

Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour": A Feminist Reading

There are many forms of oppression in "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin. Not only does Louise Mallard suffer in her medical and marital conditions, but she also poses a threat to herself, as her sister Josephine warns. This danger is particularly noticeable, since all of the action in the story revolves around Louise Mallard's preservation. Everything is orchestrated to save her from any sudden and/or extreme distress. In the end, the equilibrium of her situation is what survives: Brently Mallard's return signals the return of her oppressive condition and ensures that Louise Mallard will experience no more than a momentary change in her situation. It is this unchanging prospect—the preservation of her oppressive condition—that proves Louise Mallard, or rather her circumstances, fatal to herself.

Culminating in the doctors' diagnosis, Louise Mallard is the subject of and subject to the masculine discourse of the story. This masculine discourse, which finally pronounces her dead, is fixed at the beginning of the story. She is introduced as "Mrs. Mallard" and referred to as "she" for most of the narrative. Only when Louise has become "free! Body and soul free!" is she addressed directly in the text and by her own name. But this denomination, as well as the change it embodies, is short-lived. Louise's status as "wife" is reestablished at once in the story's language and in Louise's life when Brently comes in "view of his wife."

Louise's medical condition is the narrative construct of a masculine world as well: The male-dominated medical profession identifies, yet is impotent in treating, her heart trouble. It is her perceived frailty that prompts Richards's chivalric intercession. Even the narrator observes that Louise sobs "as a child who has cried itself to sleep." Likewise, her marriage exemplifies the status of women in the early twentieth century in that the woman is subject to the patriarch's "powerful will bending hers." Although Brently "had never looked save with love upon her," he disregarded Louise's happiness: The "lines [of her face] bespoke repression."

What becomes perceptible to Louise when she hears of Mr. Mallard's death is a change in the prospect before her. Whereas before "she had thought with a shudder that life might be long," she now "saw . . . a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome." The natural landscape before her reflects this shift in perspective: The trees "were all aquiver with the new spring life," "countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves," and "patches of blue sky [were] showing here and there through the clouds" after "the storm of grief had spent itself." Instead of "hear[ing] the story [of her husband's death] as many women have heard the same, with a paralysed inability to accept its significance," Louise is enlivened and motivated: "Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body."

Louise's recognition of her liberation is at first private. She "abandon[s] herself" in a room of her own where she speaks for the first time, albeit "under her breath." She must not make her "joy" known under any circumstances. Conscious of her social duty as a widow to grieve for a year, Louise will at least "weep again when she" beholds his corpse. Nevertheless, she manifests her joy publicly—"there was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory"—and is therefore punished. Masculine discourse is reincarnated at the end of the story and of Louise's life through her husband's return (unharmd) and the arrival of the doctors, who declare the cause of her death: "[S]he had died of heart disease—of joy that kills." That they have the last word reinforces the fact that men dictate the circumstances of Louise's life and of her death as well.

Like so many wives in late-nineteenth-century America, Louise would be master of herself only after her husband's death. As a widow, "[t]here would be no one to live for," Louise notes, and "she would live for herself." The absence of children in the story indicates not only that her freedom would be absolute but also that the marriage was unfruitful. The failure to produce offspring would have been ascribed (by those selfsame doctors) to Louise, making the failure of her feminine discourse complete. She leaves nothing behind—not a trace—in the

narrative, since she has produced nothing that was expected of her. Louise will not attend to Brently in his old age, nor will she keep his house in order or produce strong sons. The self she finds in her room does not have any value in the world of masculine discourse and therefore may as well have not existed. In fact, her existence depended on a lack of self, since a woman was meant to live for others.

The oppression under which Louise suffers was by no means unusual for the time. What is ultimately unexpected and sudden in the story is the opportunity for and exploration of her experience of freedom, no matter how transient. Louise's recognition of her unhappiness illustrates Chopin's commitment to a woman's perspective and what it beholds beyond the horizons of male discourse.