

Alice French's View of Women

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In the 1890s, one of the most well-known popular magazine contributors signed her stories and essays "Octave Thanet." That pseudonym was used by an Iowan, Alice French (1850-1934). All seventeen of her books—seven novels, one book of photography, nine short story collections—are available in the Iowa Authors Collection in the University of Iowa Library. To the student of culture and to the generally curious, these books offer a glimpse into the life and ideas that were important to the reading public at the end of the nineteenth century.

Alice French was born in 1850 in Andover, Massachusetts, of a prominent and wealthy family. When she was five years old, her family moved to Davenport, Iowa, where she lived until her death. She was well-educated; as a girl she read extensively and as a young woman she was graduated from Andover Academy. She also traveled extensively during her lifetime; once she even accompanied Andrew Carnegie and several friends on a coaching trip throughout England and Scotland. Busy with the activities of a socially prominent family, she did not really begin writing seriously until she was in her late twenties. When she did, she adopted her pseudonym, Octave Thanet, in order to disguise her sex. Under that name, she sold her first story to *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1878 and, thereafter, she was published frequently until 1913.

Between 1896 and 1900, when she was at her height of popularity, she had fifty short stories and five books published. Her shrewd business mind put her among the highest-paid authors per piece in the United States during that time, and contemporary critics placed her at the head of American fiction writers. She wrote local-color fiction drawn from life in Davenport and her winter home in Arkansas. Like many of her contemporary women writers, she was unmarried; but, unlike them, she did not concentrate her attention solely on women. Instead she wrote equally about men and women.

She was also deeply involved in women's organizations. During her lifetime she received honors for her literary work and her social activities. Yet she experienced many financial problems during the last years of her life owing to her loss of literary popularity and the economic troubles of the nation. She died in relative obscurity, and today few people know her name or her stories.

Her biographer, George McMichael, suggests that that obscurity resulted from her identification with out-dated nineteenth-century beliefs on race, capitalism and immigration.¹ Alice French argued for faith and the *status quo* at a time when American literature was seriously beginning to question Victorian standards. But it is not on those beliefs that I would like to focus attention here, but on her characterizations of women as representative of the way that many women thought of themselves at the turn of the century. Certain qualities emerged again and again in her characterizations of women which, judging from Alice French's popularity, her readers believed were a valid part of the "realistic" tradition.

Though she was primarily a writer of short stories, a summation of her views of women can be fully discovered in one of her longer works, *The Man of the Hour*. This book, written in 1905, was particularly well received throughout the country. Its focus is on labor and business conflicts, but it well illustrates Alice French's view of the place of women in society.

The first section of the book is devoted to Johnny Winslow's childhood. It is immediately apparent that both of his parents want to win the young lad to their different ideals. Josiah Winslow, a wealthy manufacturer, believes in the Puritan virtues, while his wife Olga, a former Russian princess, is attracted to socialistic theories. He went to church; she stayed home and smoked cigarettes. He could not understand her friendship with other nihilists, foreigners and radicals in Fairport. This conflict leads to the young boy being called "Johnny-Ivan" by the servants, who feared choosing between his father's "John" and his mother's "Ivan." Johnny-Ivan is only vaguely aware of the conflict and is much more concerned with his playmate, Peggy Rutherford. Finally, the two parents admit that they are completely incompatible and separate. Olga goes to Europe, leaving Johnny-Ivan with his father, but she retains a hold on his spirit. Johnny-Ivan is confused and saddened by the happenings, but looks forward to confiding all to his playmate, Peggy.

¹ George McMichael, *Journey to Obscurity: The Life of Octave Thanet* (Lincoln, 1965).

The second section of the book opens with memories of Olga's departure and death and the remarriage of Josiah Winslow to Emma Hopkins, a respected spinster in Fairport. Johnny has graduated from Harvard and is returning to his father's deathbed. He now uses the name "Ivan" to signify his identification with "foreign" philosophies. After the funeral, he sees Peggy briefly, then returns to the labor forces in Chicago where he is now actively involved. He gives away his inherited riches and supports the striking laborers, but can never completely win their confidence. Finally he realizes that he has only caused more problems for the workers than if he had stayed on his own side, that of the capitalist. He decides that before he can return to Peggy and the people of Fairport, he must work his way up in the world of industry. He is a natural leader of men and is soon a superintendent of a steel plant, at which time he is called upon to break a strike in his father's old plow factory.

