

Metaphor of Cigarettes:Feminism in Kate Chopin's *An Egyptian Cigarette*

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Objectives: Kate Chopin is regarded as one of the pioneers of the feminist literature in the United States. Her works mainly express her caring for women. Since the 1960s, the western academic circle has set off a long overdue upsurge in the study of Kate Chopin and her works, repositioning and giving Chopin a classic status in the history of American literature. This paper aims to analyze the revival and awakening of the heroine's self-consciousness and reveal the inner world of a "new woman" at the turn of the century through the heroine's behavior of taking the initiative to smoke and eventually giving up. Cigarettes, which appear repeatedly in this short novel with symbolic meanings, have a special metaphorical function. Through analyzing the social and historical environment of the emergence of "new women" in American society and the "new women" in *An Egyptian Cigarette*, this paper attempts to explore the multiple political and cultural connotations reflected by cigarettes and reveal Chopin's feminist consciousness through the novella.

Key words: Metaphor; Cigarettes; Feminism; Kate Chopin; *An Egyptian Cigarette*

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Kate Chopin (February 8, 1851—August 22, 1904) is a well-known American author and her short stories and novels are always about sensitive, bold women. Her short stories were quite popular in the 1890s and were printed out by some famous presses. Her novels almost until in 1950s critics found the value of her works and praised them for the vivid descriptions of women's lives. Nowadays, her novels and short stories are read all over the world, and she is widely recognized as a significant American writer.

As an outstanding female writer in the history of American literature in the 19th century, many works of Kate Chopin are about women's living conditions and fates. In that patriarchal society, women took care of their husbands and children and were treated as accessories to their husbands.

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Egyptian Cigarette is one of Chopin's short stories and it tells a story of a woman's experience of smoking. The short novel has a very brief plot and it is full of mystery. Written in the first person narration, the novella reflects the appeal of female independence consciousness to break the gender barriers. This paper attempts to analyze the connotation of cigarettes and smoking in *An Egyptian Cigarette* from the feminist perspective, and finally reveal the feminine consciousness of Chopin.

In the 19th century, there was a wave of male chauvinism in the United States, and women were taught to be an obedient wife and a good mother. Male power prevailed, and women were oppressed by men both in society and at home. Most women internalized the values of the patriarchal society and did what the men told them to do without any initiatives. Women's opportunities for personal development were thus ruthlessly and completely deprived. Especially in the

Southern United States, the ideal women were the ones who could preserve purity and beauty and abandon all desires and individuality for their family.

Feminism, originally understood as “women’s liberation”, originated in France and gradually spreaded to the United States and other countries. In the patriarchal society, women were physically weak, financially dependant, and even fell into the subordination of men. Such social position also made women suffer from unfair treatment. They were unable to enter politics, and their work would be suppressed in the society. Most women were often not qualified for education. Then some female pioneers began to stand up and fight against the patriarchal society. This is the so-called feminist movement.

In a short period of time, this feminist movement caused a strong impact on the society. The literary works on feminism came into being, and Kate Chopin's *An Egyptian Cigarette* was one of them. Feminism developed like a firestorm, and a new generation of female writers gained a place as a new force in the literary world. They were avant-garde and unwilling to submit to men. They not only asked for female independence, but also launched a movement to fight for more interests including getting educated, going out of the family, and even winning seats in politics. They are independent and the themes in their works are not confined to motherhood. They went so far as to abandon the identity of “motherhood” which was believed to be given by traditional society and fight against the traditional morality that bound them. In contrast, female writers focus their creative vision on independent women. Of course, Kate Chopin was naturally influenced by such feminist trends. Obviously, the anonymous heroine in *An Egyptian Cigarette* is an independent woman who acts boldly and does not hide her pursuit of freedom. She hates this traditional and pedantic society and lives in her own unique way.

Since the 19th century, cigarettes have been making more and more appearances in literature and they have long been a staple of literary conversation. In 1890, Jules Charetie, a member of the French Academy, wrote a successful novel

called *Cigarettes*. Another academician, Edmont Abou, known as Balzac of art criticism, once compared the Greek cigarettes with mini-sausages. The Italian writer, Italo Svevo, also mentioned cigarettes many times, including in an essay *Smoking*, in a book *Zeno's Consciousness*, in novels *My Pastime*, *Diaries to My Fiancee* and so on. Starting with romanticism, which emphasized individuality and emotion, cigarettes were favored by writers for its calming properties-nicotine⁹. In the middle of 1990s, the magic of cigarettes was being amplified and interpreted as an important source of artistic inspiration. Cigarette haunts in literature and the creative power of cigarettes is also evident in *An Egyptian Cigarette*: “I took one long inspiration of the Egyptian cigarette.”¹ Here Chopin did not use the neutral term “inhalation” to mean smoking but rather “inspiration”, which commonly means “inspirations”.

