Kate Chopin and the Non-American Reader
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ABSTRACT: The 19th century feminist American writer Kate Chopin gains a new audience in the branch campus classroom of Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. Part of the consortium of six American universities with International Branch Campuses (IBCs), VCUQatar provides the same curriculum to their predominately Middle Eastern students as does the main campus in Richmond. Using the example of a first year writing class, this article explores the educational context of an IBC in Qatar, and non-American students’ reactions to the well-known “Story of an Hour.” Despite being from another era and country, Chopin’s themes of companionate marriage and women’s restrictions resonate with a contemporary Arab and Asian audience.

The creation of branch campuses of American universities abroad has been described, among other metaphors, as "a kind of educational gold rush" (Lewin). These institutions are increasing in number in the emirates of the Arabian Gulf. New York University in Abu Dhabi is one such example, as is the Education City (EC) project in Qatar, which is home to six universities including Weill Cornell Medical College, Georgetown, Carnegie Mellon, Virginia Commonwealth University, Texas A & M, and Northwestern University. Such branch campuses, often referred to as "franchising," privatize American-style education abroad in countries like Kuwait, Iraq, and Lebanon, among others (Smith 68). Unique to the EC project, however, is that each degree is offered by the universities' home campus with no mention of the students' attendance abroad. This matriculation equality ensures a curricular emphasis on the North American classroom experience in both content and concepts. Such academic parity soothes the concerns institutions and their stakeholders often have about the "legitimacy, status, and institutional distance" of branch campuses (Wilkins and Husiman 627). The humanities classes in each of these campuses are also governed by American-based pedagogical practices of critical inquiry and discussion-based learning. Faculty members engage students in active learning and find that the discussion is enriched by the composition of the study body.

At Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar (VCUQatar), the fashion, graphics, and interior design majors have considerable course requirements in the liberal arts, which include writing and literature courses. Focused Inquiry I\(^1\) is the first part of a writing sequence for freshmen. The course is designed to help students develop basic

\(^1\) I have taught both parts of this sequence for three years at VCUQatar.
academic skills, including "written communication, oral proficiency, critical thinking, and information fluency" (Rajakumar). Paired with Focused Inquiry II, the courses are an introduction to academic writing and critical thinking with a major emphasis on the ability to critically read and respond to texts. The courses are part of the common core for VCU in Richmond as well as VCUQatar. Units and assignments are shared among all those teaching the course, regardless of campus, but individual faculty members determine the course readings and other materials.

There are three units, each culminating with a multi-stage writing assignment, which utilizes sequence and low-stakes writing techniques. The basic building block of every unit is the response log in which students have an opportunity to test their ideas about the material, whether art, text, or video. In this stage they receive "formative" feedback or "suggestions on how to improve and how to better achieve the goals of the assignment" (Barnhisel, Stoddard, and Groman 462). Next, students brainstorm and write the first draft in class, with revisions assigned as homework. Peers and the professor critique the penultimate draft, and then students have the opportunity to revise their drafts with two sets of feedback for the final version. This is known as a "process-based writing" approach, which focuses on the many steps involved in creating text rather than solely the end product (Barnhisel, Stoddard, and Groman 461). In preparation for the final essay of each unit, students are gaining familiarity with the tasks necessary to express themselves; this includes "the act of repeatedly going over one's ideas as expressed in written language ... That the stages of writing, particularly invention, happen repeatedly," (Barnhisel, Stoddard, and Groman 462).

