Class 5: American Women

A. Kate Chopin

1. Title Slide 1: Two American Women
2. Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton

Today we are going to look at my own adaptations of two stories by American women: *The Story of an Hour* (1894) by **Kate Chopin** (1851–1904) and *Roman Fever* (1934) by **Edith Wharton** (1862–1937). The Wharton will be the main subject, but I include the Chopin because it is so short, because I set it an as exercise, and because my own solution to it is the opposite of the one I found for *Roman Fever*.

3. The characters in each story

Both stories are about married women, widows it seems. Both take place mainly in dialogue and description, with little or no action, and both lead to a surprise revelation at the end. Both have a potential cast of five; in the one case, I reduced them all to a single character; in the other, I brought even the offstage characters onstage. Although *Story of an Hour* is mainly about the central figure, **Louise Mallard**, four other characters also make a brief appearance: her sister, a family friend, her husband, and the doctor. The question is how to incorporate them into a dramatization of the story, no matter whether for opera, stage, or film. I would be interested to know what solutions people have come up with, and what ideas they have about how to externalize what happens in Louise's mind.

4. Title slide 2 (*The Story of an Hour*)

There are several film adaptations of the story on YouTube, mostly produced as school English projects. Almost all rely on acting out the story in mime, some with an offscreen narrator, some without. Here is a clip from a short film by **Toby Nies**—the best of the shorter ones—in which Louise actually speaks.

5. Toby Nies: *The Story of an Hour*, clip
6. Text of the central section

The trouble with this is that it all happens so quickly. Chopin describes the changes in Louise's mind over the course of several paragraphs, partly in terms of her feelings, partly though the view outside the window, but she gives her next to no lines. So the librettist has to provide extra text for the singer, so that the music can take over and convey her emotions directly.

7. Brunyate/Benjamin: *The Joy that Kills*, extract

I wrote my own version of the piece for composer **Tom Benjamin** (b.1939). It 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 it because it could be given to a single character. I will give you the full text as a handout, but basically we start with her in her room

reading the telegram about her husband's death. 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." Here is the text of the middle section. As you see, I took Chopin's description of the view from the window and had her see it in two different lights: first through her grief, and then through her anticipation of the new life that lies ahead. So what you have here is essentially a traditional *scena: cavatina*—transition—*cabaletta*. Let's listen to the music.

8. Benjamin: *The Joy that Kills*, central section

B. Edith Wharton 1

9. Ward: *Roman Fever*, CD cover

Our opera *Roman Fever* came about as the result of a conversation with the Pulitzer-Prizewinning composer **Robert Ward** (1917–2013) 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, as you know, 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.

10. Breakdown of the opera

I have given you a fuller version of this breakdown as a handout, but here is a summary. As you see, the addition of the girls articulates the action of Wharton's story, breaking it up into three major segments (in red), at the beginning, middle, and end. The rest of the material is of two types: sections that are entirely new (in yellow), and others (in orange) where we have taken ideas from the Wharton, but made them into arias. I am very proud of the aria for Alida, "Bells… always the bells," and have given you a handout showing both my original libretto and the way I made it more concise and active. The text for the **Waiter's** Roman Fever aria was written by Bob Ward against my wishes. I had intended to keep him a silent character, and had given the story to Grace, as in the Wharton. But Bob wanted the male voice and a more popular style; he was probably right, but I cringe at the stage-Italian. One other place where he largely rewrote my words was the **Quartet** for all four women towards the end. He wanted something simpler than my poetry and came up with the rhyming text for the girls, though he kept most of my words for the mothers. Musically, he was right, though I still find his text to be trite. But, as **Meredith Oakes** managed so well when adapting *The Tempest* for **Thomas Adès**, the point is not the librettist's ego but the music that results, and I think you will agree that this is wonderful.

11. Scene from television production

The performance I am going to show is not my own, but a rather low-budget television production produced at the South Carolina PBS station. I will show half of it now, and the rest after the break, and we can discuss our impressions after it is over. I think, incidentally, that the white-haired man you see briefly at the beginning is the composer himself.

12. Ward: *Roman Fever*, up to the Bells aria
13. Ward: *Roman Fever*, Bells aria (if time)

As I said, I gave you the text of the aria you just heard. I structured it originally as a four-stanza lament on the passing of time. Revising it later, I tightened the first part and replaced the last, making it into a traditional *cavatina-cabaletta* structure ending with Alida's determination to live again though Jenny. In setting it, though, Bob Ward shortened the *cavatina* section, which he was probably right to do, but then doubled the *cabaletta*, taking it way out of proportion with the slow section and making it too difficult, I think, for the conservatory sopranos we had in mind in the first place.

14. Title slide 3: Alida's aria

C. Edith Wharton 2

If I've not already done so, I'll start this hour with Alida's aria, which you also have as a handout. I structured it originally as a four-stanza lament on the passing of time. Revising it later, I tightened the first part and replaced the last, making it into a traditional *cavatina-cabaletta* structure ending with Alida's determination to live again though Jenny. In setting it, though, Bob Ward shortened the *cavatina* section, which he was probably right to do, but then doubled the *cabaletta*, taking it way out of proportion with the slow section and making it too difficult, I think, for the conservatory sopranos we had in mind in the first place.

15. Ward: *Roman Fever*, Bells aria (if not included in the first half)
16. Ward: *Roman Fever*, remainder
17. Ward: *Roman Fever*, scene breakdown (repeat)

So what did you think? Do you have any questions? Looking back on it now, I am still proud of a lot of it: the opening duet, the way we used the daughters, the first part of Alida's aria, and especially the scene with Jenny that leads to the breaking of the pearls. But all these are incidental, adding a lot of variety to be sure, but not touching the essential content of the story, which is still crammed into the last ten minutes. By postponing the final confrontation between the two mothers, we only postponed the intrinsic difficulty of *showing* it rather than merely talking about it. For the all-important revelations we get here happen solely in the dialogue; they do not involve any stage action. They rely on the audience catching the words, which is always a problem in opera, even with supertitles. It is doubly a problem when the whole point of the story, the surprise punchline that turns everything else around, depends on an audience catching the last three words. I rejected the invitation to stage the premiere production

(though I have done it since), partly because I didn't know how to handle this aspect. But for a librettist to sign off on something that he does not know how to handle is in effect an admission of failure. And when push comes to shove, I fear we *have* failed.

18. Kathryn Worth and Naomi Sorkin in *Roman Fever* (Derek Coutts, 2014)

At the start of class, I showed a brief film clip demonstrating why a scene (from *The Story of an Hour*) really needed music to work. I will end with a clip from a 2014 film of *Roman Fever* demonstrating the opposite: that there are things that a well-cast and well-acted film or play can do that have no need at all for music to make their point. The film, by **Derek Coutts**, is only 24 minutes long, but it has meticulous production values and excellent acting. Coutts moves the setting to a villa outside Rome, which was presumably easier to handle than a restaurant overlooking the Forum, but otherwise the content is the same. He mentions the daughters, but doesn't show them. And he has convincing actresses of the right age: **Naomi Sorkin** makes a fine Alida, and **Kathryn Worth** is so good as Grace that I will never be able to imagine the role in any other way again. Let's watch the final five minutes.

19. Derek Coutts: *Roman Fever* (2014), ending
20. Title slide 4: Kathryn Worth as Grace Ansley