

Analysis of the short story “Story of an Hour” (1984) by Kate Chopin

Dr. Nihad LAOUAR

University Center of Abdelhafid Bossouf Mila

Department of letters and Foreign Languages

n.laouar@centre-univ-mila.dz



Lesson Three: Analysis of the short story “Story of an Hour” (1884) by Kate Chopin

I. Introduction:

A) Who is the Writer Kate Chopin?



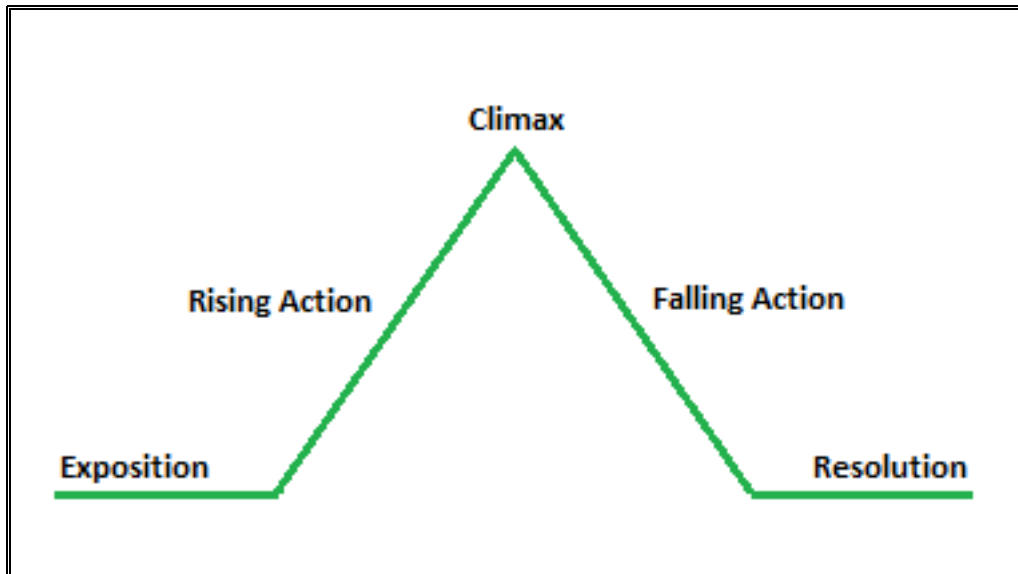
She is an American writer of short stories and novels. Chopin wrote mainly about issues related to women’s position. Chopin challenged the restricting rules of her society that encourage women to stay at home and serve their husbands and children. In other words, women in the 19th century were not expected to work or to look beyond managing the household (Wyatt 18). Hence, 1890s America, despite the rapid change of industrialisation, was still considering that motherhood and marriage were the most important jobs for women according to societal standards. In this short story “The Story of an Hour”, Chopin criticises the restricting position of her female protagonist who struggles for freedom and independence from the confines of marriage.

B) Plot of the story:



The story “the story of an hour” follows Louise Mallard, the protagonist, who learns about the news of her husband Brently Mallard that he has died in a train crash. The story channels the emotional journey of Louise Mallard as she deals with her husband’s death. At first, she is overcome with sadness and grief. After
Carle Halseo, Waiting by the Window 18

retiring to her room, however; Louise starts experiencing instances of unexplained joy. This means that her grief transforms into joy as she comes to realise that her husband’s death means freedom from her confining marriage. At the end of the story, Louise’s sense of freedom and joy appear to be short-lived. Heading back downstairs, Louise gets shocked at the sight of her husband coming back home and dies of a heart attack as a result.



Body Plot diagram

II. Plot Elements of “Story of an Hour”

- **Exposition:** the news of the death of the husband in a train crash.
- **Rising action:** Louise hears about the news of her husband’s death and she starts grieving his death
- **Climax:** She starts to experience joy over her new acquired freedom in a world without her husband and the sense of restriction that he brings to her life.
- **Falling action:** Josephine is worried about Louise’s health, she opens the door and they both walk downstairs with Louise feeling triumph at her new widowed life.
- **Resolution/ denouement:** Louise’s husband Mr Marllard returns back home and it appears that he has been far away from the accident and knew nothing about it and Louise dies out of shock.

II. Characters Analysis:

- **Characters:** Luise Mallard, Josephine, Richard Brently Mallard, the doctors.
- **Major character:** Louise Mallard

A) Louise Mallard

- We learn from the opening sentence Louise is married and has a heart condition which makes her delicate and sensitive.
- Louise appears to be a housewife who spends most of her time at home and this is typical of women’s roles in the 1890s.

