and becomes a renowned pianist.

Marianne in "The Maid of Saint Phillippe" makes a similar choice. Seventeen-year-old Marianne is tall, supple, strong; she resembles a boy, hunts with a gun, and "Her stride was as untrammelled as that of

¹⁵ Chopin's *Complete Works* are edited by Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969). All stories are cited by page number from this edition.

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the stag who treads his native hill-side unmolested" (116). It should be noted here, as elsewhere, that she can be described only in comparison with the other sex—for the only image of freedom for a woman is a man. When all the others leave Marianne's village, ceded to the English, she remains behind with her father, who soon dies.

Captain Alexis Vaudry wants to marry her and take her to France, a place of gold, "where you shall wear jewels and silks and walk upon soft and velvet carpets." Unimpressed, Marianne says she has known the freedom of the forest, and was not born "to be the mother of slaves." Captain Vaudry retorts, "Oh, how can you think of slaves and motherhood! Look into my eyes, Marianne, and think of Love" (121–122). In the end, Marianne carries her gun and walks off alone into the sunrise.

In both stories, Kate Chopin shows that placing a woman on a pedestal is not a homage, but a deprivation, for it confines her to the sphere of Love. The men who put forth the claims of Love use the words of devotion and the trappings of beauty, without seeing the individual woman's desire for something larger. Both Paula and the androgynous Marianne choose Life—and for them, unlike other spinster heroines, their choice of celibacy is not a renunciation, but a fulfillment of greater desires.

The compromise marriage also appears in Chopin's treatment of the independent woman, but it is, characteristically, more sexually tinged. "Madame Célestin's Divorce" does not occur because, not long after she has consulted everyone about divorce, the shiftless Célestin returns home. The lawyer Paxton, more than professionally interested in Madame, notices that when she tells of Célestin's return, her face seems to be "unusually rosy; but maybe it was only the reflection of the pink bow at the throat" (279). Her blush is a sign of delicacy; one assumes it is hiding what transpired the night before.

"Athénaïse" leaves her husband Cazeau because—she says—she cannot bear being around a man. What changes Athénaïse's opinion is the knowledge that she is pregnant: "Her whole being was steeped in a wave of ecstasy. . ." As she thinks of Cazeau, "the first purely sensuous tremor of her life swept over her. . . Her whole passionate nature was roused as if by a miracle" (451). Athénaïse's arousal to sexual feelings portends a new and better kind of marriage—but true to the marital compromise type, not all problems are resolved between her and Cazeau.

A woman's sexual experience outside marriage, as I have shown with Schreiner's Lyndall, is usually disastrous if not fatal. But some of Kate

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Chopin's heroines contrive to combine a degree of sexual independence despite marriage: Mrs. Baroda in "A Respectable Woman," Madame Delisle in "A Lady of Bayou St. John." But by far the most radical overturning of both monogamy and the character structure created by it is "The Storm."

Two former sweethearts, Calixta and Alcée, both now married to others, take refuge in her house during a storm. A bolt of lightning causes her to fall into his arms. He touches her steaming hair, is powerfully drawn to her red, moist lips, her white neck, her full, firm bosom. Five years ago honor had kept him from completing what passion began, but now. . . They do not notice the storm; the description of sensuality is hardly typical of the genteel 1890's.

Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily. . . When he touched her breasts, they gave themselves up in quivering ecstasy, inviting his lips. . . And when he possessed her, they seemed to swoon together at the very borderland of life's mystery (595).

The language surpasses George Sand in explicitness and anticipates D. H. Lawrence, but the ending is Kate Chopin's unique contribution. After Alcée leaves, Calixta greets her husband with great delight and a big kiss. Alcée writes his wife that she and the children are welcome to stay away in Biloxi for another month if they'd like; his wife is pleased to be free of conjugal life for another month. "So," Kate Chopin concludes, "the storm passed and every one was happy" (596).

Apparently Chopin was aware that this story would not please her contemporaries, for she did not attempt to publish it. It is a radical cure for the contradiction between the roles of the independent woman and the wife. George Sand practiced Kate Chopin's theory, but sought one man who would be all to her; Kate Chopin was a faithful wife and mother whose imagination transcended her own circumstances.

