

## The Figure in Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour”: A Structuralist Reading

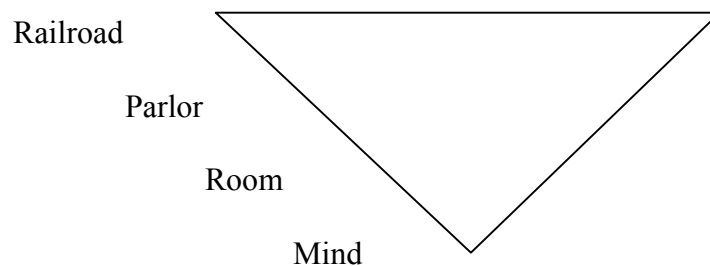
In any work of imaginative literature, the specifics of time and space play some role, no matter how small and insignificant. However, one must distinguish between narrated time and narrating time (the former can be defined as the chronological sequence and duration of events within the narrative, whereas the latter is the time of the performance of the narration, first word to last). The narrator can slow down narrated time to a veritable standstill (by undertaking a lengthy description of some object or person, for example) or speed it up such that an entire decade is encompassed within the phrase “Ten years later . . .” The same is true of spatial considerations, though narrative space (the locale of the act of narration) is less often depicted in detail. In Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” only time can be traced with any detail—though narrated space plays a substantial role—since information about the narrator and her situation can only be extrapolated from the work.

The distinction between narrative and narrated time is evident when one considers that it takes significantly less than the “hour” of the title to read the work in its entirety—even aloud—whereas the “hour” of the title refers to the passage of narrated time between Josephine informing her sister of Mr. Mallard’s alleged death and Mrs. Mallard’s own death. A tabular summary of the chronological order of events juxtaposed with their order in the story not only makes the distinction between narrative and narrated time clear but also reveals the structure of the plot.

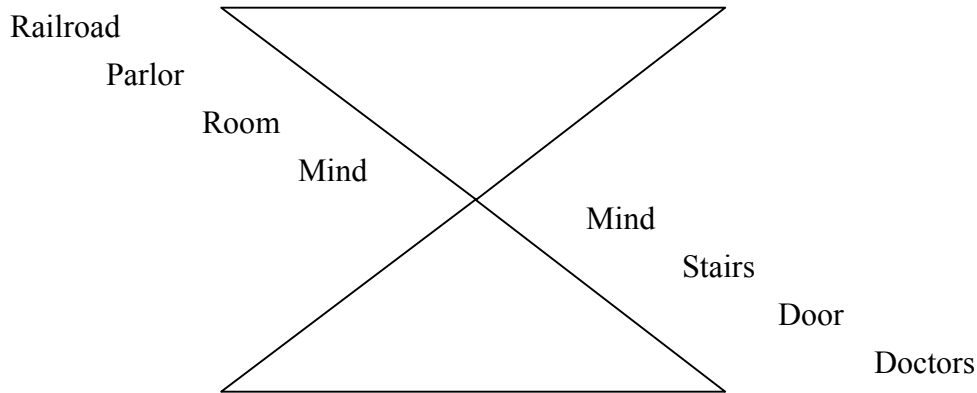
<u>Narrated Time</u>	<u>Narrative Time</u>
Railroad disaster	2nd paragraph
Richards’s telegrams	2nd paragraph
Richards informs Josephine	= 1st paragraph
Josephine informs Mrs. Mallard	= 2nd paragraph
Initial period of grief (“the storm”)	= 3rd paragraph
Mrs. Mallard goes to her room	= 4th paragraph
Louise comes downstairs	= 19th paragraph
Louise dies	= 21st paragraph

As of the third paragraph, there is little chronological difference between narrated and narrative time (Mrs. Mallard's imagining her husband's funeral does not count as anticipation or foreshadowing). The exceptions are the extreme shortening of narrated time between the penultimate and final sentences—the summoning of “the doctors” is elided—and the use of free indirect discourse at various points throughout paragraphs 4–18 inclusive, which also indicates the shortening of narrated time.

The narrator's use of space, which can be closely followed by focusing on changes in point of view and the location of the characters, reveals a clever figure in the work. It is clear that the inception of the events lies at the site of the “railroad disaster,” then moves to the newspaper office and on to the Mallard residence, presumably the parlor (paragraphs 1 and 2). Once the “grief had spent itself,” Mrs. Mallard goes upstairs; only the narrator follows her inside the room (Mrs. Mallard does not allow Josephine to enter). Here the point of view is focused entirely on Mrs. Mallard. The narrative focus has moved from the public sphere of the railroad and newspaper office to the intermediary space of the parlor and then into the private sphere of Mrs. Mallard's room and even to her mind. This focusing can be depicted like so:



As the story progresses, it becomes evident that the narrator moves from the “close-up” on Mrs. Mallard to the “wide angle” of the public sphere again: Josephine entreats Louise to leave her room (private sphere). The two descend the stairs (another intermediary space) to the front door, and finally the story's focus is on the doctors (public sphere). Thus, the structure of “The Story of an Hour” is, appropriately, an hourglass:



This figure can only be traced if the reader focuses on narrated time and space, since the sequence and locale of events is shifted in the first two paragraphs. The first paragraph focuses on the thoughts and conversation of Richards and Josephine in an undisclosed location. The second paragraph provides the necessary exposition, giving the details of Mr. Mallard's alleged death. Chopin compensates for this structural irregularity by thematically linking the beginning of the story and its end with a reference to Mrs. Mallard's "heart trouble."

This tightly structured work has but one flaw: The narrator is unreliable. With access to the thoughts and actions of Louise, Richards, and Josephine, the narrator is virtually omniscient. However, the narrator does withhold the extremely important detail that Mr. Mallard had not been in the "railroad disaster." This unreliability has significant repercussions for understanding the text as a whole. The text not only negates its title to the extent that it does not take an hour to read but also negates its status as a story.

The hourglass figure has been upheld as the ideal structure for a piece of expository prose, wherein initial general statements are followed by increasingly specific details until the thesis is stated, at which point the exposition again broadens its focus. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" follows the same pattern. Only in the most private place, to which the reader is allowed temporary access, do we learn of the "thesis" of the work: Mrs. Mallard's discovery of personal liberty and Chopin's description of marital oppression in late Victorian American society. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the work was originally published under the title "The Dream of an Hour," thus reneging its fictive status and claiming a place in the genre of dream narrative,

which is traditionally rich with political commentary (Langland's *Piers Plowman* or Dante's *Divine Comedy*, for example). For these reasons, the piece can be described better as a witty political tract than as a work of fiction.