

Chopin's Artistry in "The Story of an Hour"

To be in conflict with traditional society's beliefs is difficult for many to do; however, author Kate Chopin fights that battle to bring readers some of the most thought provoking literature that a person can get their hands on. Using to her advantage conventions of narrative stories such as character development, plot control, and irony, she is able to bring the reader into a world of emotions that society would scoff at. Kate Chopin demonstrates her incredible literary talent in "The Story of an Hour" by interconnecting the plot and character development, with her use of thought-provoking vocabulary and narrative irony.

Kate Chopin's literary talent would have never been so strongly founded if it was not for the circumstances surrounding her life and upbringing. Her father died when she was only four years old, which left her mother and grandmother to raise, and shape her desires and ideologies (Charters 156). Having been raised primarily by strong willed feminine role models, Chopin developed a taste for more of an unconventional role for women in society. In her home town of St. Louis, she became known as the town's "Littlest Rebel" (Davis). She was widowed and left with six children to bring up on her own (Charters 156). This situation developed more of her strong will to write about the passion and strength that women have. Much of her writing portrays women in their relations with men, children and their own sexuality (Charters 156). Her writing is classified in the literary movement known as Realism. The Realism movement took place in the 19th century (Agatucci 4). Realism is based on everyday events, 'slice of life' stories that depict ordinary people dealing with society and its forces on living (Agatucci 3). Realistic writing is characterized with everyday events, social controversy, and protagonist/antagonist interactions (Agatucci 3). There is often an ironic undertone to Realism, as is

evident in “The Story of an Hour” (Agatucci 3). All of the characteristics of the Realism movement mentioned are active in this story. An example of Realism in “The Story of an Hour” is evident when Mrs. Mallard’s sister reveals to her the tragic news: “It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing (Chopin 157).” This brings out the slice of life quality of Realism because it is a display of how most people would break the news of a shocking death. Chopin enjoyed life and believed that real fiction was and is life (Chopin 861). Although she felt like a literary outcast, her frankness and honest look at women and their emotions is what makes “The Story of an Hour” and her other works literary jewels in our society today.

Chopin does a great job at integrating two of the conventions of narrative fiction, plot and character development. The plot of a story is “the sequence of events in a story and their relation to one another as they develop and usually resolve a conflict (Charters2 1003).” Within the plot of narrative stories there is an exposition, rise to action, climax, and a fall from action. The character development is the other convention that enables Chopin to write this thought provoking story. Character is “what stays with you after you have finished reading it. The action of the plot is performed by the *characters* in the story, the people who make something happen or produce an effect” (Charters2 1006). Chopin uses her character development to enhance the plot in order to bring the reader closer to the emotions of the story. In ‘The Story of an Hour’ both of these elements are vitally interconnected to each other.

The plot itself is taking place primarily in the mind of Mrs. Mallard, which makes imperative that the reader understands her personality and where thoughts are derived from. First Mrs. Mallard is described as having heart trouble, and being a tender woman (Chopin 157). This is important to the plot because it explains why her

sister took great care to break the news to her. She is also described as being “young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength” (Chopin 157). This is a key piece of information in understanding why she grieves only momentarily. According to *Webster’s Dictionary* repression means: “to prevent the natural or normal expression, activity or development of; a process by which unacceptable desires or impulses are excluded from consciousness and left to operate in the unconscious” (Webster 527). Mrs. Mallard’s marriage did not allow her to express herself through any venue of release with the exception of her unconscious. She was never allowed to be ‘normal’ with her emotions or, to show or use her true strength, but instead had to suppress them. One can also see that in the plot, Mrs. Mallard resists the liberation she feels at first because of her characteristic trait of being weak, and is unable or powerless to resist them (Chopin 157). As the feeling of freedom sets in her mind she begins to describe herself as a “goddess of Victory” (Chopin 158). A goddess is a “female of exceptional charm beauty, or grace” (Webster 294). Mrs. Mallard began, for the first time in her marriage, to feel beautiful and charming in light of her victory over the battle of wills that she had been oppressed by. In the story she gets her first chance to show off her new found strength and beauty when she lets her sister in to see the “triumph in her eyes” (Chopin 158). The mix of character development and plot is not only evident in the case of main character, but is also found briefly in the case of Mr. Mallard. Chopin writes “There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime...” (Chopin 158). This is the only glimpse that the reader gets into Bentley Mallard’s character; however there is much revealed through this passage. He was controlling, forcing his will on her. He was powerful (in contrast to her being powerless) and blind

