Gender Equality or Human Relationships: A Critical Reading of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

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Abstract: Since its publication in 1894, Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" has been regarded as a feminist literary text. Feminist scholars have read it as a critique of the institution of marriage. With the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s, this story gained renewed interest among feminist critics, who saw it as emphasizing women's sense of individualistic identity. The aim of this paper is to challenge this view. In particular, this paper argues that the feminist reading of this text is, at times, unfounded. In fact, there is no reference in the text to Mr. Mallard's oppression or repression of his wife, the protagonist. The text does not provide enough information about Mr. Mallard to support such feminist readings. Through an in-depth theoretical and textual analysis, this article concludes that "The Story of an Hour" is about relationships between couples as well as love, loss, and grief.

Keywords: liberation, Familial bonds, independence, individualism, marital duties

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المساواة بين الجنسين أم العلاقات الإنسانية: دراسه نقدية لرواية "قصة ساعة" لكيت شوبان

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مستخلص البحث: يصح القول بأن رواية "قصة ساعة" لكيت شوبان والمنشورة عام 1894 تعدُّ نصًا أدبيًا يستبطن فلسفةً نسويةً، حيث يُنظر إليها من لدن جمهرةٍ من الباحثين النسويين بأنَّها تشكلُ مدماك الانطلاق لنقدِ مؤسسةِ الزواج. ومع مرور الزمن وتقلب الأيام وصعود الحركة النسوية في الستينيات الميلادية، عادتْ هذه الروايةُ إلى محلِ الصدارةِ لتلقى اهتمامًا متجددًا من قبل النقاد النسويين، والذين رأوا بأنها روايةٌ تؤكد على إحساسِ المرأةِ بالهوية الفردية. تأتي هذه الورقةُ لتسهمَ -متحديةً- بالقولِ بأنَّ هذا الموقفَ يعوزهُ الدقةُ، حيث إنّ القراءةَ النسويةَ لهذا النص في غالبِ أحوالها لا تتأسسُ على أرضيةٍ صلبةٍ مما أفضى إلى نشوءِ قراءةٍ غيرَ صحيحةٍ. وعلى التحقيق، فإن الناظر في النص لا يظفر بمجرد إشارة إلى وجود اضطهاد أو قمع كان قد أوقعه السيد مالارد على زوجته -بطلة الرواية-. زد على ذلك، فإن النص لا يعطي معلومات كافية عن السيد مالارد والتي يمكن لها أن تعضد هذه القراءات النسوية. تخلص هذه المقالة -بعد طول مداورة عبر إعمال تحليلٍ نظريٍّ ونصيٍّ- إلى أنَّ رواية "قصة ساعة"، ضدًا على القراءة النسوية، تدور حول العلاقات بين الزوجين، ومشاعر الحب، والحزن، والفقد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التحرر، الروابط الأسرية، الاستقلال، الفردانية، الواجبات الزوجية.

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1. Introduction

Kate Chopin wrote "The Story of an Hour" in 1894, at a time when 19th-century women writers and intellectuals were beginning to highlight the contradictions in modern societies that celebrated equal social and political rights while denying them to women. The feminist movement pushed for the extension of these rights to women. In this context, "The Story of an Hour" was read as a woman's longing for independence and autonomy in modern society[1].

Theoretical and Intellectual Background

Middle-class women debated the 19th-century assumption that women should focus only on the domestic sphere (the predominant role for working-class women). In *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*, Janet Todd (2014) explains that one of the major changes in the social context of the 19th century was that middle-class women who were concerned with issues of women's rights and women's equality with men in modern society had more time and education to pursue these issues, and in many cases, they had fewer children than lower-class women. Todd goes on to point out that, as the century progressed, middle- and upper-class family couples began to use contraception, reducing the number of children in these families and opening up more social options for women. As Todd argues, these changes in the social context for families are one of the factors that contributed to the rise of modern feminism.

On the other hand, Carol Gilligan (1982) notes that there was a camp that opposed the extension of equal rights to women and based their arguments on sociological, psychological, and biological theories. These theoretical positions were an attempt to justify why women should not enter public life. The sociological theory argues that women are in an inferior social position because human societies are hierarchical, and men have always been at the top of the social hierarchy. Historical observations support this argument. In other words, throughout history, women have always been in a lower social hierarchy than men.

