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An Analysis of "The Story of an Hour"

Kate Chopin's short story "The Story of an Hour" is a classic work of American literature, renowned for its concise yet powerful portrayal of one woman's reaction to the news of her husband's death. Chopin challenges traditional gender roles and expectations and suggests that a person's desire for independence and self-determination can lead to complicated emotions and reactions. While it is a relatively short work, it is densely packed with complex literary themes, such as the nature of freedom, the limits of gender roles, and the role of marriage in society.

The story begins with Louise's sister, Josephine, informing her of her husband's death in a train accident. Louise reacts in a way that surprises Josephine and the other characters, as she locks herself in her room and begins to weep uncontrollably. However, as time passes, Louise begins to feel a sense of freedom and liberation that she has not felt in a long time as she whispers, "Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin 49). She realizes that she is now free from the constraints of her marriage and can live her life on her own terms. As Louise begins to experience this newfound freedom, she reflects on her marriage and realizes that it was not a happy one. She remembers moments of oppression and subjugation and feels a sense of relief that she is no longer bound by those constraints. She begins to see her husband's death as a gift, one that has given her the chance to live a life of her own choosing. However, just as she is reveling in her newfound freedom, her husband walks through the door, alive and well. Louise is

shocked and devastated by this turn of events, and her heart gives out. The doctors on the scene determine that she has died of joy, but the reader is left wondering whether it was really joy or the crushing disappointment of having her freedom snatched away. At its core, "The Story of an Hour" is a story about the conflicting emotions that can arise when a person is freed from the constraints of an unhappy marriage. Through Louise's experience, Chopin shows how society's expectations of marriage and gender roles can be oppressive, and how a person's desire for independence and self-determination can lead to complicated emotions and reactions.

One of the most striking aspects of "The Story of an Hour" is the way in which it explores the concept of freedom. The story opens with Louise Mallard learning that her husband has died in a train accident. At first, she is overcome with grief, but then she begins to experience a sense of liberation, realizing that she is now free from the confines of marriage. As the story progresses, she becomes increasingly excited by the possibilities of her newfound freedom, imagining a life of independence and self-determination. However, her hopes are abruptly dashed when her husband returns home alive and well, leading to her sudden death. This exploration of freedom is central to the story's themes, as it highlights the tension between societal expectations and individual desires. Throughout the narrative, Chopin uses "storm" as a metaphor when she states that "when the storm of grief had spent itself when she went away to her room alone" (Chopin 48), to symbolize the conflicting emotions that Louise experiences as she grapples with her newfound sense of freedom. On the one hand, she is ecstatic at the thought of living for herself and pursuing her own desires; on the other hand, she is deeply conflicted about the prospect of defying the norms of her society and risking her own safety and security. Ultimately, her death can be seen as a tragic consequence of this tension, as she is unable to reconcile her desire for freedom with the reality of her situation.

In his article, "The Autonomous Female Self and the Death of Louise Mallard in Kate Chopin's 'Story of an Hour,'" Mark Cunningham explores this theme of independence, along with agency, and death in Chopin's classic short story. The article argues that Louise Mallard's death is not simply the result of shock or joy at seeing her husband alive but rather a tragic consequence of the tension between her sense of autonomy and the constraints of patriarchal society.

Cunningham begins by examining the feminist context in which Chopin wrote "The Story of an Hour." He notes that the late 19th century was a time of great change for women, with many beginning to assert their independence and fight for their rights (Cunningham 49). Chopin was part of this movement, and her writing often explores the ways in which women are oppressed by patriarchal society. Cunningham then turns his attention to the character of Louise Mallard, arguing that her reaction to her husband's death is not simply one of grief but of a sense of independence (Cunningham 49). He notes that Louise's reaction is "not so much to the death of her husband as to the prospect of a new life of independence and self-definition" (Cunningham 50). This realization is both liberating and terrifying, as Louise recognizes that she has the power to shape her own life but also must face the consequences of doing so in a society that expects women to be submissive and obedient. The article then examines the tension between Louise's desire for autonomy and the constraints of patriarchal society. Cunningham notes that Louise's newfound sense of agency is "tempered by the realization that she lives in a society that denies her full autonomy and constantly threatens to undermine her self-definition" (Cunningham 52–53). This tension is reflected in the story's title, which refers to an hour in which Louise experiences both the freedom of independence and the realization of its fragility. Cunningham argues that Louise's death is not simply the result of shock or joy but of the tension between her newfound independence and the constraints of patriarchal society. He notes that Louise's death

represents not only the death of her newfound self but also the death of the possibility of a new life of independence and self-definition for women (Cunningham 52-53). In this way, her death is a tragic reminder of the ways in which patriarchal society limits women's autonomy and agency.

