Plot vs. Point of View in Chopin's "Story of An Hour"

Kate Chopin’s “Story of an Hour” tells the tale of an evolution of a character in a single hour. Chopin accomplishes this by using a specific point of view and unique plot to carry out her vision. These elements work together to create a theme that has the greatest impact on the reader.

Ann Charters defines “point of view” as “the author’s choice of narrator for the story” (1009). “The Story of an Hour” is told from the viewpoint of a third-person narrator. This speaker is a “non-participant in the story” (Charters 1009). Never does the narrator include herself in the plot of “Hour.” Specifically, this speaker has only “limited omniscience” as she relates the story. According to Charters, a speaker with limited omniscience is able to know what is going on in the mind of a single character, but not have a full understanding of, or chooses not to reveal to the readers, the minds of all the characters (Charters 1009). For example, the emotions and thoughts of Mrs. Mallard are fully described within the story. We see her grief, but also the thoughts of freedom that begin to come to her mind (Chopin 157-8). Because the narrator does not show all the aspects of the story, it allows the fact of her husband being alive to be a surprise (Chopin 158). The narrator, because he or she is not a member of the story, may be able to be trusted more by the reader than a person involved directly in the story (Charters 1010). The narrator is considered more “objective” (Agatucci 4).

The author, Kate Chopin, was a great admirer of Guy de Maupassant, a writer of the realist genre (Agatucci 4). Maupassant stated that “The writer’s goal is to reproduce this illusion of life faithfully…” (Maupassant 898). Chopin used a point of view in “Story of an Hour” very similar to that of Maupassant when he wrote “The Necklace.” The author’s factual account allows a reader to experience this “illusion of life”. According to Maupassant, a writer should find a new way of looking at a situation (Charters 523). Chopin, in attempting to imitate the genre embraced by this author, looked at a situation of the death of a husband in a unique
way. She accomplished this by presenting the true feelings of a widow and contrasting those feelings with society’s beliefs. Working in the realistic genre, Chopin presented a more “disillusioned” view of life (Agatucci 4). Chopin did not portray the accepted norms of society. She did not state that the wife could not go on without her husband. By contrast, she viewed her story with a new concept, that of a wife feeling empowered to go on living because her husband was no longer alive.

The thoughts and actions of these characters can be seen in the development of the plot. Point of view is how a reader is able to look into a story; the plot is the arrangement of the incidents themselves (Charter 1003, 1009). Charters defines plot as “the sequence of events in a story and their relation to one another as they develop and usually resolve a conflict”(1003). The sequences within this story are quite short because this story occurs in the course of a single hour. The conflict present in this story is all within the protagonist, “the main character of [the] narrative” (Charters 1051). Without the view which allows the reader to see inside the mind of Mrs. Mallard, the reader would not be aware of the true conflict. Without this insight, a reader might assume, like Mrs. Mallard’s sister, that the conflict of the wife was the grief associated with her husband’s death (Chopin 158). The point of view allows the reader to see the true conflict within the plot and to sense the freedom that is eventually embraced by the protagonist (Chopin 158).

The life of the author seems to have an impact on the plot. Kate Chopin had a very similar experience as Mrs. Mallard in the tragic death of her father. Chopin’s father perished when she was young in a train accident (Chopin 157; and “Katherine Chopin”). Also, she did not begin writing until after her mother and husband had both passed away (“Katherine Chopin”). She herself stated that “If it were possible for my husband and my mother to come back to earth, I feel that I would unhesitatingly give up every thing that has come into my life since they left it and join my existence again with theirs. To do that, I would have to forget the
past ten years of my growth -- my real growth” (O'Brien). This suggests Chopin sympathized with Mrs. Mallard, who had found new freedom in the death of a loved one (Chopin 158). Kate Chopin had a bicultural background. According to Contemporary Authors, this author’s great-grandmother related stories of her ancestors, including those about “notorious infidels” ("Katherine Chopin"). This may have given Chopin confidence to explore topics not generally discussed by the society of her day.

The plot itself has some very distinct characteristics that are of the literary realism genre. First, it is believable. Most people believe that heart disease and train accidents do exist (Chopin 157). Authors writing within this style often chose to look at the nature of human beings (Agatucci 3). The entire plot of “Story of An Hour” is that of describing the nature of the characters. The plot begins by depicting the reaction of Mrs. Mallard’s sister and Mr. Mallard’s friend (Chopin 157). The evolution of the emotional nature of Mrs. Mallard is described as she sits alone (Chopin157-158). Finally, we see the nature of society at that time, totally ignorant of the true feelings felt by the wife about her husband. Agatucci describes this impact on characters such as Mrs. Mallard as “ordinary people of contemporary times live it in society, caught up by social…forces” (3).

The social forces of this time included, what could be referred to as society’s “repression” of women. Seyersted describes this time period as a society in which “a society where man makes the rules, woman is often kept in a state of tutelage and regarded as property or as a servant”. Seyersted quotes Chopin herself in saying, “As Mme. de Stael's Corinne is told: Whatever extraordinary gifts she may have, her duty and ‘her proper destiny is to devote herself to her husband and to the raising of her children’.” This type of society had a great impact on the plot of this story. The reader can better understand the situation of Mrs. Mallard. Her destiny was that of devoting herself to her husband. Even though she loved him and would weep upon seeing him dead, she welcomed the “procession of years that would belong to her absolutely”
Maureen Anderson refers to Chopin as having an “authorial skill through which she elegantly addresses society's flaws” present in all her works.

In conclusion, both the point of view and the plot of “Story of an Hour” work to create the theme of this story. Theme is “a generalization about the meaning of a story” (Charters 1013). The theme of Chopin’s story is how ignorant society was at that time of the true feelings experienced by repressed women. First, the point of view allows us to see the inner emotions expressed by Mrs. Mallard. Without a speaker with limited omniscience, a reader would never realize what was truly being felt by the protagonist, and the theme would be lost. Because the narrator is outside the story and could be considered more objective, the reader is more likely to believe that these feelings experienced by Mrs. Mallard are true. If Mrs. Mallard or the sister had told the story, readers would have gotten two different, biased accounts. The point of view allows a reader to feel that this really could have happened, an “illusion of life”, thereby making the theme more powerful. The plot allows Mrs. Mallard to explore her feelings of repression and finally accept the fact that she can rejoice in the freedom of being a widow (Chopin 158). The surprise ending, the return of Mr. Mallard and the death of Mrs. Mallard, gives the reader a chance to understand the ironic beliefs of society (Chopin 158). The irony can be seen in the totally contradictory feelings of the protagonist and society. Mrs. Mallard, upon seeing her husband alive, was suddenly thrown back into a situation in which she had “thought with a shudder that life might be long” (Chopin 158). It was this great shock and grief that led to her death, not the “joy that kills” (Chopin 158).

Works Cited

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