

AWAKENING INTO SELFHOOD: FEMININE OPPRESSION, SELF-DISCOVERY, AND ILLUSIVE FREEDOM IN “THE STORY OF AN HOUR” BY KATE CHOPIN

Imdad Ullah Khan*
Syed Mujeebullah Shah†
Afaqullah Khan‡

Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of Kate Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour," from a feminist perspective. By examining the ideas and thoughts prevalent in the late 19th century, it seeks to understand how Chopin critiques oppressive social institutions and their impact on women's selfhood. Using close textual reading, the article explores how Chopin's use of characterization, imagery, and symbolism depicts Louise's inner conflict and emotional journey toward self-discovery and freedom. The motif of confinement and freedom is used to contrast Louise's experiences of being oppressed by societal norms and loveless marriage with her brief moment of liberation and freedom upon hearing of her husband's passing. The irony of the ending, in which Louise dies of shock upon seeing her husband alive, highlights the theme of how social structures can restrict women's lives. This analysis seeks to understand the significance of approaching literature from a feminist perspective and the various ways in which literary works can critique oppression and social imbalances, and the impact these have on an individual's freedom of choice and happiness. The study further examines how Chopin's characters' experiences of oppression and confinement create an internal conflict between social obligations and the desire for true freedom. Through an in-depth examination of Chopin's work, including characterization, diction, imagery, and symbols, this study aims to analyze the author's message regarding the consequences of oppressive social institutions on women's lives.

Keywords: Short story, Patriarchy, Tyranny, Gender, Feminism, Masculinity, Social institution, Freedom, Marriage

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Swat, KP, Pakistan.
Email: imdad.khan@uswat.edu.pk ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7933-901X>

† Graduate Department of English, University of Swat, KP, Pakistan

‡ Graduate Department of English, University of Swat, KP, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

Published in 1894, Kate Chopin's short story "The Story of an Hour" is about a single hour in the life of the protagonist. It tells the narrative about a woman named Louise Mallard who learns that her husband was killed in a train accident. Her initial reaction to the news is one of extreme sadness, but as she spends some time alone in her room, she starts to feel liberated by his passing. At the thought of being free from the restrictions of marriage, she experiences joy and a sense of liberation. However, her initial joy is quickly replaced with shock and disappointment when her husband shows up alive and well. Louise eventually suffers a heart attack and passes away, which some see as a metaphor for the passing of her spirit. The narrative is a commentary on how late 19th-century social expectations for women affected their lives.

To examine the oppressive norms that were placed on women in the late 19th century and the literary devices used to depict the protagonist Louise Mallard's emotional journey, we will examine "The Story of an Hour" through a feminist lens in this research article. It examines Chopin's use of the literary devices to portray Louise's inner conflict and emotional journey, as well as the motif of confinement and freedom in the story, through the lens of feminist theory. The narrative serves as a commentary on the social restrictions placed on women and the potential for independence and self-discovery. Louise's initial reaction to learning of her husband's death is one of relief and freedom rather than the socially expected grief at his passing, which is why the motif of confinement and freedom is crucial to the plot.

The purpose of this article is to examine how Louise's experience of freedom after learning of her husband's passing contrasts with her confinement within her domestic role. This analysis specifically aims to respond to the following research questions: 1) How does Chopin use the character of Louise Mallard to critique societal expectations of women in the late 19th century? 2) How does the motif of self-discovery, confinement, and freedom function in the story when Louise's experience of lack of freedom within her domestic role contrasts with her experience of liberation upon hearing news of her husband's death? Through exploring these questions, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly conversation about Kate Chopin's work and its relevance to feminist literary criticism.

A Brief Biography of Kate Chopin

American writer and feminist Kate Chopin (1850–1904) lived in the late 19th century. She was born and raised in a Creole neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri, which had a big impact on her writing. She had six kids after getting married at age 20. She started writing fiction after her husband passed away to help her family financially. Her first book *At Fault* was published in 1894, and *The Awakening*, the second book, was published in 1899. *The Awakening* was criticized at the time for being scandalous as it tells the story of a woman who discovers her sexuality and identity. It is now, however, regarded as a classic of feminist writing.