Another key theme of the story is the way in which it challenges traditional gender roles. Louise's sense of liberation is, in part, a result of the fact that she is no longer bound by the constraints of marriage and the expectations that come with them. As a woman in the late nineteenth century, she would have been expected to be subservient to her husband, to devote herself to his needs, and to sacrifice her own desires in service of his. However, by imagining a life without him, she is able to break free from these expectations and explore her own identity. This theme is underscored by the character of Brently Mallard, Louise's husband. While he is only briefly mentioned in the story, his presence is felt throughout as a symbol of the patriarchy and the constraints it imposes on women. By portraying him as a distant and largely absent figure, Chopin highlights the ways in which men were able to gain control over women's lives without ever fully engaging with them as equals. In this way, the story can be seen as a critique of the gender roles that were dominant in Chopin's society, as well as a call for greater equality and freedom for women. In her article "Time and Gender in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' and Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour,'" Fahimeh Q. Berenji examines this role of time in relation to gender in two classic short stories of American literature. Berenji argues that both "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and "The Story of an Hour" use time as a way of exploring the complex relationship between gender and power in society. Berenji begins by exploring the theme of time in "The Yellow Wall-Paper." She notes that the story is told through a series of journal entries that document the protagonist's gradual descent into madness (Berenji

223). Berenji argues that this structure allows Gilman to explore the ways in which time is used to control and limit women's agency. She notes that the protagonist is trapped in a room with yellow wallpaper that she finds oppressive and disturbing (Berenji 228). As time passes, the wallpaper becomes a symbol of the protagonist's deteriorating mental state and the ways in which she is being controlled by her husband and society (Berenji 228). Berenji then turns her attention to "The Story of an Hour," examining the ways in which time is used to explore the relationship between gender and power. She notes that the story takes place over the course of a single hour, during which the protagonist, Louise Mallard, experiences a range of emotions as she contemplates her newfound sense of independence (Berenji 230). Berenji argues that this compressed timeline allows Chopin to explore the ways in which women's agency is constrained by patriarchal society. She notes that Louise's realization of her own power is short-lived, as her husband's unexpected return results in her death. This tragic ending underscores the limitations of women's agency in a society that values male dominance and control. Throughout her analysis, Berenji emphasizes the ways in which time is used to highlight the power dynamics between men and women. In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the protagonist's descent into madness is a reflection of the ways in which she is being controlled by her husband and society. In "The Story of an Hour," Louise's brief moment of independence is a reminder of the ways in which women's agency is constrained by patriarchal norms.

In Gary H. Mayer's article "A Matter of Behavior: A Semantic Analysis of Five Kate Chopin Stories," the author conducts a close reading of several of Chopin's works, including "The Story of an Hour." Mayer's central argument is that Chopin's stories often revolve around the idea of human behavior, and that her use of language and imagery is intended to reveal the true nature of her characters. One of the key themes that Mayer identifies in "The Story of an

Hour" is the tension between personal desires and social norms. He notes that the protagonist, Louise Mallard, experiences a sense of liberation when she learns of her husband's death, but ultimately succumbs to the societal expectation that she should mourn his passing (Mayer 95). As Mayer explains Louise's brief liberation is tempered by the realization that it is only temporary, that society will force her back into a role she no longer wishes to play (Mayer 95). Mayer also explores the use of imagery in "The Story of an Hour," noting that Chopin often uses naturalistic elements to represent the emotions and desires of her characters. For example, the open window in Louise's room represents her newfound sense of freedom, while the storm clouds gathering in the distance foreshadow the tragic ending of the story. Mayer's analysis of "The Story of an Hour" focuses on the ways in which Chopin uses language and imagery to reveal the true nature of her characters and to explore the tension between personal desires and societal expectations.

Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is a powerful exploration of the complex emotions and reactions that can arise when a person is freed from the constraints of an unhappy marriage. Through Louise's experience, Chopin challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, and suggests that a person's desire for independence and self-determination can lead to complicated emotions and reactions. As a woman in the late nineteenth century, she would have been expected to be a dutiful wife and mother, to put the needs of her family before her own desires, and to accept the limitations that came with her gender. By imagining a life without her husband, she is able to challenge these expectations and explore her own sense of self.

Citations:

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FAHIMEH Q BERENJI. "Time and Gender in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper' and Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour.'" Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Araştırmaları Dergisi, vol. 2, no. 2, July 2013, pp. 221–34. EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.nyack.edu/10.7596/taksad.v2i2.231>.

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