

Novel into *Opera*



Edith Wharton

5. American Women

Thursday, October 20, 2022

American Women

TWO AMERICAN SHORT STORIES: the one-page feminist marvel *The Story of an Hour* (1894) by **Kate Chopin** (1851–1904) and *Roman Fever* (1934) by **Edith Wharton** (1862–1937), both masterpieces of the genre, not least for their surprise endings.

I myself have adapted both texts for opera composers. The Chopin became *The Joy that Kills* (1998), a 15-minute dramatic monologue for soprano and chamber ensemble by **Thomas Benjamin** (b.1939). The Wharton became a one-act opera (1993) for Pulitzer-Prizewinning composer **Robert Ward** (1917–2013). They make an interesting comparison in that we found opposite solutions to the problems in each case, reducing the cast of the Chopin to a single soprano and expanding the Wharton to include characters who are merely mentioned in the text.

I would not claim either opera as my best work, but even a comparative failure can cast light on the process of transforming a prose story into opera. I shall also show clips from a film adaptation of each story, as examples of what opera can manage well and what it can barely handle at all. *rb.*

A. Kate Chopin

The Joy that Kills was a commission from the Candlelight Concert Society in Columbia for a 1998 concert by the American Quartet (violin, viola, horn, and piano) with a soprano soloist, so it was not a real opera. We chose the story because it could be reduced to a single character. We start with Louise Mallard in her room reading the telegram about her husband's death. Alone in her room, her feelings change with the light flooding through the window. She calls

out to her doctor through an imaginary door, then emerges, only to see her husband approaching alive and well at the back of the auditorium. Her dying words are “Tell him it was the joy... the joy that kills.”

— **Toby Nies:** *The Story of an Hour* (2017), film clip

— **Tom Benjamin:** *The Joy that Kills*, audio clip

B. Edith Wharton

Our opera *Roman Fever* came about as the result of a conversation with Robert Ward in which I told him of the need for material for all those fine sopranos that so outnumber the men in music schools. He came up with the subject which, in the original, involves only two women. But with our market in mind, we always intended to use four; the question was how? My first idea was a little out there: to cast the two named characters doubly: the Alida and Grace of today sharing the stage with the girls they had been twenty years before. Bob's was simpler: to bring the two daughters onstage to interact with their mothers. We never actually see them in the story, but they are there as a kind of parallel to what happened between their mothers. By bringing them onstage, we make their interaction present and visible, and we see the way the fact that it is Grace's daughter Barbara who is the natural leader, not Jenny, the second-fiddle daughter of the assertive Alida.

— **Robert Ward:** *Roman Fever* (1993), complete opera
Marilyn Taylor (Alida), Tonya Currier (Grace), Karie Brown (Babs),
Christina Thompson Howell (Jenny). Richard Conant (Eduardo);
South Carolina Public Television, 1998; Donald Portnoy (c),
Sidney J. Palmer (d)

— **Derek Coutts:** *Roman Fever* (2014), final section
Naomi Sorkin (Alida), Kathryn Worth (Grace)

For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/novel-opera/>

Roger Brunyate may be contacted at rogerbrunyate@gmail.com