This is tradition, as Edmund Burke saw it (Kramnick,1977). Burke maintains that there are valid reasons for this social hierarchy, and traditions of the past have a certain wisdom and logic that stand the test of time and should be respected. For example, according to sociological theorists, it is natural for men to be at the top of the social hierarchy because they have experience running organizations and managing institutions and, thus, families. Heinrich von Treitschke, a German historian, contends that a family is also a hierarchical institution that works well according to this sociological theory, where the father is the natural head of the household and the one who oversees justice among its members. Therefore, both the family and the social system as a whole, Treitschke insists, must uphold the authority of men over women in order to protect social traditions (Davis, 1914).

Gilligan observes that the psychological theory of gender differences is closely related to the sociological and biological ones that emanate from it. This theoretical viewpoint emphasizes the difference in the size of women's brains. In the 19th century, Gilligan explains, there was a general belief that women had less capacity for abstract thought because their brains were smaller than men's. This made women more emotional and empathetic, less rational, and less reasonable. However, their innate position as the guardians of emotional life also made them the guardians of morality. Women's biological determinism made them qualified to nurture but not capable of equal participation with men.

1 Kate Chopin was a daughter to an Irish father and a French mother. She married Oscar Chopin in 1870 and lived with him in New Orleans, Louisiana. Between 1871 and 1879, Kate became a mother to four sons and a daughter. In 1882, her husband died. Years later, she started her serious writing in 1889. She published more than a hundred stories. Among others, she wrote about women's blind contentment as well as their many roles even within the confining structures of her nineteenth century culture.

This logic led to a biological theory that explained gender differences, emphasizing that women could not be equal because they were physically different from men. In particular, biological theory claims that women's reproductive functions and menstrual cycles prevent them from developing rational analyses of public problems or using reason like men. Thus, the biological theory justified the exclusion of women from public life and politics. Women were controlled by their bodies, while men simply were not. The world of men was public, while women were confined to the private sphere.

In France, Edmond and Jules Goncourt wrote in 1855 (as cited in Apter, 1991), "All the life juices, the whole evolution of woman flows downward toward the inferior parts of the body: the pelvis, the rump, the thighs" (p. 67), that a woman's physical strength was in the pelvis, whereas man's power was in the "upper nobler parts" and the "high forehead." The key biological difference was that women functioned in a lower physical realm; they had less capacity for abstract thought because a woman's body was considered more important than her mind. To this effect, Justice David Josiah Brewer wrote the following in 1908 (as cited in Ancheta, 2006):

Still again, history discloses the fact that woman has always been dependent upon man. He established his control at the outset by superior physical strength, and this control in various forms, with diminishing intensity, has continued to the present. . . . [I]n the struggle for subsistence, she is not an equal competitor with her brother. . . . Differentiated by these matters from the other sex, she is properly placed in a class by herself, and legislation designed for her protection may be sustained, even when like legislation is not necessary for men, and could not be sustained. (p. 30)

The basic attitude was that women needed protection and were dependent on men. This goes back to the early conception of women in America as delicate flowers. G. Edward White writes: "The triumph of industrial enterprise paradoxically produces a heightened consciousness of women as delicate flowers" (p.141) In 1873, the United States Supreme Court heard a challenge to the denial of admission to the Illinois bar to Mrs. Bradwell. She argued that the equal protection rights of the 14th Amendment guaranteed her the right to practice law. The Supreme Court unanimously rejected her challenge. It held that the 10th Amendment reserved to the states the right to decide whether women or anybody else could practice law. According to Justice Joseph Bradley (as cited in Zaitzow and Thomas, 2003),

On the contrary, the civil law, as well as nature herself, has always recognized a wide difference in the respective spheres and destinies of man and woman. Man is, or should be, woman's protector and defender. The natural and proper timidity and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occupations of civil life. The constitution of the family organization, which is founded in the divine ordinance, as well as in the nature of things, indicates the domestic sphere as that which properly belongs to the domain and functions of womanhood. The harmony, not to say identity, of interest and views which belong, or should belong, to the family institution is repugnant to the idea of a woman adopting a distinct and independent career from that of her husband. . . . A woman had no legal existence separate from her husband, who was regarded as her head and representative in the social state. . . . The paramount destiny and mission of women are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother. This is the law of the Creator. And the rules of civil society must be adopted to the general constitution of things, and cannot be based on exceptional cases. (p. 46)

This idea emphasizes that biology is the salient difference between men and women, and both the social and the psychological theories are branches and subtexts derived from biology. Men and women both have different and complementary roles to play. According to the 19th-century Victorian ideal, men were physical, rational, and sexually dominant, while women were emotional, spiritual, and sexually passive. Sarah Stickney Ellis writes in *The Daughters of England* (1842), "The first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength" (p. 8).