The middle unit in Focused Inquiry I is called An Introduction to Short Fiction and requires students to read and then present their perspectives by generating text as a response. In this second unit, students read short stories as a way to understand and analyze the basics of literary concepts. They are presented with the goals for this unit in the course syllabus as a way to "gain a better understanding of how narrative works" and "how we are shaped by our language and how our own stories shape our interpretations" (Rajakumar). Students are specifically told they will be asked to consider "memories or personal responses" to the material and the way the writer evoked these reactions (Rajakumar). Foregrounding the role of personal reaction to the text allows students to consider their own realities in contrast the world created by the author in the text.
"The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin is used in this unit because of several qualities that make it accessible to novice readers but also relevant to the culture of the diverse student body in Qatar. Chopin is a well-established feminist American writer and her work can set the tone for a well-rounded discussion on gender. The story itself is very compact and can be read aloud during a single class session. Despite the seeming simplicity of the narrative—a wife is told her husband has died in a tragic accident, only to die from a heart attack when he is discovered alive—there are many layers of irony and meaning, which can be examined in successive readings. This particular short story by Chopin has been used in North American classrooms as well when teaching second language learners:

We selected this text as one that was both accessible to native and non-native, readers of English and offered a perspective on marriage that could generate discussion about social, historical, and cultural norms. Whereas other works might resonate with different students based on the country of origin or setting, given the likelihood that no student in the class would hail from the Delta (and none did), we surmised that "The Story of an Hour" provided a level playing field for all students to approach Louise's marriage and death (Diederich 117).

Louise Mallard, the protagonist, has an epiphany which is revealed in dramatic irony to the reader: "She saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome … There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature" (Chopin). Louise's reflections have been characterized as both empowering and also out of character for a grieving wife. The end of the story is ambiguous enough to underscore the severity of her disappointment when this promise of freedom is taken away: "Someone was opening the front door …. It was Brently Mallard who entered … when the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of the joy that kills" (Chopin). These ironic subtitles are not lost on student readers whose societies consider marriage and wifehood with an attitude similar to that of the North America Chopin is depicting in the late 19th century.
Students and the Text

The classrooms in Qatar offer a diversity of learners who are similar to those of their North American counterparts. VCUQatar boasts an international student population including students from Qatar, as well as the major countries of South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, among others). These students often still live with their families, as the traditional family structure is a shared value among all the communities: young people do not leave home until they are married. Newlyweds may also live with the husband's family in order to share resources before setting out on their own.

In such a social context, the themes of Chopin’s story resonate in students’ everyday experiences, perhaps more so than is the case with North American students who might find the struggles of the protagonist, Louise Mallard, antiquated. Throughout her fiction, Chopin explored women’s place in society and these concerns are present also in her short stories: "She test[ed] the ways women could-and could not-achieve articulation, finding eventually a 'voice covert' which (at its most effective) undermined the patriarchy from within its own paradigms" (Cutter 18). Patriarchy and covert voice are well understood by the students in Qatar because of the forms of gender discrimination in many of their home cultures. As Cutter suggests, speaking covertly or within defined gender parameters is often necessary in public as well as private spaces, in countries where constitutional monarchies are still in place. The nation and the home rely upon men. For example, in most Arab countries, women cannot pass nationality on to their offspring; the child shares the nationality of his/her father. A thousand-word story in which a woman attempts at self-assertion, but is denied agency, presents many potential points of analysis (Berkove 152).

Louise Mallard reacts with suppressed joy at the thought that her husband has passed away: she considers her greatest gain to be freedom. Arab and Asian students are not surprised by this reaction. Instead, in their essays about "The Story of an Hour," they reflect that Louise probably felt restrained by her marriage as many women in their contemporary societies do: "women in society can relate to Chopin’s short story through Mrs. Mallard because they are sometimes frustrated with their husbands" ("Unresolved Women’s Struggles in Society"). The protagonist basks in the brief sense of freedom she feels at the idea that her life is now completely her own: "Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering … What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this
possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" (Chopin). Restriction of women's mobility is another theme that resonates with readers in this region: "Louise's experience is somewhat similar to my friend Maryam's experience. Maryam's father was so strict, he did not allow her to leave the house without her mother or brother" ("An Emotional Bond"). The student goes on to compare Maryam's reaction to the death of her father, with Louise Mallard's to the death of her husband. Neither Maryam nor Louise shed a tear:

Her father passed away in 2009. She was shocked but not upset. Not a single tear fell. She was free, finally able to do whatever she wanted. "It is just like being released from prison," Maryam said. This incident was similar to Louise. She felt free, exactly like Maryam. ("An Emotional Bond")

This type of reflection is an excellent way to establish the potential of literature for students and the relevance of storytelling or narrative to their own experience.