The final section of the book is filled with the action accompanying John (his name is changed to fit his new attitudes) as he leads the Negro strikebreakers against the attacking strikers and saves the plant. He is wounded in the battle and awakes in his own home being nursed by his stepmother, Emma, and his sweetheart, Peggy, who promises to marry him and keep him out of any further mischief.

Even this brief synopsis illustrates what McMichael has said about Alice French's obscurity: it resulted from distrust of immigrants, stereotyping of Negroes, and identification with benevolent capitalism. McMichael neglected to point to outdated views of women as contributing to her obscurity. The absence of women during most of the significant action in the book and the description of the actions in which they are involved suggest who women are in the world of Octave Thanet's stories.

First of all, it is important to realize that Alice French and much of her society believed that there were distinct personality traits linked to the sex of the person. The most important ramification of this philosophy was the belief in the spirituality of women, a quality that at once made them more virtuous and mysterious than men. This spirituality did not necessitate a religious commitment; Olga "is of a devoutness, although she had renounced the orthodox religion."⁽²⁶⁾² Spirituality always called forth worshipful feelings in the men. Josiah first responded to his new wife, Olga, as "a raw country lad admires the first beautiful summer visitor who flings him a smile His

² All numbers in parentheses refer to pages in *The Man of the Hour* (Indianapolis, 1905).

soul was on its knees before her purity and her truthfulness.”(19) Even at nine years old, Johnny-Ivan “hated to cast a reflection on Peggy . . . before whom he would willingly abase himself.”(9) Much later in life, he even “opened [her] letter on his knees as if before his queen.”(395)

To all who knew him, Johnny Winslow was acting irrationally when he joined the labor forces, but eventually his “masculine” rationality triumphed and he came to his senses. Masculine rationality was often contrasted to feminine emotionality in the Thanet stories. The very best women had learned to control their emotions and, consequently, could behave more sensibly than men in an emotional situation. Olga was a good example of a woman who never learned to control her emotions. “She had the insatiable yearning for the secrets of life which belongs to the Slav Her blind and passionate absorption in the social faiths” brought her to her ruin.(25) When Olga left her young son, he was very upset and his father, Josiah, didn’t know what to do. The housekeeper took the situation in hand, “with a woman’s instinctive scorn of man’s inadequacy in an emotional crisis.” (135)

Their emotionality naturally inclined women to be sympathetic. Therefore, sympathy was prescribed as a great charm for women to develop. Peggy qualified as an ideal sweetheart for Johnny, because even in her absence he knew that she was the only person in the world who could understand him. When his father died, she met Johnny at the train station and “let him know somehow without telling, that she did not expect talk from him,” for she understood perfectly.(182) Olga, on the other hand, was characterized as being entirely too sympathetic by becoming the victim of all the nihilists and alien elements in Fairport. Alice French endorsed sympathy moderated with sense.

Thanet women either had the attributes of grace and beauty or tried to develop them. Olga’s “beauty . . . wit . . . graciousness conquered everyone,” and Peggy was the prettiest girl in town even though she was unconscious of it.(24, 56) Thanet women were all interested in beautiful things. Olga criticized such fancies, but her son, Johnny, was extremely depressed to think that he couldn’t afford to buy a pearl necklace for Peggy. Refinement tempered beauty with good manners and proper behavior. Unlike many modern women, Peggy had not lost her reserve and refinement. The working women that Johnny knew had lost their refinement, but beneficially they had also lost their “feminine” vanity.

Good humor was an important charm for women to develop. Several of the women in *The Man of the Hour* manifest such a charm.

Olga was so cheerful before Johnny-Ivan when he was sick that she earned the doctor's never-ending admiration. Johnny's stepmother, Emma, had "a sense of humor which not all women have." (168) In fact, that good humor seemed to compensate for her plainness and made her pleasant to look upon. Again Alice French qualified her beliefs with moderation: "Fairport admired Mrs. Winter [the Winslows' neighbor] almost with abandon. . . . It laughed itself into tears over her mimicries. . . . Yet there was always, deep down, an uneasy distrust. She was very good-natured, but she 'made fun' of people." (53)

Most of the Thanet women reflected good sense and developed their intelligence when it would be beneficial to their relationships with their families. When advanced education would not serve the family's needs, it was not pursued. Peggy learned all that she could about the labor movement, not because of a real personal interest, but in order to win Johnny back to the side of the capitalists. Generally, women could not understand the workings of a man's world and displayed only their feminine ignorance.