The emphasis on the lives and experiences of women in Chopin's writing is distinctive. She wrote about the challenges of motherhood and marriage as well as the struggles of women to overcome societal values (Ewell, 1992). Her writing is frequently interpreted as a feminist examination of human experience and criticism of the patriarchal society of her day. Scholars continue to research Chopin's writing because it has been acknowledged as a significant contribution to feminist literature (Rooney, 2006). Because they examine women's inner lives and their desire for autonomy and self-discovery, her novels, like *The Awakening*, are regarded to be among the key works in feminist literature. The late 19th-century feminist movement and the fight for gender equality can be seen clearly in Chopin's life and work. Her writing serves as a potent reminder of the challenges women faced at the time and serves as motivation for women today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The multidisciplinary field of feminist theory started in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a reaction to society's patriarchal structure and how women have historically been marginalized and oppressed (Madsen, 2000). The feminist theory works to eliminate gender-based oppression and discrimination by analyzing and criticizing how gender relations and power dynamics affect our society (Yazgi, 2020). The influence of societal expectations and norms on how we perceive gender and femininity is another area feminist theorists look into. The "gender binary," for instance, holds that there are only two distinct and opposing genders, male and female, but feminist theorists contend that gender exists on a spectrum and that femininity and masculinity are socially constructed rather than biologically determined (Bittner & Goodyear-Grant, 2017). Liberal feminism, radical feminism, and black feminism are just a few of the many branches of feminist theory, which is constantly changing and has many different perspectives on

the causes of women's oppression and the best ways to end it.

The term "patriarchy" refers to societal and institutional power structures that give men an advantage over women and is one of the central ideas in feminist theory (Sultana, Zaheer, & Badshah, 2021). Various forms of oppression like economic injustice, sexual assault, and cultural representations that devalue women all contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchy (Ewell, 1992). Feminist theory, which holds that patriarchal societies function through oppressive and dominating systems that restrict the autonomy and agency of women, includes the construct of tyranny as a key concept (Rooney, 2006). Different forms of tyranny are sustained by a variety of methods of discrimination and marginalization, such as economic inequality, sexual violence, and cultural representations that objectify and devalue women. It is rooted in the historical and structural power disparities between men and women.

According to feminist theorists, women are oppressed by patriarchal societies because there is a lack of political, economic, and social equality between men and women in these societies. In addition to denying women access to reproductive rights and employment opportunities, this oppression also takes many other forms, such as the normalization of violence against women and limitations on their ability to access both education and the workforce (Emmert, 2008). Feminist theory's use of the term "tyranny" emphasizes how patriarchal societies are not only oppressive but also unlawful and unfair. Further, intersectionality, which draws attention to how various oppressions, including those based on race, class, and sexual orientation, intersect and compound to give marginalized groups individualized experiences of marginalization, is one of the most important contributions of feminist theory to our understanding of tyranny (Choo & Ferree, 2010). The importance of comprehending and addressing the connections between patriarchal systems of power and other forms of oppression is emphasized by this intersectional approach, which also emphasizes the need to work toward the abolition of all tyranny.

Kate Chopin is a well-known author who writes from a feminist perspective. Her writing, which is mainly comprised of short stories and novels, explores women's lives and experiences while subject to patriarchal society's limitations. Several academic studies have been done on Chopin's short stories and novels, and a wide range of published articles have examined her work from different angles. A review of these articles reveals a variety of critical stances and readings of Chopin's works. The examination of women's lives and experiences in late 19th-century America is one of the most popular

themes in research on her literary works. In her writing, Chopin challenges societal notions of femininity and promotes women's independence and self-discovery (Berkove, 2000). *The Awakening*, by Chopin, is regarded as a key piece of feminist literature. The protagonist of the book is Edna Pontellier, a woman who learns about her sexuality and desires before deciding to forgo her traditional domestic role and conform to society. Although the book received unfavorable reviews when it was first released, it is now regarded as a classic of feminist literature.