In this same line, Alexander Walker (1840) asserts: "It is evident that the man, possessing reasoning faculties, muscular power, and courage to employ it, is qualified for being a protector: the woman, being little capable of reasoning, feeble, and timid, requires protection" (as cited in Jones, J. & Sharp, P. p. 95). This difference is not social or cultural; it is biological and rooted in nature. On the other hand, women had a unique social, psychological, and spiritual role; they were the guardians of private and domestic life. In 1839, Sarah Lewis explains in her "Woman's Mission" that a woman's primary role was to make her home a sanctuary and to care for and submit to her husband because she was naturally more religious and possessed more moral qualities.

Nevertheless, feminists wanted to improve the social status of women. In the 1960s, women's rights were expanded, and opportunities for higher education increased. Still, Betty Friedan (1963) recognizes in *The Feminine Mystique* that women still face certain challenges, which she refers to as "The Problem That Has No Name":

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American women and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife—freed by science and labor-saving devices from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world. She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of. (p. 60)

Even with the extension of rights to women in the 20th century, women were still confined to the home. "They prided in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife." (Friedan, 1963, p. 60)

Therefore, women were merely housewives whose only obligation was to the family and whose role was socially and economically subordinate to that of their husbands. Friedan asserts that this limitation on women is traditionally due solely to their gender. This domestic stereotype, she suggests, has been imposed on them primarily through expectations shaped by convention, custom, and women's magazines.

A Feminist Perspective on "The Story of an Hour"

Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" has been read from this feminist perspective as a narrative of a woman's liberation from her controlling husband and her struggle to reconcile self-actualization with her inescapable biological reality. For example, with the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s, this story gained new interest among feminist critics. They used it to highlight women's sense of individualistic identity. In "Kate Chopin's Lyrical Short Stories," Bert Bender (1974) argues the story's point is about the inequities of marriage.

Others, such as Mary E. Papke (1990), suggest that the story is about women's development and that Louise becomes self-assertive and gains her independence in the course of a single hour. Papke emphasizes the

aspect of feminism in this story at the end: that when a woman begins to see herself as an individual and is then denied the chance to live freely, the result will be death or the dissolution of this newly discovered identity. Papke says that Chopin is saying that unless the world changes, there is no hope for independent, unconventional women to survive in modern American society. For this reason, according to Scott D. Emmert in "Naturalism and the Short Story Form in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour,'"

[a]lthough Louise's sudden sense of autonomy, her "possession of self-assertion," creates an exultant vision, because she is unable to act on this vision, she is never completely a realist character . . . suggesting her [actual] lack of self-possession by insinuating the power of an elemental force [or in this case of social forces]. (p. 77).

Emmert continues, "Louise's 'freedom' is short-lived . . . for her husband is not dead, and when he enters the house, Mrs. Mallard suffers a fatal heart attack" as a result of her extreme disappointment (p. 77).

Similarly, Emily Toth (1999) sees "The Story of an Hour" as "a criticism of marriage itself, as an institution that traps women" (p. 10), while Emmert claims that at the story's conclusion, "Louise's fortunes are reversed suddenly, and she dies not out of 'joy' but from a traumatic divestment." And so, her heart fails as a result of her "abrupt return . . . to her socially constructed identity" (p. 77). Emmert notes that "The Story of an Hour" is often seen as a representation of "married, middle-class women in 1890s America, women who were subjected to a strict set of social codes that governed female desire and identity" (p. 78). Some other critics, such as Suzanne Hunter Brown, observe a shift toward independence in the story: the protagonist wants to escape being Mrs. Mallard and become Louise. Brown points out that the word "mallard" literally means male duck:

Mrs. Mallard's identity is certainly determined by the socially sanctioned prerogatives of the male, particularly the defining power to name. The abrupt change of status near the end of the story—the sudden shift from "Louise" to "Mrs. Mallard" and, of course, her swift death—most clearly dramatizes Mrs. Mallard's loss. (p. 79).