In such a fashion Alice French built the idea that women had a separate-but-equal sphere in which to operate. Women's strengths were in handling emotional situations, in sympathizing with their men, and in standing by their virtuous beliefs. Women were sometimes quite assertive for such causes. Peggy even chased the thief of Johnny's money with feelings of "mounting excitement of combat, the wild stir of the blood which had sent the men of her race into a hundred reckless adventures." (225) When there was no further need for her immediate assertion, she was willing, as were the other heroines in the Thanet stories, to defer to man's control and rational judgment.

Alice French did not overlook what she called "feminine" faults. These often included deceptions and cruelty. Comments such as the following from the novel indicate her feelings: "Cruelty comes to women early"; "Guile comes easy to her sex"; "Acting comes like breathing" to a girl. Even Peggy, the worthy heroine, had some of these weaknesses. "It is not to be inferred, however, because Peggy despised the help of jealousy that she was above setting feminine snares." (362)

These basic characteristics—virtue, emotion, sympathy, humor, sense and guile—determined how the women in the Thanet stories related to their world. In love, these women were faithful and patient; however, passing doubts about their love often made them complain in order to be reassured. Peggy made herself very angry

at the thought that Johnny was married to someone in Chicago, so that she could hear Mrs. Winslow convince her that she was imagining things. The relationship between Peggy and Johnny, as between other Thanet lovers, was very romantic and Platonic. For a long time, Peggy felt that her only feelings toward Johnny were maternal. The only clue to sexual attraction was an occasional blush on the part of Peggy.

Many marriages in the Thanet stories grew out of long friendships and serious attitudes, as manifest in the development of the relationship between Peggy and Johnny. Though the book did not include a description of their marriage, the reader could be sure that Peggy's early prediction of her future life would come true: "I shall be a married lady, I suppose and give balls. . . . I suppose I'll have to marry you—to keep you out of mischief."(439) Married men under the influence of their wives became less reckless and more sensible.

The marriage between Josiah and Olga was an example of what could happen between two people who rushed into marriage and were incompatible. In a letter to Johnny-Ivan after the separation, Olga made it clear to her son where she'd failed as a wife. "I have not been all a wife should be to your father. . . . Give the consideration, the patience and the forbearance which I did not give."(158) Only when the marriage-split became inevitable did she begin to criticize her husband in front of her son. Before that time she had maintained the noncritical stance of a good wife. Olga further failed as a wife by not knowing how to cook, how to train a cook, or how to care for the house properly. "Princess Olga didn't so much as know bread was raised by yeast."(23)

Motherhood was practically deified in many of the stories, and Johnny's feeling for Olga was no exception. "All times near his mother were lovely."(38) Johnny adored and worshiped his mother and respected his father. But, though Olga loved her child and was willing to go to great lengths for him, Josiah was convinced that she couldn't properly raise her son in the American ideals. Therefore, mother and son were separated.

Respectable and admirable spinsters appeared in many of the stories. They remained single in memory of a lost lover or in hope of finding a man to marry. Some spinsters were able to establish an economically self-sufficient situation and enjoy their spinsterhood. Emma Hopkins was just such a self-sufficient, well respected spinster before she became Josiah Winslow's second wife.

The most important physical location for a woman in the Thanet stories was her home, whether she was married or single. A woman's character was reflected in the order and arrangement of her house. It

was in keeping with Olga's beliefs that she removed the beautiful carpets in the Winslow house and replaced them with rag rugs. Josiah tried his best to tolerate the fact that the house was not kept in decent order. When Josiah remarried, his second wife redecorated and arranged until the house again contained "a soft harmony of splendor." (369) Rooms held immense significance to women as well. "There was a little room in [Winslow's house] which Peggy Rutherford loved, yet it had witnessed some of the saddest hours of her life." (313) Men were not involved at all in the care of the house and were most often connected with their places of business or study.