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) coined two terms: the signifier and the signified. For Saussure, the meaning of signs is fixed by social conventions. Moreover, he argued that choosing a particular symbol to represent something was a largely arbitrary process; That is, he does not think it is motivated by any attempt to get it to replicate, simulate, or imitate any perceived features of the entities it refers to.

Theodose Burette, author of *The Anatomy of a Smoker* (1840), brought up with an interesting view that cigarettes was so soft, sensitive, energetic and voluptuous and they became the “pretty girls” of male smokers. The metaphor of the word “cigarette” soon changed from masculine to feminine. If cigars (cigare in French) are associated with cicadas (cigale in French), the long and thin cigarettes are more associated with slender women. This gender connotation is related to its physical form. Cigarettes are smaller and more fragile. From the etymology of the word “cigarette”, the suffix “ette” is the feminine suffix in French, meaning “female”. In 1881, the French poet Jules Laforgue published a poem in praise of cigarettes, “La Cigarette”, which directly compared cigarettes to beautiful and dangerous women. What is certain is that at the end of the nineteenth century cigarettes acquired the definite feminine meaning. Chopin, who was half French, was clearly aware of the implications of gender differences in cigarettes and cigars.

In *An Egyptian Cigarette*, her friend, the Architect, gave her some cigarettes in “a small box”² which was got from a species of fakir in Cairo. “It was of finer cut than the Turkish or ordinary Egyptian, and threads of it stuck out at either end.”² The cigarettes are so delicate and attractive. It seems to be fine-qualified and evidently hand-made. The heroine cannot help to try one.

However, the revolution in women's smoking underwent countless frustrations. Apparently, traditional women were not allowed to smoke then. When people find a woman smoking, they would immediately suspect her of many vices and faults. In the analysis of female smokers, prostitutes are regarded as one of the typical examples because they were a symbol of the moral decay and decadence of the time. In the 19th century, it was common to describe women who smoked as immoral. Even the famous French writer, Gustave Flaubert who was an avid smoker made the male protagonists smoke in his novels, but would never let ladies do. Oscar Wilde, through Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, said: “You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure.”³ Smoking, like drinking, has become the exclusive relaxation of men.

In 1900, *Harper's Weekly* mentioned the popular view of the common Americans on female smoking in this way: “Few respectable, well-mannered American women today smoke...it is generally opinion that it is vulgar for a woman to smoke.”⁴ An elegant lady should not smoke. “Smoking and being respected are contradictory.”² At that time, the medical also believed that smoking was harmful to women's reproductive organs. Since frugality and self-discipline were advocated by the Victorian society, smoking was gradually associated with hedonism and idleness. The female smokers were labeled as morally degenerated, and women who smoked in public places were even likely to be arrested. The female smokers are likely to be “bad women” who only care about pleasure, lead a casual life, live irresponsibly, ignore their families, and pose a threat to social stability and moral goodness. As a result, female smokers in

the nineteenth century were rare, and female smoking was confined to small gatherings or private spaces. So in *An Egyptian Cigarette*, when the Architect offer to strike a match the heroine replied: “Not now and not here.”² And she asked whether she could go to his smoking room. The act (smoking) itself shows the bravery of the heroine and its her way to fight against the traditional society.

From 1920s the females began to waken. At that time, something was already happening to shake the male hegemony on the political level. There were debates on equality issues, and the theme of the debates are gender equality and the female's equality of the basic rights. In order to obtain the same social, political, economic and other basic rights as men, the females fought against the patriarchal society. However, the accumulation of male social foundation also created many obstacles and difficulties for the development and growth of feminism. There were still many restrictions on women in terms of law, religion and traditional area, and southern women's social position is more worrying among them. As commonly to be ignored, women have no right to vote and they even had no chance to speak for themselves. Although women can work outside, most employers had a negative view of females and they always refused to hire female workers. Therefore, the females could help but stay at home and do chores. In addition, women also suffered injustice in the ethical level. In the south area of the United States, there was a conventional view which believed that women should be the embodiment of virtue. Women should be tolerant, loyal, and obedient. Freedom is a luxury, esp for the married women, and there are many written restrictions on what they could do. For example, many states stipulate that married women may not possess their own property, or even control their own income. If a couple divorced, for whatever reason, the wife could not obtain custody of the child.