Her best-known portrayal of the independent woman in marriage is in *The Awakening*. Edna Pontellier, married to an insensitive man, awakens to sexual desire and wonders about her own place in the universe. In the summer of her awakening, she has two female foils who incarnate the extremes of possibility for her.

Madame Ratignolle conforms completely to the image of wife and "mother-woman." Golden-blonde, with round arms, madonna-like, she is totally devoted to her husband and children. She believes Edna should be the same. But Edna is also friendly with the great questioner among

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women: Mademoiselle Reisz, a disagreeable, self-assertive little woman, no longer young. Her independent status gives her strength, and the right to her eccentricities: although she is quite ugly and unpleasant, her splendid piano-playing entrances Edna. Later Mademoiselle Reisz talks with Edna about the need for "the soul that dares and defies."

Although Edna can embrace neither of these extremes, she gradually sheds the confinement of marriage and gropes toward independence. When she first appears in the book, she is confined beneath a parasol; in the end she is naked in the sun, at the seashore. In the course of the novel, she moves out of her husband's house and takes up painting—although she lacks commitment to her art. She learns to enjoy her body, in swimming and in an affair with one man, followed by a failed affair with another, who can see her only as her husband's property. The narration parallels Edna's increasing awareness: at the start, she is called "Mrs. Pontellier"; then "Edna Pontellier"; and finally—shedding the link with her husband—"Edna." But Edna discovers, as so many independent women do, that personal liberation is not enough.

Made conscious of the meaninglessness of life, she commits suicide, finally eluding all who try to enslave her. Some argue that her drowning is a sublime assertion of independence; others, that it represents the depths of despair. In any case, *The Awakening* is a book American literature was not yet ready for. Kate Chopin, like Edna, ventured where no woman had before, extending the definition of the American independent woman to include sexual freedom, at a time when women were still presumed to lack sexual feelings. Her book was banned.

PROBABLY ONLY A REVOLUTIONARY SOCIETY could encompass and use the critique of patriarchal definitions in *The Awakening*. The Soviet Union immediately after the Revolution was that kind of society, and Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952) was the "new woman" for the role. Kollontai, known as "The Red Rose of the Revolution," was the only woman member of the Central Committee; was the first woman ambassador in history; created women's organizations; campaigned against prostitution and for maternity benefits.

She wrote and she lived the life of the independent woman. Like Sand and Chopin, she suffered from judgment by caste: contemporaries discuss her appearance as much as her works; enemies accuse her of numerous excursions into "free love," and claim that she "dressed like a man, smoked day and night, drank vodka continually and ignored

the most elementary social rules".¹⁶ Ultimately, her radical political ideas were abandoned by her country. But in her theoretical writings, especially the essay on "The New Woman," and in her fiction she presents a more concrete picture of what an independent woman would be, especially an independent woman of the working classes.

"The New Woman" describes the kind of women creating themselves in her time, especially as reflected in fiction. The new women are not "the pure 'nice' girls whose romance culminates in a highly successful marriage. Nor are they old maids who bemoan the unhappy love of their youth"¹⁷—i.e., they have rejected the traditional fates of the independent woman: confinement to marriage, renunciation of sex. Instead the new woman is usually single, appendage ("wife") to no man, and a fighter against sexual inequality, both in its material aspects—the channeling of women to child care, housework, and economic dependence, and its psychological ones—the character structures created by the treatment of lover or spouse as property, and by the double standard.

The crux of her discussion is also the central theme of most of her writings: women must value work more than they value love. George Sand is cited as the prime example, in her renunciation of de Musset. Kollontai sees Sand as two figures in one: when she was tempted to leave her work "the woman in her—Aurore Dudevant—was directing George Sand, the bold, rebellious, passionate dreamer, to destruction and stifling her" (66). Just as Sand split herself in two—Pulchérie and Lélia—Kollontai dramatizes the dialectical conflict between the "old" woman and the "new" through Sand's rebellion. In several other writings Kollontai discusses, women place work before love: one, in fact, astonishes her lover, as Sand no doubt did de Musset, when she tells him not to visit her in the morning, because she would rather do her writing then (87). Women, says Kollontai, must consider self-renunciation a sin, and passion is "the most terrible captivity imaginable for a woman" (70).