A few of the Thanet women held jobs outside the home when they had no other means of support, but most women were involved in only one major activity outside of the home—club work. Women in *The Man of the Hour* participated in a Ladies Literary Club and the Spinster's Alliance; they made bandages during the war and solicited for charities. The clubs in Fairport were most interested in preserving culture by setting up an art museum and holding conversations on other cultural matters. Full-scale charity movements that didn't support the idea of self-help were doomed to failure in the stories; Olga's attempts to help the workers at her husband's plant failed miserably because the workers had no desire to accept charity. (32)

Alice French was a shrewd author who knew what would appeal to her reading public. Her great popularity was evidence of that fact. It is interesting to compare Alice French's own life-style and beliefs with the characters she created. For example, even when she created characters with distinct personalities linked to their sexes, she recognized in herself (and critics acknowledged in her) a combination of both "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics. Her rationality and judgment on business affairs won the respect of many men, while her responsiveness and love of feminine frills made her popular with many women.

Alice French once said that men were more sentimental than women and so persisted in believing in women's mysterious nature. However, men were also "less emotional than women . . . The average man looks at things [other than women] in a larger and more impersonal way than the average woman—although this is hard to believe when Congress is in session."³ Uncontrolled emotions were evident in many modern women, she felt; such emotions were being channeled into such disreputable causes as pacifism and women's suffrage.

Alice French's size—at one time she weighed as much as 280 pounds

3 "Men as Friends," *Harper's Bazar*, XLII (October, 1908) 999.

—precludes her being remembered as a beautiful woman, yet her kind face, lovely clothes and warm personality made her quite attractive. Many people commented on her refinement of manners, dress and voice. Her heroines were similarly refined. She hadn't always displayed such refinement though; as a girl she had enjoyed games of battle and murder quite as much as her rambunctious brothers.

In an essay entitled, "But They Do Marry," Alice French asserted that clever, intelligent women make good wives even though many people think they don't.⁴ Clever women were most often attracted to businessmen. An intelligent woman had the advantage of being very interesting to her husband.

It has been said that Alice French did not marry because of a personal aversion to caressing. She said that she highly valued the institution of marriage, but felt that it wasn't for her. Nevertheless, she wrote several essays describing and prescribing the behavior of men and women within marriage. Being an excellent cook herself, she felt that all women had the solemn obligation to learn to cook well. A woman, married or single, could share the world's burdens by maintaining a pleasant, well-ordered home.

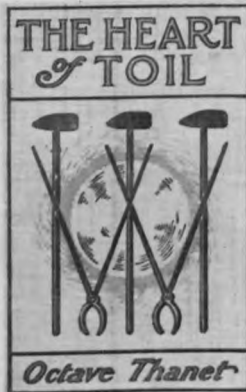
Alice French must have considered herself different from her women characters because of their lack of understanding of or interest in business principles. She was one of the first to write fiction about the Pullman strike, and published several essays supporting classical economic theories. Even though writing had long been recognized as something that women could do within the home, Alice French did not encourage aspiring female writers to write; she preferred that they learn to cook.

Like the characters she created, she was extensively involved in club work. Her favorite organizations encouraged charity programs of self-help and self-improvement. She was most actively involved in the Colonial Dames and the Federation of Women's Clubs, but she also played major roles in the Iowa Society of Midland Authors, the Iowa Russian Famine Commission, the Propaganda Food Administration and the Women's Council on Public Safety. Her other club activities are too numerous to mention here. She also played an active role in the anti-suffrage movement in Iowa, particularly in Davenport, basing her opposition to the vote on the grounds that women would not become better women by voting.

Alice French's views of women reflected not only her own life-style and beliefs, but also those of many magazine readers. There is ample

⁴ "But They Do Marry," *Ladies Home Journal*, X, 12 (November, 1893), 10.

evidence in her popularity and that of other turn-of-the-century writers that many readers were attracted to such philosophies. When those readers were women, they must have dreamed of their lives reflecting Alice French's patterns of womanhood and they must have feared that something was wrong when they did not. The moral was clear: woman is different physically, emotionally, morally and intellectually from man. She should use her talents in her sphere, the home, to contribute to the greater good of the nation as the man uses his talents in the business world for such a goal. Such outdated views help to explain her present obscurity.



Three books by Octave Thanet (Alice French) from the Iowa Authors Collection. *A Book of True Lovers* (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1897); *The Heart of Toil* (New York: International Association of Newspapers and Authors, 1901); and *A Slave to Duty & Other Women* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1898).