

Love, Loss and Liberation: Feminist Reading of Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*

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Abstract

The paper aims to delve into the gendered nuances of loss and grieving within a marriage as portrayed in Kate Chopin's notable short story "The Story of an Hour". Louise Mallard, a traditional wife and a heart patient, receives the news of her husband Bently Mallard's tragic accident. However, her reaction to the news of her husband's death is peculiar and by no means, traditional. The feminist critique of the societal institution of marriage as a site of gendered oppression becomes the basis of the analysis. Marriage, presented as a source of love, companionship and security, often becomes an agent of consolidating and upholding patriarchy, denying independence, self-discovery and individual identity to women. The oppressive and elusive love and the convoluted sense of freedom achieved through death and loss, simultaneously forms the thematic structure of the story. The paper aims to explore the juxtaposition of loss and liberation as represented by Chopin through Louise's character.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminism, Loss, Grief, Gender, Identity.

The Story of an Hour written by Kate Chopin in 1890s, during the first wave of feminism, which was deemed an unconventional and objectionable text by the American society at that time, remains till this day, a significant work of feminist literature. It explores the complex relationship between marriage, female identity, personal freedom, and patriarchal oppression. The narrative traces Louise's transformation from experiencing a peculiar form of grief to an unexpected recognition of freedom, revealing how deeply entrenched gender norms can restrict a woman's capacity to imagine a life beyond the institution of marriage.

The story opens with Mrs. Mallard, a wife "afflicted with a heart trouble", receiving the news of her husband's death (Chopin 285). The news is delivered in broken sentences, carefully, gently and tenderly by her sister, Josephine and her husband's friend, Richard. "She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance" rather "she wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment" (Chopin 285). Chopin, from the onset, underlines the unusual manifestation of loss in Louise's reactions. According to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, there are essentially five stages of grief, namely; Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance (Kübler-Ross and Kessler 7). Most psychologists

consider grief to be a singular and distinct experience and a perpetual state of being, these stages provide a steady foundation for understanding the universal process of grieving and the subsequent healing. The loss of Louise's husband, does not instigate in her a natural response of denial, or any resistance to acceptance of the news, rather she throws herself in a wild abandon and leaves to spend some time alone in her room as if "the storm of grief has spent itself" (Chopin 285). This "wild abandonment" alludes towards a state of delirium rather than sheer devastation. The story in its temporality unfolds within the span of one hour, as the title suggests. However, it reveals the realities of Louise's identity, beyond that hour. Chopin deliberately refrains from explicitly revealing the complexities of Louise and Brently Mallard's marriage, instead, readers are left to infer the nature of their relationship primarily through Louise's reaction to the news of her husband's supposed death. In her book *All About Love*, bell hooks argue that grief is the metaphysical presence of love beyond immediate experience of loss (hooks 195). Therefore, the absence of a tangible form of grief after the devastating loss of her husband, alludes towards the absence of an unconditional, fulfilling love in Louise's marriage.

Louise's physical exhaustion from "the storm of grief" is soon overcome by "the new spring of life" and she begins to experience a transformation that culminates in a whisper under her breath, "free, free, free!" (Chopin 285, 286). This emotional transformation challenges the assumption that the loss of a spouse must produce only everlasting grief and sorrow, suggesting instead that loss can induce relief and the recognition of previously unacknowledged and constrained desires. Louise's experience reveals a paradox of the experience of grief; the death of her husband presents her with an opportunity to liberate herself from the restrictive gender roles imposed upon her by her marriage and patriarchal expectations. Grief then somehow conflates into a sense of freedom and subsequently into an act and process of reclamation of the self. This conflation essentially arises from the urge to liberate oneself from the restrictive roles imposed by seemingly inexorable external structures. The loss of such structures, directly or indirectly, enables the individual to shed the oppressed identity that was consolidated by the presence of the other. Consequently, the absence of the other enables the self to redefine its identity and reclaim its autonomy.

Louise contemplates how "she had loved him—sometimes. Often, she had not" (Chopin 287). Whether love existed in their marriage or not becomes irrelevant to Louise, as her newfound awareness of "the strongest impulse of her being" allows her to prioritize personal freedom over emotional attachment and the stereotypical expectations of marriage (Chopin 287).