**From Chopin to the Arab Writer**

Having gained experience with closely reading Chopin, students then move on to short stories by writers from the Arabian Gulf and Egypt to showcase how the form of the short story is being used to address contemporary social and political issues in the Middle East. Julie Brown explains in the Editor's Note to *Ethnicity and the American Short Story* that short fiction is "a fluid and flexible genre that has never been adequately defined" (1). Brown's volume traces the oral traditions of short stories among various ethnic groups, linking African, Asian, and Native American traditions to the contemporary variations of the form itself. Her argument for the short story as a way of capturing, expressing and circulating the identity of a subgroup to Arab authors has been useful in grounding students in the form through Chopin's work and then expanding to contemporary authors in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The *Beirut 39* anthology, for example, is a collection of short stories by Arab writers under forty, selections from which Focused Inquiry I students read during the short fiction unit (Shimon). Each story illustrates how the writers use the form of the short story to address trauma; whether grief in dealing with large-scale tragedy such as war, or personal trauma, such as madness, the form allows for a fictional look at very
real situations and problems.

The stories run along a similar pattern to what Brown outlined as the common motifs in her collection: they do reflect the oral nature of Arabic culture; they do focus more on the community than the individual; they exhibit interesting relationships between non-white writers and largely European editors, publishers, and readers.

The final assignment in this short fiction unit asks students to compare or contrast two of the stories they have read: they must choose literary elements of Chopin's story and one of three others by an Arab author to discuss in an essay. A successful essay will "answer if the authors are using these terms in similar or different ways and prove [their] interpretation with direct quotations" (Rajakumar). The question guides students towards a thesis that "presents at least one of the following literary terms:" symbol/symbolism, theme, motif, and figurative language (simile, metaphor, analogy, allusion, or personification) (Rajakumar).

The gender-related topics in Chopin's story lend to facile comparisons with the other short stories read in class. Among the stories in Modern Arabic Fiction, Wadad Al Kawwari's "Layla" is an example of a character who struggles to fulfill the traditional gender roles for women as wife and mother (448-453). As a student reflects, the two authors explore similar themes. She makes the connection by comparing the use of a literary technique, foreshadowing: "Both Al-Kawwari and Chopin use foreshadowing in their stories to portray the female protagonists' struggles with life and death. These struggles are still present in society for women today" ("Unresolved Women's Struggles in Society"). The student connects both stories to contemporary issues facing women in the Middle East, noting that despite their publication dates, 1964 and 1894, respectively, "show how these short stories still relate to today's issues" ("Unresolved"). This type of reflective connection is what the unit is designed to promote and the assignment asks for. "These events," the student explains "can relate to almost all women across the world, making it universal and relatable" ("Unresolved").

**Writing Classroom: A Successful Hybrid**

The branch campuses of the EC project are an interesting exploration of American education abroad. In the writing classroom, students receive the best of both traditions. In their classes, they are able to use well-established curricular practices,
such as process writing, and texts, such as "The Story of an Hour," to make connections to their own contexts and perspectives. Student essays from the Focused Inquiry I course at VCUQatar demonstrate the new frontiers and possibilities in this hybrid. This is one case study in the ongoing multicultural American university franchise experiment. There are no doubt many others, and I will continue to explore the connections between Kate Chopin and Arab readers as a new semester begins even with the writing of this article.
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"Student Reading Log 2: An Emotional Bond." 2/1/2012. TS. Focused Inquiry 111, Liberal Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, Doha, Qatar.


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