Chopin's short stories also present a feminist perspective on the oppressive effects of static norms around societal institutions such as marriage. For instance, the protagonist Louise Mallard's emotional journey is depicted in "The Story of an Hour" after learning of her husband's passing. The narrative is a commentary on the social restrictions placed on women and the potential for freedom and self-discovery (Berenji, 2013). "Desiree's Baby," another short story by Chopin, is a commentary on societal anticipations of race and gender. The protagonist of the tale is a woman who, upon learning that she is of mixed race, is shunned by both her husband and her community. The narrative demonstrates how race and gender intersected in the late 19th century as well as how societal norms can be used to oppress and dominate people.

Another important strand in the body of research about the works of Chopin uses the application of psychoanalytic theory to the analysis of her stories. These studies focus on the examination of the psychological motivations of the characters in Chopin's stories through the use of a psychoanalytic method (Jamil, 2009). The method involves exploring the unconscious mind and the hidden desires of the characters through their thoughts, behaviors, and interactions. This approach sheds light on the underlying emotional conflicts and desires of the characters, and how these influence their actions and decisions in the story (Paudel, 2019). Through this lens, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the complex motivations that drive the characters and how they play a role in shaping the story's themes and events. Additionally, the psychoanalytic approach can provide insights into how Chopin's stories reflect broader cultural and societal issues, such as gender roles, expectations from women, and the limitations placed on personal freedom and autonomy.

A new-historical perspective on Chopin's writing offers a unique insight into the beliefs, values, and norms that were prevalent during that period. Chopin's works have been analyzed as cultural and historical documents that can reveal important details about the attitudes and opinions of people during

that era. According to Wan (2009), the historical perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of the context in which Chopin's works were produced, including the literary, cultural, and political influences that shaped her writing. The historical context also sheds light on the literary and cultural movements of the time and how they influenced Chopin's writing style and themes. The historical perspective thus provides a valuable framework for evaluating the significance of Chopin's works, including their literary merit, cultural impact, and lasting legacy.

In sum, research on the short stories and novels of Kate Chopin reveals a variety of critical approaches and interpretations of her work. The most common themes include the exploration of the lives and experiences of women and the intersectionality of race and gender. Chopin's writing continues to be widely studied and celebrated for its contribution to feminist literature and its reflection on the social and cultural context of her time.

METHODOLOGY

The current article employs close textual reading as an analytical technique. A close reading of a text entails carefully analyzing and interpreting it by paying close attention to its language and structure. This method is frequently employed in literary research to elucidate the deeper themes and meanings of a literary work (Smith, 2016). When using close textual reading as an analysis technique in a research article, the researcher would typically begin by reading the text several times while paying close attention to the language and structure of the text as well as any symbols, imagery, or other literary devices that are used. The researcher would then use this in-depth reading of the text to spot trends and themes as well as draw connections between various passages (Federico, 2015). For instance, a researcher might look at how specific words or phrases are used differently throughout the text or how specific symbols or images are used repeatedly. To inform their analysis, the researcher would also draw on their knowledge of the text's historical and cultural setting. After identifying patterns and themes in the text, the researcher would use this knowledge to create a thesis or argument about the text. Evidence from the text and insights derived from the researcher's own interpretation of the text would be used to support this contention or thesis. The researcher would then use this justification or thesis to derive conclusions from the text and establish links between it and larger literary, cultural, or historical contexts (Culler, 2010).

For the current article's focus, the researcher selected text excerpts from "The Story of an Hour" that explore themes such as societal constraints on

women's roles and agency, the impact of marriage and family structures on women's lives, and the potential for female empowerment and liberation. To choose relevant text, we looked for passages that illustrate the experiences and emotions of the female protagonist, Louise Mallard, and how she navigates the constraints of a patriarchal society. We also analyzed the author's use of literary techniques, including imagery, symbolism, and characterization, to convey nuanced messages about the story's themes.