Since the 19th century, the United States has experienced many major events including racial conflicts, the Civil War and so on. Great changes have taken place in the United States, such as the abolition of black slavery. American ideology has also undergone earth-shaking changes. After these experiences, American women also began to grow up and they began to no longer submit to the role imposed by men. Thus, the awakening of female self-

consciousness began, which was reflected in the northern women's struggles for educational equality. They brought advanced ideas into society and worked to revolutionize ideologies based on male hegemony. *An Egyptian Cigarette* was written in the Victorian era when male sexuality was dominant and sexual repression was the dominant culture. But some feminist writers began to challenge this dominant culture, such as Chopin. In *An Egyptian Cigarette*, Chopin uses the metaphor of cigarettes to reflect the fight and awakening of women. And the action that her friend gave cigarettes as gifts is meaningful. It not only shows the heroine is avant-garde but also reveals that the friend not only understands her preferences, but also approves of her possible new womanhood. Because in the 1890s, only a few radical avant-garde women really dared to smoke. The avant-garde argued that their liberation means the ability and opportunity to behave like men. This is associated with models of feminism that "attempted to fit women uncritically into a masculine pattern of life and a masculine model of humanity and culture which was presented as gender-neutral".⁵ Smoking is a manly behavior that a woman could also do. In the novel, smoking is the heroine's way of rebelling against social conventions. Because smoking is a privilege enjoyed by men, the heroine is particularly eager to break this taboo, just like her statement in the novel: "The weight of centuries seemed to suffocate my soul that struggled to escape, to free itself and breathe."²

While slowly infiltrating into every corner of the society, cigarette also gradually penetrated into the interpersonal relationship of the society, including the sexual relationship. Psychoanalysis has pointed out similarities between sex and smoking. In his book *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Gaston Bashara points out that the change of intensity, the warming of the body and the pleasure of love are mutually reinforcing. The erotic experience, known as "the Novalis Complex", combines the urge to make a fire through friction with the need to share body heat. The match works the same way: a hard stick is set on fire by rubbing against a fluted cork

board, which symbolizes sexual intercourse.

In *An Egyptian Cigarette*, the heroine falls into a fragmented dream or fantasy after smoking a cigarette: "A subtle, disturbing current passed through my whole body and went to my head like the fumes of disturbing wine."² After all, cigarettes can make people excited, arouse desire and pleasure. Smoking can send out a kind of passion beyond self and make her produce the uncontrollable desire for sex. In the fantasy, the heroine is in a desert and she tries to win back Bardja who was once her lover. She longed for Bardja came back with the music and she fancied: "The moon shines and the breeze is soft-A garland of flowers-let us go into the King's garden and look at the blue lily, Bardja."²

It can be said that cigarettes have become an indispensable part of the life of modern women with successful careers. However, the Victorian ethics were like a sword hanging over women's heads and they brought great pressure on the females. As a result, the women's rights movement at that time did not achieve victory. And Chopin was aware of this problem. Therefore, Chopin always took the conflict between women's self-actualization and society's expectations of women as the theme of her novels. Just like Chopin, the heroine in *An Egyptian Cigarette* was eager to fight against with the traditional society through smoking, but at the end she gave up by crumpling the cigarette and throwing out of the window. In the novel, the heroine returns to reality fifteen minutes later, . After regaining consciousness, she "took the cigarettes and crumpled them"², then "walked to the window and spread my palms wide"². The heroine of the dream experiences the desperate predicament of abandoning everything for love but getting no response.

