

## ANALYSIS

“The Story of an Hour” (1894)

Kate Chopin

(1850-1904)

“‘The Story of an Hour’...details a very ordinary reality and conscientiously analyzes that moment in a woman’s life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-consciousness begins. Louise Mallard, dutiful wife and true woman, is gently told that her husband has been killed in a train accident. Her response is atypical, however, and that is the subject of the story: what Louise thinks and feels as she finds herself thrust into solitude and self-contemplation for the first time.

Louise appears in the opening as the frail, genteel, devoted wife of a prosperous businessman; she is at first only named as such: Mrs. Mallard. However, her first response to the tragedy indicates a second Louise nestling within that social shell: ‘she did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms.’ Chopin thus implies that perhaps some part of Louise readily accepts the news. She also intimates that since Louise unconsciously chooses to enfold herself in a female embrace and not in the arms of the male friend who tells her of Mallard’s death, Louise has already turned to a female world, one in which she is central. It is in the mid-section of the story, set in Louise’s room, that Louise and Chopin’s reader explore and come to understand reaction and potential action, social self—Mrs. Mallard—and private, female self—Louise.

Louise sits before an open window at first thinking nothing but merely letting impressions of the outer and inner worlds wash over her. She is physically and spiritually depleted but is still sensuously receptive. She sees the ‘new spring life’ in budding trees, smells rain, hears human and animal songs as well as a man ‘crying his wares.’ She is like both a tired child dreaming a sad dream and a young woman self-restrained but with hidden strengths. She is yet Mrs. Mallard.

As she sits in ‘a suspension of intelligent thought,’ she feels something unnamable coming to her through her senses. It is frightening because it is not of her true womanhood world; it reaches to her from the larger world outside and would ‘possess her.’ The unnamable is, of course, her self-consciousness that is embraced once she names her experience as emancipation and not destitution: ‘She said it over and over under her breath: ‘free, free, free!’... Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.’ It is at this point that she begins to think, the point at which she is reborn through and in her body, an experience analogous to that of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*.

Louise then immediately recognizes her two selves and comprehends how each will co-exist, the old finally giving way to the one new self. Mrs. Mallard will grieve for the husband who had loved her, but Louise will eventually revel in the ‘monstrous joy’ of self-fulfillment, beyond ideological strictures and the repressive effects of love: ‘she would live for herself...’ It is only after Louise embraces this new consciousness, her sense of personal and spiritual freedom in a new world, that she is named as female self by her sister. This is no doubt ironic since her sister only unconsciously recognizes her; she can have little idea of the revolution that has taken place in Louise’s own room. Yet Chopin does not allow simple utopian endings, and Louise’s sister’s intrusion into Louise’s world also prefigures the abrupt end to her ‘drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Louise leaves her room and descends again into her past world. Though she carries herself ‘like a goddess of Victory’ and has transcended the boundaries of her past self, she is not armed for the lethal intrusion of the past world through her front door. Brently Mallard unlocks his door and enters unharmed. His return from the dead kills Louise, and Chopin’s conclusion is the critical and caustic remark that all believed ‘she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.’

It is easy for the reader to be overwhelmed by the pathos of the story, a natural response since the reader comes to consciousness of the text just as Louise awakens to self-consciousness. Chopin offers the reader only that one point of identification—Louise, whose powers of reflection have been repressed, suddenly shocked into being, and then brutally cut off. It is a disconcerting reading experience to be cut off as well after being awakened to Louise's new self-possibilities. It is also beyond irony to be left at the conclusion with the knowledge that only Louise and the reader perceived the earlier 'death' of the true woman Mrs. Mallard; and that what murdered her was, indeed, a monstrous joy, the birth of individual self, and the erasure of that joy when her husband and, necessarily, her old self returned.

Far from being a melodramatic ending, the conclusion both informs and warns: should a woman see the real world and her individual self within it only to be denied the right to live out that vision, then in her way lies non-sense, self-division, and dissolution. Chopin's analysis of womanhood ideology and quest for self here takes on a darker hue. Her earlier stories examined the destruction of women who lived within traditional society; this piece offers no escape for those who live outside that world but who do so only in a private world in themselves. Either way, Chopin seems to be saying, there lies self-oblivion if only the individual changes and not the world."

Mary E. Papke

*Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*  
(Greenwood 1990) 62-64

"Reprinted in countless paperback anthologies and college textbooks, 'The Story of an Hour' is one of America's most successful short stories.... She has just been told—very gently, because she has a heart condition—that her husband was killed in a train crash.... It is a powerful moment, a startling moment, one of the most heavily discussed moments in nineteenth-century American literature. Scores of critics have described it as a woman's cry of joy over liberation from male dominance. Mrs. Mallard's husband had 'never looked save with love' upon his wife, Chopin writes, yet he has a 'powerful will' capable of 'bending hers,' which is 'a crime,' whether the intention is 'kind' or 'cruel,' so Mrs. Mallard's face has lines that 'bespoke repression.' Now she is suddenly free of him, and even though she 'had loved him—sometimes' and knows she will 'weep again' when she sees 'the kind, tender hands folded in death,' she knows too that her life has been transformed. Now she will 'live for herself,' not for her husband....

For 17 of the story's 23 paragraphs, Mrs. Mallard sits in her armchair staring out the window. In the last three paragraphs she stands up 'with a feverish triumph in her eyes,' walks down the stairs, and, when she sees her husband come in the door, dies of heart failure.... Mrs. Mallard is focused on her husband's repression of her, a man's repression of a woman. But the narrator—and, perhaps, Mrs. Mallard as well—understands such repression in a larger context. Mrs. Mallard now 'would live for herself,' the story reads. '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 (emphasis added).

To 'live for herself,' to live free of coercion by another, is Mrs. Mallard's hope—and the hope of many people inhabiting Kate Chopin's world. An instinctive yearning for freedom, for a more fulfilling life, is an organizing theme in *The Awakening* (1899) and in some of Chopin's strongest short stories. But in almost all these narratives, there is an additional context—something within the story itself, something in the relation of a story to another story, something in the reappearance of a person from an earlier story. The narrator of 'The Story of an Hour' steps back at a 'brief moment of illumination,' a moment of intense emotional sensation, to find in the events taking place a more complex perspective, to notice that women as well as men 'believe they have a right' to coerce others."

Bernard Koloski

*Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1996) 3-4

Michael Hollister (2015)