to the fact that he was hurting his wife. The other minor characters are left to the imagination of the reader because they do not play major roles within the plot.

A fundamental characteristic of Realism is its use of irony. Chopin plays with irony to bring surprise to the climax, as well as enhance the depth of the story. Sara Davis has this to say: “The Story of an Hour” “turns on a series of artful modulated ironies that culminate in a somewhat contrived ending” (Davis). There are several examples of this, first off that of Brentley’s friend Richard takes the time to confirm his name with a second telegram, and then at the end of the story it turns out that he is not even involved in the accident (Chopin 157). Another example of irony is this: “Her pulse beat fast, and then the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body” (Chopin 158). In this sentence it is ironic that it was blood, the symbolic representation of life, that was fueling her, and then at the end her life ceases. Another ironic point is made within Mrs. Mallard’s thought process: “She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long” (Chopin 158). Her prayer was answered, and when she found out she immediately had a fatal heart attack. In addition to this irony of life and death, the reader is faced with yet another and maybe the strongest use of irony in this short story, and that is the use of the word ‘joy’. It is first used in Mrs. Mallard’s thoughts as a “monstrous joy” of being free from bondage, and tasting the elixir of life that is now so precious to her (Chopin 158). Secondly it is used by the doctors in the last line who naively state that she died “of heart disease—of joy that kills” (Chopin 158). It is ironic that it was not joy of seeing Mr. Mallard alive that killed her, but that of the terrible loss that she would never feel the monstrous joy she had felt before. Kate Chopin did produce an excellent example of Realism literature with her use of irony in this story.

Chopin does not allow her use of irony as her only tool to enhance the dynamics of "The Story of an Hour". She also incorporates a variety of tools such as metaphors, narrative style, and thought provoking vocabulary that bring this story to life. Mrs. Mallard is described as having heart trouble (Chopin 157). One could argue that her 'heart trouble' was not that of a physical condition, but of an emotional and psychological condition derived from such a difficult marriage. Chopin also uses a wide array of descriptive words to bring to life the feelings that Mrs. Mallard is having about the death of her husband. Examples of this are seen throughout the text: "new spring life" "delicious breath of air" "blue sky showing through the clouds" "drinking in a very elixir of life" "summer days" etc. (Chopin 157-158). Chopin also uses the metaphor of an open window that she sits Mrs. Mallard in front of during the rise of the plot. The window is not just part of the setting, but a window into the heart and mind of the main character. It was her access to new life, new excitement, and new hopes of the coming years without Brently's overpowering will on her. Jennifer Hicks brings out another point of narrative eloquence by stating that Chopin "elaborates upon this when the narrator says that Mrs. Mallard "would have no one follow her." While the implication is that she would have no one follow her to her room, the reader wonders in hindsight whether Mrs. Mallard might have meant also that she would have no one interfere with her new life again" (Hicks). Kate Chopin used all of these tools to her advantage to bring the world a controversial look at a woman's emotions.

It took many years after this story was written for its popularity to grow into what it is today. In "The Story of an Hour" Kate Chopin interconnects the plot, characters, irony, and narrative eloquence to produce a literary product that is arguably priceless in our society today. Fred Lewis Patte says in "A History of American Literature" that since 1870 the strength of Chopin's work come from "what

may be described as a native aptitude for narration amounting almost to genius” (Hicks). Readers of the future look forward to see if her ‘genius’ in this work will stand the test of time.

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