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Louise Mallard's Deadly Hour of Quandary in  
Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

Kate Chopin captures the unities of dramatic structure, past, present, and action in "The Story of an Hour", with perfection and intrigue. Louise Mallard lives in a conflicting past, a devastating present and an optimistic future in sixty short – yet deadly - minutes. Afflicted with a delicate heart condition she is informed by her sister Josephine, and close friend, Richards, of her husband's demise in a deadly train wreck that should leave her in a state of shock, remorse and grief. What readers learn is that it is not such a crushing blow as she experiences her true feelings when left alone. The plot of the story is radical for the late 1800's, yet thought provoking and heartfelt to those who can relate to Louise's true emotional quandary.

As a late 19<sup>th</sup> century author, Kate Chopin revealed a proto-feminist sentiment unexpected of a woman in her era. Born in St Louis in the 1850's to an affluent family she was sent away to boarding school at the tender young age of 5 to The Sacred Heart Academy. Why she was sent there was questionable because her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was wealthy enough to provide private education in the home. In Emily Toth's study, "Unveiling Kate Chopin", Toth speculates it could have been young Kate's stubborn attitude because she had her own agenda and thirst for knowledge that quite possibly frightened her father; therefore, she was sent away from the residence. Before leaving for the Academy, Kate insisted on going with her father to his place of employment, and saw the reality of how the lower class lived in St Louis. Young ladies of her stature were not usually allowed to experience this. Toth says that "According to family tradition this outing sparked a lifelong desire against keeping young ladies ignorant about the

rest of the world” (1). When O’Flaherty was killed in a railroad accident the women of the household helped raise Kate, and they were said to be of a strong mind, and influenced her future writing career. Chopin would express her views on female relationships in a way no other writer dared to do in the late 1800’s – by describing reality.

In 1870 Kate married Oscar Chopin, a successful businessman, and they settled in New Orleans where she gave birth to six children. In a biography it’s written, “Like other wealthy families they attended the opera, horse racing and would vacation on Grand Isle, a Creole resort in the gulf of Mexico” (the setting for her most radical novel published in 1899 “The Awakening”) (Kate Chopin Biography). The family later moved to northwest Louisiana and when Oscar died in 1882 she was left alone to support the children. Before moving back to St. Louis, it was rumored that she had an affair with a local man. Once back in St. Louis, she embarked upon a writing career. Chopin’s multilingual and multicultural background heavily influenced her writings, which were for the most part set in the Cajun heritage of the United States and not well received by the public in her lifetime. Kate’s childhood experiences and memories are reflected in many of her works that were considered sexually controversial when published yet today are acclaimed and viewed as important literary contributions.

In “The Story of an Hour”, although Louise and Brently Mallard’s relationship is not analyzed or elaborated on, one realizes that something is amiss when she takes the news “with paralyzed inability to accept its significance” indicating how insignificant her life with Brently was. Looking at the past, she is not only stunned by grief but also struck with the realization that she will never have to submit to anyone’s persistence to bend her will. She did love him at one time, but his repression and imposition of his will throughout the years have taken their toll on Louise and she is not going to look back anymore. Will she be able to play the role of the grieving widow? Louise is elated that, what was then - is not now, and a type of euphoria settles in.

Perplexed at first by her emotions regarding her husband’s supposed death she is saddened, but soon she is “drinking in a very elixir of life” and reveling in visions of the future. Alone in her private chamber she gazes out the

window at a springtime “aquiver with new life” and embraces and fantasizes about her life of new beginnings regaling “ Free! Body and soul free!”. Louise is free at last and her perception of newfound freedom is intoxicating and unlimited. What shall she do with all her uninhibited days to come? At the same time she is terrorized by these blatant feelings that a newly widowed woman should not be experiencing. Nevertheless, she cannot help being overcome by a “monstrous joy” at the prospect of his passing and her anticipation of days to come. Presently, she is looking forward to a longer life with a stronger heart.

Ironically Louise’s heart gives out when Brently shows up unscathed. Did Louise’s actions and thoughts in privacy contribute to her demise? Could she have gotten her comeuppance, for having those happy thoughts? What did she see in the last moments of life – a choir of angels or the demonic face of Brently Mallard? Ultimately, and unfortunately, it was the thoughts of joy and visions of freedom that killed her. When her dreams of freedom were taken away from her, she ceased to exist entirely. Mark Cunningham writes “Louise Mallard does not die from the shock and grief of seeing her husband; she dies a death as a result of her newly gained autonomy” (48-54).

The beauty and tragedy of this story is that, in the era in which the story was written, women were expected to be abiding and devoted wives to their husbands and Kate Chopin boldly put into writing a woman’s desire for freedom and individuality. Yet, it was not received as a significant literary contribution until over half a century later. In Chopin’s own words “Human impulses do not change and can not (sic) so long as men and women continue to stand in the relation to one another which they have occupied since our knowledge of their existence began” (Ostman15). In this literary treasure, Kate captures the essence of the past, present and future in “The Story of an Hour” as it entices the spirit while one feels the pain of injustice.

## Works Cited

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