As a result of her decision to throw away cigarettes, critics have concluded that Chopin's attitude toward the heroine's manly experiment was conservative because smoking brought her pain rather than pleasure. Some argued that the post-war feminist movement did not really achieve more social status for women. They are still deprived of the right to vote and abortion of their own choice. By 1920, most women were finally returning to the kitchen and to home again. But this may be one of the reasons why they fall in love with cigarettes: a respite from the dullness and drudgery of traditional life. In addition, this analysis is not convincing enough to some extent. Why on earth

would "I" decide to give up a friend's gift of Egyptian cigarettes after an illusory dream? The reason seems to be hidden in the fantasy of "I". "I" in dreams is not the same as the heroine who dares to try cigarettes. The narrator "I" is a female artist who dares to try cigarettes. The relationship between "I" and his male friend is equal. But the woman in the dream, "I", repeatedly chases a man's footsteps, and he leaves and returns again and again, finally telling me that he is determined not to come back: "I'm tired of fetters and kisses and you. I am going away. You will never see me again."²

What is it that men in the dream are tired of? If "kiss" refers to erotic love, "fetters" probably refer to marriage. In the early part of the vision, I once described "fetters" as follows: "I decked myself with lilies and wove flowers into a garland and held him close in the frail, sweet fetters."² This sentence most likely describes a wedding ceremony, since the lily, a symbol of purity, was often used at weddings. The heroine in the dreamland could hardly bear the double torture of the failure of traditional marriage and she tries to die for relief. In the fantasy, the heroine is a woman who was in an absolute submissive position in marriage and then frustrated and committed suicide after being abandoned by her husband, which was completely different from the real heroine in the novella yearning for independence and freedom. She implicitly describes her relationship with the man: "Bardja is my god."² It is precisely because "I" worship him completely that I follow him at all costs: whether "with flying feet"² or "with stumbling feet"², or even "with hands and knees"². Only the mindset of the enslaved can explain my active surrender: I relished his "fierce anger"² and "stinging words"² regardless of the injury, and repeatedly forgave his departure and disloyalty. When he decides to abandon her, "I" am not thinking of freedom, but of physical and mental torture. "I" in the dream was willing to be the man's servant, and the attitude made the heroine who woke up from the dream disgusted and resentful, so that she no longer expected the illusion brought by the cigarettes and destroyed them instead. When my friend found she was pale and

questioned whether she was well or not, she replied: "A little the worse for a dream."² This reply, together with the crumpling of the cigarette, suggests that what she fears is not just a dream, but a dangerous implication of the dream for the fate of reality. Her choice to end the social life of cigarettes is the new woman's resistance to fate. The act of throwing away cigarettes is exactly the presentation of the feminist consciousness of the narrator "I".

At the same time, it also coincided with the tide of social opposition to smoking at that time. Under the circumstances at that time, women could not have independent personality. However, Chopin, the author of the novel, was not famous for her works, because the female images she described subverted the social tradition of the time, violated the dogma that people had been advocating, and she was once despised by the world. At the same time, it has also been blamed by public opinion.

Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, American society became increasingly vocal against smoking, especially among women. In addition to well-known reasons, such as that nicotine in tobacco is harmful to health, or that smoking encourages hedonistic attitudes and harms social morality, the social Darwinian ideas that shaped American society then also propelled the anti-smoking movement into the public eye. Social Darwinists generally believe that smoking (like alcohol) is a genetically altered "race poison that causes infertility"⁶. "In civilized countries, women have never smoked as much as men,"⁷ said Dr. Kellogg, one of the leading health reformers of the Progressive era, because cigarettes are so harmful to frail women⁸. Chopin, who had read the evolutionary views of Herbert Spencer and Aldous Huxley, must be very clear of this. Moreover, in the spring of 1898, Frederic, Chopin's fourth son, fought in the Spanish-American War. After the war, many American media summarized the lessons of Spain's defeat and cited cigarettes as one of the main reasons. The idea is that Spain's general love affair with cigarettes has led to their defeat and that they would not have failed so badly if the country had introduced a total smoking ban.

Conclusion

Chopin described the life of middle class women under the patriarchal rule in the 19th century through

a series of female images. In the meanwhile, they are influenced and suppressed by the patriarchal society, and in the meanwhile, they waked and rebelled. Chopin's new women rebel and fight against cultural values positively and bravely. However, Chopin was also aware of the obstinacy and power of traditional forces. So suppression brings disillusionment, awakening brings joy, and rebellion brings death. This is the tragedy of Chopin, of women, and of humanity and society. The vivid character and her distinctive personalities in *An Egyptian Cigarette* made Chopin an excellent female writer. Chopin, who spoke out for women's rights and fought for women's liberation, was finally honored as one of the pioneers of American women's literature and women's rights movement.

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