- She is described as “young”, and that she has a “calm face” with lines of “strength”. It appears later in the story that such “strength” is not solely physical but it is also part of her character (Beer 23).
- Her personality is different from other women in the way that, unlike other women, her grief about her husband’s death is quickly transferred to joy.
- Her experience of a restricting marriage mirrors the case of many married women in the 1890s.
- Kate Chopin uses this character to criticise the oppressive nature of marriage and this appears in the way that Louise experiences joy over her newfound freedom and independence after the death of her husband.

B) Josephine: She is a supporting character that helps Louise mourn over the death of her husband.

C) Richards is another supporting character who is Brently’s friend. Richard’s main role in the story is commencing the story’s plot by finding out the news about Mr Mallard’s death and delivering it.

D) Brently Mallard is also a supporting character. The readers get limited information about him and we only learn about his character from his wife’s description of him. She notes that he is kind hearted, loving and caring.

E) The Doctor(s): the doctors’ presence in the story is very brief. Their role is to interpret Mrs Mallard’s heart failure as one of joy, meaning that the sudden happiness after her husband’s return has been too much for her troubled heart.

III. Setting of the story:

- **Place:** The Mallard’s House
- **Time:** An hour around 1894

IV. Theme of the story:

The central theme of this story is “The forbidden joy of freedom/hidden joy of freedom”. This means that the sense of freedom that Mrs Mallard has longed for can only be imagined secretly. As she receives the news of her husband’s death, Mrs Mallard reacts with grief. Her grief, however, is momentary as it transforms into a sense of unexplained joy. When alone in her

room, Mrs Mallard starts to realise that she is now an independent woman and this excites her. However, she soon starts to feel guilty over such an unknown joy and tries to push these thoughts away by recalling how kind and loving her husband was. Such resistance unravels the fact that the pleasure she has been feeling is forbidden. She ends up embracing her newfound freedom in the way that she sees that her life is now her own. When her husband returns, Mrs Mallard’s newfound freedom vanishes. Her husband’s return at the end of the story indicates that the patriarchal rules of her society continue to be exercised despite women’s resistance to them (Bloom 4).

V. Type of narrator: the narrator of this story is third person omniscient because the narrator takes the reader into the mind and feelings of Louis.

VI. Conflicts of the story:

- A) **Internal conflict:** within Louise. She is relieved that her husband is dead but she is afraid to welcome or feel that joy.
- B) **External conflict:** Louise struggles against her society.

VII. Foreshadowing: Foreshadowing is a literary device which is used by the writer to give us hints or an indication of what will happen later in the story. An example of foreshadowing in “Story of an Hour” is the mention of “heart trouble” in the beginning of the story which foreshadows her death of heart disease later in the story.

Foreshadowing examples	Meaning
Heart Trouble	It foreshadows Mrs Mallad’s death
There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it?	This lets us know that something exciting is going to happen soon, but we don’t know what it is yet. Mrs. Mallard is having a premonition.

VIII. Symbolism: Symbolism is a literary device that uses symbols to represent something beyond the literal meaning. symbols can be words, objects, characters, or concepts that elicit a range of other meanings beyond the literal. Some examples of symbolism in this story are:

Symbols	Meaning
The open window	Symbolises Mrs Mallard's newly gained freedom after the death of her husband.
The comfortable roomy armchair	Symbolises Mrs Mallard's new position in life.
Blue patches of the sky	Temporary taste of freedom

References

Wyatt, Neal. *Biography of Kate Chopin*. Virginia Commonwealth University: 1995. Bloom,

Harold. *Kate Chopin*. Chelsea House Publications: 2007

Beer, Janet. *Cambridge Companion to Kate Chopin*. London: **2008**.

Story of an hour Evaluation Quiz

1. The last line of the story is this: “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?
2. Mrs Mallard is described as descending the stairs “like a goddess of Victory”. In what ways does she feel herself Victorious?
3. Give other two examples of symbolism from the story “Story of an Hour” and explain them.
4. Compare the character of Mrs Mallard with the character of the American wife in “Cat in the Rain” from the previous lesson.
5. What did Louise Mallard feel toward her husband during their life together?
6. What is Louise’s immediate outward reaction to the news of her husband is dead?
7. What does Louise understand about the thoughts and feelings she is having about Brently’s death?
8. What is the true cause of the heart attack of Mrs Mallard?
9. What does Chopin present as a source of forbidden joy for women?
10. What motif does Chopin use to highlight the dichotomy of sorrow and happiness?