Chopin acknowledges that Brently had looked upon Louise with love and that Louise had sometimes loved him. Yet she also experiences the prospect of a future without him as a source of profound relief. This apparent contradiction challenges the conventional assumption that love and marriage necessarily provide complete personal fulfilment, especially for a woman. Jennifer Hansen observes, “Beauvoir strongly believed that marriage . . . trapped and stunted women’s intellectual growth and freedom” (2). The prospect of not being a wife, to Louise, seems synonymous, to being free. This underlines the restrictions women feel while upholding the traditional role of a ‘wife’. To further emphasize this role, Chopin consistently refers to Louise as “Mrs. Mallard” throughout the story rather than by her first name. This underscores the restrictive role imposed on Louise as a wife, with her identity largely defined by her marital status rather than her individuality. It is only after Louise begins to realise the prospect of her freedom that Josephine (an agent of the external reality) addresses her by her first name, “Louise.” This subtle yet significant shift in naming reflects a transformation in her sense of self, as she begins to liberate herself from the identity imposed upon her by her marriage. By revealing her first name at this pivotal moment, Chopin symbolically highlights Louise’s desire to exist as a woman in her own right and light, independent of her role as a wife. This was also the moment that “she was drinking in a very elixir of life” and felt feverish from “triumph in her eyes” and “carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of victory” (Chopin 287). Thus, the contrast between “Mrs. Mallard” and “Louise” reinforces one of the struggles for female autonomy within the constraints of marriage and the patriarchal definitions of being a wife.

Louise’s desire for freedom and agency is plagued with a sense of guilt and ‘monstrous joy’ simultaneously. “She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will” (Chopin 286). Her impulse to suppress this newfound sense of freedom underscores the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal structures on women’s consciousness, revealing the difficulty in subverting the internalised social conventions and structures. This resistance to transformation reflects the inertia of social change, which complicates women’s attempts to reclaim their autonomy due to internalisation of patriarchal norms. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie writes in her book *We Should All Be Feminists*, about how we teach girls shame, “we make them feel as though by being born female, they are already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire... who cannot say what they truly think” (Adichie 33). This guilt and silenced desire, make women’s life smaller. Chopin emphasises this by writing how Louise “breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a

shudder that life might be long” (287). This juxtaposition reveals a profound transformation in her perception and potentiality of her own existence. Previously, the prospect of a long life appeared burdensome, indicating towards the monotony of a future confined within the structure of marriage. However, following her moment of self-realisation, longevity becomes desirable because it brings the possibility of living for herself.

The story concludes when Brently Mallard unexpectedly returns home, alive and unaware of the reported accident and his pronounced death. Louise, who has just imagined and realised a future of independence, dies upon seeing him. The doctors conclude that “she had died of heart disease—of the joy that kills” (Chopin 287). The doctors assume that Louise's death results from overwhelming happiness at her husband's return. However, the narrative suggests that the collapse of the dream of anticipated freedom may be the more significant explanation. This conclusion is deeply ironic because the medical explanation contradicts the emotional reality. Louise's “heart trouble” or “heart disease” can be interpreted not merely as a physical ailment but as a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual confinement imposed by marriage.

Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* exposes the paradoxical and dialectical relationship between loss and liberation within the patriarchal structure of marriage. It underlines how a woman's freedom becomes tangible and an achievable reality only through the absence of the patriarchal figure who structures her existence. Brently Mallard's presumed death momentarily disrupts the authority of marital convention, the assigned roles of husband and wife, allowing Louise to envision a future in which her time, desires, and identity belong exclusively to her. However, his unexpected return dismantles this possibility, revealing how deeply her anticipated autonomy remains dependent upon the disappearance of the power structures that constrain her. Chopin therefore presents female liberation as both a powerful personal realization and a possibility constrained by patriarchal social structures. The irony lies in the fact that what society perceives as the restoration of marital happiness signifies, for Louise, the re-emergence of a life from which she thought she had escaped. Her death consequently marks the tragic closure as the promise of liberation is subverted before it can materialize into lived experience. Chopin thus complicates the conventional opposition between grief and joy. Louise's loss becomes the precondition for imagining freedom, while the reversal of that loss reinstates the conditions of her confinement. In the end, what is lost is her potential, anticipated independence and individual identity. This becomes the loss which is much more profound and more eternal than the one experienced at the beginning of the narrative. The ending ultimately exposes the patriarchal order in which a woman's independence appears so incompatible with

her prescribed gender role that its possibility is reduced to a momentary realisation rather than a rational reality.

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