In addition, Lilia Steinmetz (2021) argues in her work "The Personality of Louise Mallard in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour.' A Tragic Life" that Mrs. Mallard is nothing but a tragic character. Just as she realizes her freedom, she dies. She "could never be happy, as her understanding of freedom can never be achieved in real life, she loves nobody but herself, and she is physically too weak to face the difficulties of life" (p. 1).

2. Bonds of Love

These scholars interpret "The Story of an Hour" to suggest that marriage is the main obstacle to women's freedom, as its structure prioritizes men's rights. Marriage precludes women's liberation. The window through which Mrs. Mallard looks out is a metaphor for a bird in a cage—the experience of being in a marital relationship without reciprocity and equality. Critics read the story as a statement about the inequality of marriage, as an unjust institution that prevents women from gaining freedom or their identity. Perhaps it is Chopin's intention to challenge the arguments for gender hierarchy—that women must break free from such a hierarchy and try to find their own way to themselves.

However, these different readings are limited and do not justify some critical aspects of the text. The text clearly portrays a woman grieving over her recently deceased husband. The story strongly suggests that Louise (also referred to in the text as "Mrs. Mallard") is in love with her husband, and she is not oppressed by him. At one point in the story, the narrator says, "She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength" (p. 23). Her husband does not oppress her, but

these repressed feelings emerge from love and perhaps due to her physical illness and grief. In "Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour,'" Lawrence I. Berkove (2000) states quite accurately that the narrator of the story is unreliable, does not provide enough information about Mr. Mallard, and does not offer any evidence of Mrs. Mallard's oppression or suppression inflicted on her by her husband.

Looking at the story from its own logic, it becomes evident that the people who truly know Louise are her family, her sister Josephine, and her husband's friend Richards. Her family knows that she loves her husband. Because Louise has a heart condition, they are cautious about telling her the terrible news of her husband's death in a "railroad disaster" (23). The narrator says, "Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death" (p. 23). Even after receiving the terrible news, Louise "wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms," indicating her love and emotional attachment to her husband (p. 23).

When Louise calms down, she leaves and remains alone in her room, trying to make sense of this traumatic loss and come to terms with her grief. Here, we come to a turning point in the story: a change of setting, a move from the phenomenal world, the outer world, to the mental, cognitive world. The catalyst for this change of setting in the story is the storm. The narrator describes her grief and wild weeping as a "storm," and when Louise goes into her room, sits in her chair, and looks out the window, the reader sees that the storm outside has just subsided at the moment when the narrator says, "When the storm of grief had spent itself" (p. 23).

Scholars base their feminist perspective of Louise's oppression at the hands of her much older husband on this text's depiction: "the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead" (p. 23). According to this description, a feminist reading sees Louise as a victim of an arranged marriage. Therefore, when Mr. Mallard dies, she feels "free, free, free!" However, this feminist reading is not only spiteful (that a woman can regain her freedom when her husband dies) but also inaccurate. The narrator describes Louise's sadness as "grief," and when she hears the news of her husband, she "wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment" (p. 23). There is a clear implication that Louise withdraws into this mental and cognitive space to deal with her grief. Let us consider the following:

First, when Mrs. Mallard sits at the window and looks out, it is a line of sight that shows that the world outside reflects how she feels inside. During the "storm of grief," the world outside is also stormy. But when she calms down, the weather outside becomes calm. It begins to reflect the beauty of life—life goes on. She sees the sunshine filtering through the clouds, the fresh scent of rain coming to her through the window, the trees dancing in the breeze, and the birds singing their joy on this beautiful day. "The window" has become a turning point in this case; the look outside is actually a look inside, and the open casement is an actual entrance into mental space, a change of setting in the story. This mental space unfolds in lucid and nightmarish terms. It is clear that Louise is dealing with the emotion of grief. Still crying in her chair,

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams. (p. 23).