To ensure objectivity, the researcher applied a set of criteria for each excerpt, including relevance to the research question, clarity of language, and consistency with the broader literary and historical context. We took into account the wider cultural and historical context of the text, such as the social and political climate of the time period, as well as the author's biography and other works. This approach allowed us to situate the text within a feminist analysis and avoid any potential bias or oversimplification of the complex issues at play. Furthermore, we paid close attention to the ways in which the selected passages related to other parts of the story and to the overall feminist interpretation of the text. This ensured that the analysis was thorough and that the selected excerpts contributed to a nuanced and detailed understanding of the story's feminist themes and issues. By carefully selecting text excerpts and applying a rigorous set of criteria for analysis, we provide a comprehensive and objective feminist analysis of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour."

Along with the close-reading technique, feminist literary theory serves as the theoretical perspective in the current article. The text from Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" can be studied effectively through the feminist construct of tyranny, particularly concerning the social restrictions placed on women and the denial of autonomy and self-expression (Madsen, 2000). With a focus on the idea of tyranny, the imagery and symbolism in this story contrast the themes of confinement and freedom. The concept of tyranny, as seen from a feminist perspective, describes the ways patriarchal societies limit the freedom and autonomy of women by wielding power over them (Salahuddin, 2021). This can take many forms, such as through gender roles, societal norms, and laws and policies that discriminate against women (Rooney, 2006). The idea of tyranny can be used in literary analysis to describe how a text depicts the struggles and experiences of its female characters as well as the author's use of literary devices to convey themes of oppression and resistance.

Louise Mallard, the main character in "The Story of an Hour," is constrained to a domestic role and the socially endorsed roles of a wife and mother. The

narrative shows her psychological journey after learning of her husband's passing and how she responds with a sense of freedom, liberation, and self-discovery (Wan, 2009). A feminist literary analysis would also concentrate on the author's literary devices for expressing themes of oppression and resistance. The text may make use of symbolism, imagery, and characterization to emphasize how women are restrained and in control, as well as how they resist and strive for freedom. This gives "The Story of an Hour" and other literary works that discuss the struggles of women a suitable theoretical framework for analysis. We can better understand the complexity of Louise Mallard's emotional journey and how the author has created an examination of the power dynamics of gender by reading the text through a feminist lens.

ANALYSIS

Louise is initially restricted to her domestic role as a wife, where she must adhere to social views about femininity and submission to her husband. Louise, however, feels liberated and free after learning of her husband's death. She understands that since her husband passed away, she is no longer bound by social norms and her domestic responsibilities. The narrative conveys Louise's emotional journey, her confinement, and her liberation through symbolism, imagery, and characterization. The protagonist yearns for freedom and liberation, which is reflected in the imagery of the open square, the trees and the sky, the far-off song, and the sparrows. Similar to how her husband is seen as the oppressive force in her life, Louise's first chance at feeling free comes from the death of her husband. The following passage is particularly important when examined from a feminist perspective because it touches on themes of repression and strength that are essential to Chopin's writing.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. (Chopin 1969, p. 498)[§]

Louise's description as "young" and "fair" immediately places her in the socially constructed categories of femininity and beauty. However, the word "repression" used to describe her face suggests that Louise's outward appearance conceals a more profound sense of oppression and restraint. The phrase "certain strength" reinforces the idea that she has been forced to

[§] All subsequent references are to this edition of Kate Chopin's works.

internalize her emotions and experiences. This feeling of restraint and repression is emphasized even more by Louise's "fixed gaze" and "dull stare.". "Fixed away off yonder" implies that Louise's gaze is not on the immediate surroundings but rather on an undefined future in the distance, indicating that she is not thinking about the present because of the constrictive matrimonial relationship she is in. This might be seen as a manifestation of her desire to be liberated from the obligations and restrictions placed on her by society. Additionally, the phrase "patch of blue sky" can be interpreted as a representation of freedom and the potential for a better future. This allusion to a symbol emphasizes Louise's desire to flee her oppressive situation.

