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English 305, Version 2

9 November 2018

Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" : Defining the Expectations of a Woman

"The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin is a thousand word short story published in 1894 that takes you through the hour of freedom that ultimately leads to the death of Mrs. Mallard. In this story, readers are introduced to two different Mrs. Mallards -- the married Mrs. Mallard and the widowed Mrs. Mallard. These two represent equally important versions of women that were completely acceptable within the terms of married and widowed. "The Story of an Hour" takes us through multiple definitions of what it is to be a woman throughout its one thousand words. Mrs. Mallard is introduced as a married woman with a heart condition. By the middle of the story she has completely transformed into Louise, the widow, only to ultimately die as Mrs. Mallard once again as her husband never died in the first place. What it means to be a woman changes with marital or widowed status and women are most free with the status of widowed, compared to being single or married, and "The Story of an Hour" shows the aforementioned through Louise Mallard's short-lived stint as a widow. The story's attitude toward married women is that they are trapped and unaware of their lack of freedom and that being a widow is the most superior type of woman as she is societally accepted and free.

Most of the women being portrayed in the late nineteenth century were portrayed as wives or single temptresses by male and female writers alike. Whether it be the shamed "adulteress" Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* or the overbearing mother Mrs. Bennett in Jane Austin's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, women were

not presented in the most positive light. As a female writer later in the nineteenth century, Chopin was able to bring more depth and honesty to her women characters. As a woman, Chopin departed radically “from literary convention within a minority tradition are especially likely to be censured and suppressed by the dominant culture, because they violate social as well as aesthetic stereotypes and expectations” (Showalter 203). The societal expectation of this time period was for women to serve their husbands and to be unheard, the epitome of an individual without freedom, as you can not be free without a voice. Chopin went against the dominant male culture and wrote her view of the world, both as a wife and as a widow and how each role differed in regards to freedom.

Married women have the expectation to serve others in their marriages, trapped within its obligatory restraints. In the nineteenth century, the cult of true womanhood surfaced, which was essentially the expectation that the identity of American women was “within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers, and housekeepers” (Delikonstantinidou 54). Through her reflections, Louise Mallard helps define the role of a good wife and the societal expectations that were expected of her in this time period. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the goal of every good housewife was to serve her family. Perhaps this vision of what it is to be a wife is taken directly from Southern Christian beliefs as even in the Bible, it is written that “a wife is bound as long as her husband lives” (1 Corinthians 7:39). The societal expectations of women were based upon and defended by the Bible. Essentially, because women were treated unequally in the Bible, men were justified in treating women terribly in the real world. While married, a woman only exists *with* her husband. Only a husband can exist without his spouse. Brigham Young claimed that “it is the calling of the wife and mother to know what to do with everything that is brought into the house, laboring to make her home desirable to her husband and children,

making herself an Eve in the midst of a little paradise of her creation” (Embry 396). This suggests that the only goal for women of this time was to labor for their husbands and children, that the end goal is having something perfect that she created. The same goal was most likely preached or woven into the life of Louise Mallard, so it is no surprise that upon hearing the news of her husband’s death her first reaction is to weep “with sudden, wild abandonment” (Chopin 60). Louise Mallard in this moment is abandoning the life she has always been told to live. She, like many women in the late nineteenth century was told to be a wife and serve her husband, which she did, and now the only life she has ever known, ever worked for, has died with her husband. Louise Mallard is “free! Body and soul free!” (Chopin 61).

Widows are accepted forms of free women as they are freed from the constraints and servitude of marriage. As widows, women are free to be free without the judgment of society weighing down on them. The only way a woman can be freed from the constraints of marriage is through death--whether it be hers or his. Louise Mallard, like all widowed women of the late nineteenth century, is most free and liberated as a widow. Louise Mallard “dies, ironically and tragically, just as she has been freed from a constricting marriage and has realized self-assertion as the deepest element of her being” (Berkove 152). Louise’s confidence and acceptance of her supposed freedom that came along with being a widow shows how women, even if they do not realize it, always long for freedom. How is it that Louise is so self-assured and comfortable with being a widow? It is because she has finally achieved the freedom that she craved her entire life.

Even in death women still presume certain expectations. It is almost as if there are feminine deaths and masculine deaths. A woman is expected to die a soft death. She is not going to die in a mine or a railroad accident. In the case of Mrs. Mallard, she dies from the shock of discovering that her husband was actually still alive the entire time. Mrs. Mallard “had died of

heart disease—of the joy that kills” (Chopin 61). The shock of Brently Mallard’s return home was too much for Louise’s heart. She had become comfortable with her freedom, the idea of being a widow, and all of that was taken away from her in a matter of seconds. It is only fitting that Louise’s death was the result of her weak heart. The heart is the human organ linked to love, an often frivolous act. Women were often associated with being emotional and love is an emotion, so therefore it is only fitting that a woman die from a misfiring of the heart.

Women are unaware of the lack of freedom they have as single women living in the home of their fathers and then directly into the realm of married women, where they have just as little freedom. They went from reporting to their fathers to reporting to their husbands. Some women may have never realized the lack of freedom in their lives if they died before their husbands. It is not until a woman is freed by the death of her husband that a woman realized how truly unfree she was. This is the life cycle of a woman. Single to married to widowed or dead, gaining the most freedom only through death, whether it be hers or her husband’s. Throughout “The Story of an Hour”, Chopin paints this exact picture of the life of Louise Mallard, accurately showing the freedom or lack-there-of women experience throughout their lives.

## Works Cited

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