"Dreams" serves as a trigger word to show that we are entering a realm of mental cognition. Louise sits in the chair with "a dull stare in her eyes," looking out the window (23). In that moment of grief and the darkness of death that visits her, signs of life and its beauty come to her through that window, telling her that life is beautiful, that it does not stop when someone dies, and that life should go on:

> She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window. (p. 23)

At the same time, the protagonist feels a sense of world-weariness, helplessness, and "exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul" (p. 23). This grief is a sign of her love for her husband. Although her eyes look outward to "patches of blue sky," her gaze is not one of "reflection, but rather indicate[s] a suspension of intelligent thought" (p. 23). Louise is drawn into her inner mind; she is not thinking, but the thought comes to her and takes her over in the form of a demonic possession. Along with those beautiful images of life comes an idea that she hates and tries to resist—a "monstrous" idea that she fears. "[H]er bosom rose and fell tumultuously," and she tries to escape, but she is so helpless against this monster that comes to possess her from outside and to her through that window (p. 23). It "was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully . . . creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air" (p. 23).

Typically, we regard thought as an epiphenomenon of the brain, a byproduct of brain processes, so thought comes from within. In this story, the text emphasizes Mrs. Mallard's love for her recently deceased husband. Because of this love, her life cannot go on without him (which is why she feels "abandoned"), first by describing the newly discovered thought as sinister and "monstrous," and second, by ensuring that it comes (not from within, but) from without, from outside, through the open window. And it comes to her like a demon to possess her, and she is so afraid of it that she helplessly tries to push it away. But, when the possession is complete, the idea (not Louise) speaks through her slightly open lips, repeatedly saying, "Free, free, free!" When the possession of this demonic idea occurs, and the metamorphosis is complete, "[t]he vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body" (p. 23). Louise now experiences a "monstrous joy," which the author later refers to as "the joy that kills" (p. 25).

The point is that there is no one Louise; rather, she undergoes a transformation. One Louise mourns her husband, and the other overcomes her grief so that life goes on. It is not that she hates her husband and has never been able to feel like an individual because he oppresses her. Nor is she only able to be an individual when she has been liberated by the death of her oppressor. This feminist reading of the text is at odds with the very meaning of human relationships; it fails to understand and recognize them. In fact, it is an unhappy, selfish view of human existence.

When a person enters a marital relationship, there is a sense of finally becoming complete and whole by finding his or her better half.[2] In a relationship, a couple enters into a series of compromises and conflicts until they find their comfort zone and understand their responsibility to each other. Through this act of giving, each becomes happy by fulfilling the other. Therefore, it is only with love in a relationship that an individual's life becomes meaningful. Freedom is not absolute; freedom is dutiful; it only has meaning in the framework of responsibility, doing not what one wants to do but what one ought to do. Love is not a social construct but a mutual feeling that is deep, vital, and spontaneous; it is a part of us. In marriage, passion is compatible. In other words, when people live together, they willingly sacrifice their autonomy and the integrity of their individual form; they form a couple, and their own subjectivity merges with that of the other. Edvard Munch's 1987 painting "The Kiss" serves as an instructive example, depicting the unification of two people through a kiss, resulting in the loss of individuality. Love itself is a fusion of two people, where one shares the life of another; this is what is glorious about love.

The true fate of human relationships is death; death is what dissolves the human family. Therefore, when a person's partner dies, it is as if, with the death of that person, a part of the other person, a part of their history, their life, has also disappeared. It could be seen as a partial death of the self. That is where the grief comes from. That is exactly what "The Story of an Hour" is about.

So, Mrs. Mallard enters this cognitive space and tries to come to terms with her grief. She tries to convince herself that there is something good worth living for—to see a ray of light in this all-encompassing darkness. As she looks through the window, she gives free rein to her subjectivity, which she has no control over. Her subjectivity is shaped by what she sees outside the open window. She is hurt and exhausted, and her old self seems to hold her captive—a kind of prison that suffocates her—and she must recreate herself to find a new self. The narrator says:

> She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death. . . . But she saw beyond that bitter moment 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. (p. 23)

This is a turning point in her grief toward acceptance and self-recreation. But then she goes further to persuade herself, forcing herself to value individuality ("There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself" [p. 24]) and to deny her feelings of love for her husband by redefining what love is. She initially tries to question her grieving as to why she is suffering, because she may not have loved her husband, by gradually distancing herself emotionally from him. First, she says that her husband's face "had never looked save with love upon her," and then she says she loved him. On second thought, she says, "No, perhaps she loved him sometimes but not all the time," but upon further reflection, she concludes, "No, I think I have never loved him." Her thought process gradually distances her from loving her dead husband, the only reason for her grief. The narrator says, "And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter!" (24).