The Story of an Hour's imagery and symbolism shed light on the emotional journey and the protagonist's interaction with the outside world. The image of the open square before her house in the passage that follows can be read as a commentary on Louise's current state of confinement within her domestic role and her yearning for the freedom and autonomy that the open square represents. The peddler's imagery and the song's distance serve to emphasize Louise's access to opportunities outside of her domestic confinement as well as the outside world.

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 someone 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. 498)

The descriptions of the "new spring life" in the trees, the "delicious breath of rain in the air," and the "countless sparrows twittering in the eaves" represent the potential for development, change, and a new beginning in life. This imagery contrasts with the description of the closed door and Louise's husband returning, which stands for the limitations placed on women by society and the denial of the possibility of freedom and self-discovery. The passage's use of imagery and symbolism also reflects Louise's internal emotions, which are described as "aquiver with the new spring life" and "fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky.". "This imagery captures Louise's hope and longing for freedom and self-expression, as well as her desire to overcome the limitations placed on her by society. At the

same time, it also symbolizes her disconnection from her current situation and the role she is expected to play as a devoted and submissive wife.

Louise feels emancipated and free after learning of her husband's passing. She understands that, as a result of her husband's passing, she is no longer subject to the stifling anticipations that came with her domestic responsibilities.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. (p. 499)

Louise's inward utterance of the phrase "free, free, free" can be seen as a manifestation of her desire for independence and freedom from social restraints. Her desire to be free from the shackles of societal norms that limit and confine women can be inferred from the repeated use of the word "free.". Furthermore, the contrast between Louise's initial "vacant stare" and the subsequent "look of terror," as well as her new "keen and bright" eyes, emphasizes the abrupt change in her emotional state. This change can be seen as her acceptance of her newfound freedom and awakening into selfhood as well as her realization that the social boundaries that had previously kept her under societal pressure and tyranny must be rejected.

Louise continues to exclaim her happiness and newfound freedom, saying, "Free! Body and soul free!". She wishes to be independent and able to express her creativity, and the phrase "Free! Body and soul free!" serves as an embodiment of this desire. The emphasis on "body and soul" suggests a holistic liberation, indicating that Louise's newly discovered freedom encompasses not only physical shackling but also emotional and psychological oppression. Her fervent desire to be freed from her domestic responsibilities as a wife can be inferred from the repeated use of the word "Free.". The passage's use of imagery and symbolism emphasizes the theme of confinement and freedom and reflects Louise's internal state of mind as she travels through her emotional journey toward self-discovery and liberation.

The narrator says, "And yet she had loved him—sometimes," when describing Louise's marriage. Sometimes she had loved him, other times she hadn't" (p. 499). This passage sheds light on the protagonist's complex emotional state, which is characterized by her ambivalent feelings toward her

husband and conflicting feelings toward her place in the family. As she struggles to accept the death of her husband. And yet, as implied by the phrase "And yet she had loved him—sometimes," Louise's feelings for her husband were not always warm and fuzzy. It is possible that her true feelings for her husband were suppressed by oppressive marriage relationships and norms surrounding marriage and the place of women in marriage. Additionally, the phrase "often she had not" raises the possibility that she felt confined and trapped in her marriage.

As soon as Louise learns of her husband's passing, she is initially overcome with grief, but she soon starts to consider the possibilities of a life without the limitations of her domestic role and marriage institution. This is evident in the line, "She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long," where she prays for a long life of freedom.

Her 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. 498)

The imagery used in this passage, "spring days, and summer days," represents renewal and growth, reflecting Louise's emotional journey toward self-discovery and liberation. The phrase "and all sorts of days that would be her own," which emphasizes Louise's desire for independence and self-expression while implying that her previous life was not entirely her own, is particularly significant.