¹⁶ Isabel de Palencia, *Alexandra Kollontai: Ambassadors from Russia* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1947), 177. Other references to this book are incorporated in the text. In fact, Kollontai did not smoke; Chopin and Sand did. The accusation that Kollontai wore men's clothes—she didn't—is proof that the notorious tradition of George Sand was alive and well in the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ Alexandra Kollontai, "The New Woman," in *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 53. All citations are from this edition.

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In her fictions, Kollontai presents a vision of the past, present, and future of women, in relation to revolutionary morality. Several themes are continually present: the difficulty of sustaining triangular relationships, no matter how open; the conflict between work and love; the necessity for women's uniting with and valuing each other.

Her novella, "A Great Love," is set in Tsarist Russia, but among revolutionaries. The protagonist, Natasha, is the independent woman in contrast with Anjuta, a conventional wife. Both love Anjuta's husband, Ssenja. Natasha sees her lovemaking with Ssenja as a surrender: "she was giving herself to a god."¹⁸ This is a clue to the fatality of the relationship: Kollontai often called for the "disappearance of the overpowering masculine self-sufficiency and the servile submission of women" (de Palencia, 157). For awhile, the romance is beautiful, but gradually the inequalities become apparent to Natasha: Ssenja does not take seriously her work for their Cause, nor value her time as he does his own. He gives her sex when she wants affection, making her feel that he "loves only the woman in her, not her spirit" (de Palencia, 147). Love leaves her heart because of his "man-like failure to understand" (153). When he leaves after their last meeting, she is happy to return to her Party work, without him forever.

Kollontai's subject is one hinted at by Sand and Chopin: the separate universes the sexes inhabit and their resulting inability to comprehend each other. Men lose the power to feel, in relationships with women¹⁹; women lose the power to think, and both are psychically deformed in the process. The earlier independent women were forced to renounce sex; Natasha can have sex, but not on her own terms, nor in accordance with her own psychological rhythms, for the "new man" has not caught up with the "new woman's" development.

Vassilissa, a factory worker, finds a similar psychic gap in *Red Love* (also translated *Free Love*), "a purely psychological survey of sex-relations in the post-war period."²⁰ The book is divided into three significantly-titled parts: Love, Marriage, and Freedom.

"Vasyuk" (a tomboy name) and "Volodya" (Vladimir, the name

¹⁸ Alexandra Kollontai, *A Great Love*, trans. Lily Lore (New York: Vanguard Press, 1929), 40.

¹⁹ In "Love and the New Morality," a Kollontai pamphlet reissued by the Falling Wall Press (Bristol, England, 1972), the author attributes this failing to men's emotionless experiences with prostitutes (p. 19).

²⁰ Alexandra Kollontai, *Red Love* (New York: Seven Arts, 1927), 5. All page references are from this edition.

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of Alexandra Kollontai's first, scarcely-lamented husband) meet through Party work, in which she gives him nurturant support in his conflicts with other Party functionaries. She falls violently in love with him, but despairs when he says he is keeping his heart and his love "for a pure girl." Vassilissa has had two lovers. When she tells him of her past, he says it doesn't matter: "You belong to me, and that's the end of it" (57). The danger signals are already present: treatment of the woman as property ("you belong to me") and the vestiges of the double standard ("a pure girl").

Volodya's cultural lag becomes more evident later, when he prefers a grand style of life (lush furnishings, fine food) while Vassilissa retains a commitment to the Revolution's ascetic ideals. He also, predictably, expects Vassilissa to drop her community work to be with him; with regrets, she does so.

She discovers, too, that he has been having an affair with Nina, a beautiful ex-bourgeoise who "got rid of" her unwanted pregnancy by Volodya. Vassilissa's emotions include some jealousy towards Nina, who is the kind of woman other women are supposed to envy, but stronger anger towards Volodya: not for going to another woman, but for being dishonest about it. Finally, Vassilissa leaves him, writing a compassionate letter to Nina. Vassilissa discovers she herself is pregnant, and joyfully looks forward to raising her child in a community nursery, sharing her child in common with her female friend Grusha.