2 Aristophanes' myth in Plato's Symposium is instructive here. To explain the meaning of love, Aristophanes says that people did not look like they do today. In the early stages of human life, people were a combination of four legs, four arms, and a head with two faces on either side. Because they dared to climb Mount Olympus and ascend to the realm of the gods, Zeus split them all apart with a thunderbolt as punishment for hubris, making humans weaker. Since this incident, humans have felt that they are partial human beings, not complete souls. This is why they long for their other halves. And the only good thing that can happen to a person in life is to find their partner. As a result, people are always searching for their other halves, trying to regain their lost integrity. They long to become whole, integrated human beings (Nichols, 2009).

Thus, in order to completely overcome her grief, Louise redefines love not in spiritual terms to show its transcendental beauty but in negative materialistic terms to admonish and deconstruct its moral intrinsic value in human relationships, seeing it as a means of enslavement. For the protagonist, love becomes "that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature." This love gives her husband a "powerful will bending hers . . . . In that brief moment of illumination, [Louise realizes that] there would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself" (p. 24). In that moment, she feels free, body and soul, from that soul-wrenching pain of grief. The narrator comments, "What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" (24)

All this is happening in her mind. Her sister, Josephine, knows that Louise loves her husband, and we see this from the beginning when Josephine tries to break the news of her husband's death gently so as not to upset Louise. Josephine goes to Louise's room, thinking that she is crying over the loss of her husband, "kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. 'Louise, open the door! I beg, open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door'" (p. 24).

But now we know that Louise leaves that mental space with a newly born self that has accepted its loss and is now fresh and ready to continue living. The narrator describes this mental negotiation as coming to terms with loss as if she has been drinking from the elixir of life, and she emerges from this cognitive space into the phenomenal space, swooning with happiness and freedom, fully transformed as a "Goddess of Victory":

> [S]he was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window. . . . She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. (p. 24).

Although Mrs. Mallard is aware of the weakness of her heart and that this fragile life of hers could slip through her fingers at any moment, "[h]er fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long" (p. 24). She emerges from her room joyful, like the natural rhythm of the clouds, trees, and birds she observes through that window: "She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs" (p. 24).

In another notation in the story, the author explains that this story is not about a woman's independence from her husband and that her husband is an agent of oppression, nor is it about women's empowerment and liberation, but rather about a woman's love for her husband. At the end of the story, we discover that Mr. Mallard is not actually dead. In fact, "[h]e had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one" (p. 25). Josephine and Richard know that Mrs. Mallard has a weak heart and cannot handle strong emotions. They know at the beginning that the news of her husband's death will plunge her into deep sadness, so they are careful when breaking the terrible news to her. Likewise, they know that she will be happy to see her husband alive, which is also an extreme emotion. As a result, Richards tries "to screen [Mr. Mallard] from the view of his wife. . . [b]ut Richards was too late" (p. 25). Alternatively, it could be interpreted as an attempt to prevent Mr. Mallard from seeing his wife collapse when she catches a glimpse of him. This is indicative of a loving relationship that binds the couples together, as it is clearly known by their close family members. Mrs. Mallard dies. The text does not suggest

that she dies of the disappointment that she now has lost her newfound freedom. There is a strong suggestion that she dies of the happiness that her husband is actually alive, which is the "monstrous joy" that the doctor describes as "the joy that kills" (p. 25). Her mental anguish causes her to die of heart trouble.

3. Conclusion

Perhaps it is true that for some women, there is no other path, no professional opportunities, and no social avenues. Love and marriage seem to be the only paths to self-fulfillment and satisfaction. The story's ending may leave readers with the idea that Louise cannot live out her sense of freedom; she cannot find satisfaction. One could argue that Louise succeeds in keeping her reborn self intact and that her death at the end symbolizes spiritual emancipation. She undergoes psychological disintegration. Perhaps her death is an act of will. To die is to choose the path that preserves her dignity as an autonomous self. Since she cannot maintain her dignity when her husband returns, she can die without giving it up. So, the search for and belief in freedom and independence endure the devastation of the story beyond the irony.

What emerges from this reading, however, is not the image of a woman as inferior to and dependent on her husband, but marriage as an equal partnership between husband and wife, sanctioned by love and devotion, breaking through the glass wall that separates women from their spouses. The story is about Louise coming to terms with her loss and thinking about the life that she is left to survive without her husband, hence her feeling of "abandonment."

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