Louise is initially shocked to hear the news of her husband's passing, but as she starts to picture a life without him, she starts to get more and more excited about the prospect of freedom. The line "She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long" emphasizes Louise's wish for a long life of freedom. She desires a long life so that she will have more time to live her life freely, unrestricted by societal norms and domestic responsibilities. In addition, the phrase also makes a point about how few opportunities for freedom and autonomy there were for women at the time. Louise's wish for a long life indicates that she is aware of the limited number of chances she has to experience freedom and is motivated to make the most of it. Her prayer also emphasizes how societal norms and family obligations can restrict one's sense of freedom.

After learning of her husband's passing, Louise's personality changes, as the story notes: "There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself

unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (p. 499). The line "There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" emphasizes the protagonist's emotional state as she mulls over her husband's passing and the future. Her expression of "feverish triumph" and the description that she carried herself "like a goddess of Victory" represent the emotional journey toward self-awareness and freedom. The word "unwittingly" implies that Louise is unconsciously embracing her newly discovered freedom, which is something she has never experienced before. In addition, the term "goddess of Victory" is particularly significant as it implies that Louise has overcome not only the loss of her husband but also the social obligations that have previously limited her.

As Louise reflects upon her life without a husband, she deliberates the implications of living independently: "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" (p. 498). The theme of self-discovery and the importance of individual freedom are conveyed by this realization. The realization, however, is fleeting because she passes away from shock after her husband returns home safely. The realization serves as a powerful example of the value of one's right to choose one's path in life and to exercise personal freedom.

CONCLUSION

Analysis in the research article shows that Chopin uses the character of Louise Mallard to challenge societal obligations of women's emotions and domesticity. Louise's initial reaction to the news of her husband's death is one of relief and joy, as she perceives it as an opportunity for freedom and self-discovery. However, this reaction may meet with societal disapproval and judgment. Chopin uses this to illustrate the societal pressure that women should grieve for their deceased husbands and that any other reaction is considered inappropriate (Wan, 2009). Louise's husband, who was believed to have died in a train accident, returns alive and well which is an important situational irony in the story. Louise, who is trapped in a loveless marriage, is finally able to envision a new life for herself, free from the constraints of her husband. The surprise ending, in which her husband returns and she dies, serves to demonstrate that unfulfilling marriages and expectations for females around them can have a detrimental effect on individuals, by denying them the ability to live their own lives and make their own choices.

Chopin's use of imagery and symbolism in the story to convey the theme of oppression and self-discovery also reflects the experience of women in the

late 19th century. The imagery of an open window and the blue sky, for example, symbolizes the possibility of freedom and self-discovery, while the imagery of a closed door and the return of Louise's husband symbolize the societal constraints imposed on women and the denial of the possibility of freedom. The story contains an underlying theme of resilience and hope, that despite the limitations imposed by society, women are still capable of finding their power and strength to break free from oppression and reclaim their agency (Ewell, 1992). This theme is seen not only in Chopin's work but throughout the experiences of women during the late 19th century, as they fought for suffrage and other rights that allowed them to gain a degree of autonomy. Thus, Chopin's work can be seen as an inspiration for women of the period and beyond, a testament to the strength of the female spirit in adversity.

Further Research

The research questions explored in the current article can provide a starting point for a deeper analysis of the themes, characters, and motifs present in "The Story of an Hour." However, this research can be expanded to include a more comprehensive analysis of the story. For example, other themes such as the representation of gender roles, the power dynamics in relationships, and the impact of societal constraints on individuals could also be examined. The research can also be expanded to include a comparative analysis of other short stories and novels written by Kate Chopin. By examining "The Story of an Hour" concerning other works by Chopin, it would be possible to gain a better understanding of the author's overall literary themes, styles, and techniques. For example, it could be interesting to compare "The Story of an Hour" with other stories that explore similar themes such as "Desiree's Baby" and "The Storm." Through a comparative analysis, it would be possible to identify patterns and similarities in Chopin's writing and gain further insight into her perspective on the lives of women in the late 19th century. Furthermore, it would also be useful to explore how Chopin's work influenced other feminist writers and the literary canon of her times and afterward.

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