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ERH-206WX-03

19 September 2014

Short Analysis Paper – *The Maid of Saint Philippe* by Kate Chopin

Help received: *The Maid of Saint Philippe* by Kate Chopin, Microsoft Word spell check function, and the Oxford American Writer’s Thesaurus

Word count: 544
The Maid of Saint Philippe by Kate Chopin is an argument for the freedom or autonomy of women. The story takes place in Louisiana in 1765 and is focused on Marianne, a young woman who lives with her father, Picote Laronce. Marianne shows a desire, and that she has the ability, to live and support herself, and her father, by her own means. Chopin suggests that Marianne is more than able to act as both patriarch and matriarch of her household early in the novel when Jacques Labrie, a young man who lives in the town of Saint Philippe, meets her outside of Sans-Chagrin’s tavern and walks with her to Laronce’s home.

The opening sentence of the novel, “Marianne was tall, supple, and strong. Dressed in her worn buckskin trappings she looked like a handsome boy rather than like the French girl of seventeen that she was”, tells of how Marianne has accepted the role of, essentially, a frontiersman. Furthermore, Chopin shows Marianne’s fighting spirit while Jacques and Marianne are discussing the British acquisition of Saint Philippe, “‘Ah’ muttered the girl with pale exasperation, ‘That is a monarch to be proud of!’”1. Shortly after Jacques and Marianne arrive at her home, Marianne changes into the working clothes typically worn by French women in the eighteenth century, complete with “the white cap of the French workingwoman”. This suggests that Marianne is adept at changing roles when needed, i.e. from a strong, hunting frontiersman to a French workingwoman in her home.

Marianne proves that she is willing and able to support herself and her father, who is “more like a child to her” in his advanced age, but what of her desire for freedom?

1 This comment is made with regards to the British soldiers attempting a new route, over the mountains versus crossing the river, into Saint Philippe; Natchez Indians had stopped them during earlier attempts.
Throughout her work, Chopin suggests, sometimes subtly, Marianne is content, and would be uncomfortable leaving, her independent lifestyle. The first obvious evidence of this arises in a conversation between Picote and Marianne regarding the impending state of Saint Philippe: “It will be a dreary life, my child, for you,” says Picote regarding her decision to stay in the village. When Marianne rebuts his comment, Picote does not debate her decision, which indicates that he is confident, and used to, Marianne’s autonomous lifestyle.

Marianne speaks of her father’s will as her reason to stay behind in Saint Philippe, but once her father dies that argument becomes invalid. So why does she deny the priest, Jacques, and Captain Vaudry? Marianne declares to Vaudry that she has “breathed the free air of forest and stream”, “Freedom is left for me”, “Marianne goes to the Cherokees”, and finally “Hardships may await me, but let it be death rather than bondage!” Clearly, Marianne, and possibly Chopin, view married life in the eighteenth century as a form of servitude rather than the life of grandeur that Captain Vaudry has offered her.

After rereading The Maid of Saint Philippe, evidence of Marianne’s desire for freedom, and possibly Chopin’s slightly negative views of the role of women in her time or her desire for equality, clearly stand out in the text. When offered several opportunities to live a comfortable life, even one characterized by wealth and ease, she declines and leaves for the Cherokee nation, where Europeans were far from welcome. Marianne’s ultimate goal is evident; “liberty or death”.