While Vassilissa is in many ways the model of the new woman, Sheila Rowbotham points out a flaw.²¹ Vassilissa's "stiff upper lip" attitude amounts to the same kind of renunciation of sex and love experienced by countless "spinsters" (she is a knitter) in literature. The truly independent woman must be able to combine Love and Freedom, as in Olive Schreiner's dream for the future.

Two other Kollontai short novels are available in English: "Sisters" and "The Loves of Three Generations." In both, the relationships between women are paramount. "Sisters" contains the classic Kollontai situation: two comrades fall in love (in this case they also marry); he takes to a bourgeois style of life, abandoning his work for the Cause; he involves himself with another woman. The other woman is a prostitute, whom he brings into the very bedroom he and his wife share. In the morning, the wife finds the prostitute weeping, and learns her story:

²¹ Sheila Rowbotham, "Alexandra Kollontai: Women's Liberation and Revolutionary Love," *The Spokesman* (Summer, 1970), 23.

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she had not known the man was married, the factory had laid her off, and she went to the street to support her sick mother. The wife, touched, realizes that she and the prostitute are really sisters—as Pulchérie told Lélia. Both of them leave the man’s house.

“The Loves of Three Generations” is about multiple romances in three generations of political women. In the first two generations, the women lived with the men they loved, either in marriage or free unions, but their relationships were always based on love. But the granddaughter Zhenia, a Communist, sleeps with two men concurrently—one of them her stepfather—and loves neither one, seeing them simply as comrades. Her mother is shocked at the lack of love and at Zhenia’s lack of concern for her mother’s feelings when the younger woman slept with the stepfather. Zhenia argues that it was only an extension of friendship and takes nothing away from her mother.

And then, mother, you can’t want to chain Andrei so firmly to yourself that he may not enjoy life while you are away! That is not love. That is a selfish desire for possession. Grandmother’s bourgeois training speaks in you there.²²

Zhenia says, finally, that the only loves she has had in her life are her own mother and the Cause.

To contemporaries, Zhenia was the most controversial of Kollontai’s heroines. She espouses the “glass-of-water” theory which Lenin condemned, the conception of “free love” as simply free sex. But Zhenia did not speak for Kollontai, who argued for an idea of love more akin to Sand’s: a comradeship of mutual interests and deep feeling. Love is never truly “free,” for it always wants something in return.

Kollontai’s fiction is not skillfully written: she lacks the poetry of Sand, the irony of Chopin. Yet she comes to a more complex view of women’s independence than they were able to discover. Both Sand and Chopin found laws and customs as the major barriers to women’s sexual freedom; in Kollontai’s era, both these restrictions were ostensibly removed—yet parts of the patriarchal character structure remained, at least in the minds of men. Liberation was not as easy as it had seemed.

Reading Kollontai literally, one would have to conclude that the independence of women cannot be achieved while men are in control of society. Indeed, the warmest feelings in Kollontai’s fiction are between women: the wife and the prostitute in “Sisters”; Vassilissa and

²² Alexandra Kollontai, “The Loves of Three Generations” in *A Great Love*, trans. Lily Lore (New York: Vanguard Press, 1929), 229.

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Grusha in *Red Love*; Zhenia and her mother in "The Loves of Three Generations."

Similarly, the stronger feelings and more interesting attachments in Chopin's *Awakening* are between Edna and Mademoiselle Reisz, and especially between Edna and Madame Ratignolle, whose beauty draws Edna as Lélia's attracted Pulchérie.

It should be added that Kollontai, Chopin, and Sand each had a life-long female friend with whom she read books and discussed ideas. The Brontes had each other. And Olive Schreiner, with whom this essay begins, had as her closest long-term intimate Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter).

What binds women together is their general feminine lot. As Simone de Beauvoir writes, women

are bound together by a kind of immanent complicity . . . they are in league to create a kind of counter-universe, the values of which outweigh masculine values.²³

Today women are actively creating this counter-universe, using the positive images of strength, sexual feeling and independence which Sand, Chopin, and Kollontai provide. Out of their counter-universe women are creating a milieu in which Love and Freedom need not be at odds; perhaps, as in Olive Schreiner's tale, both gifts will come in one hand.

²³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953), 511.