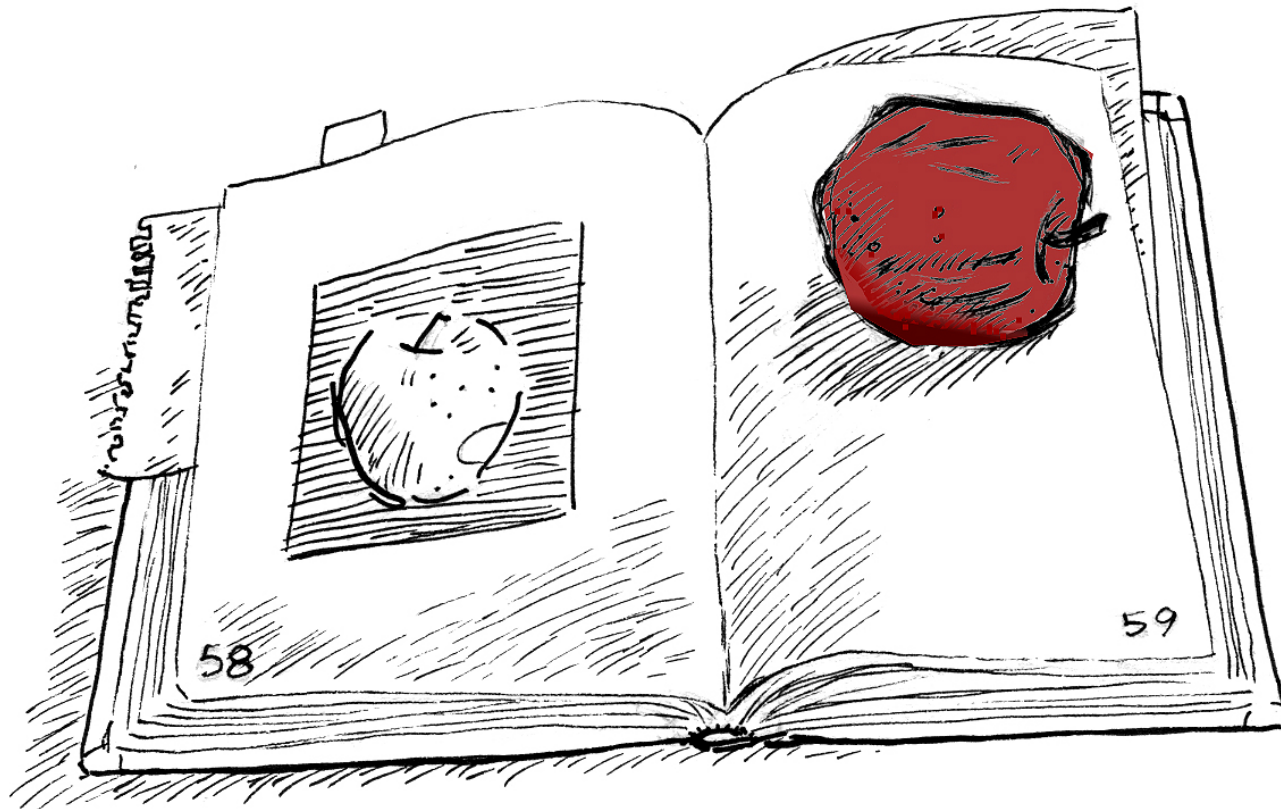


Kate Chopin



Kate Chopin

Quick facts:

- Considered to have been a forerunner of feminist authors of the twentieth century.
- She herself denied feminist leanings, more than likely because she did not want her stories to be labelled as “women’s” work. She wanted them to be considered as equal to men’s work.
- Chopin was an early American writer in the genre of “local color.”

local color: distinctive, “picturesque” characteristics of a place or period in time—represented in literature or drama.

- Chopin focused many of her stories in North Central Louisiana, but she did use New Orleans scenes occasionally. Mainly used material regarding the Creole sections of the state.

Kate Chopin

- Her literary qualities were overlooked and largely forgotten until the fifties when her work was “rediscovered.”
- Over time however, literary critics determine that Chopin addressed the concerns of women in all places and for all times in her literature.
- In 1899, her second novel, *The Awakening*, was published. It remained out of print for several decades, due to the nature she portrays the female protagonist.
- She often challenges stereotypical male and female gender roles.
- Other issues such as race and ethnicity also show up as major themes in her work. Within “Desiree’s Baby” for instance, you have a dual theme of woman’s issues and of race issues set in Louisiana on an Antebellum (before the American Civil War) plantation.

The Story of an Hour

- In this particular case, it is important to notice the opening sentence: “Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with *a* heart trouble” — (my emphasis)— cleverly Chopin uses the added article “a” rather than simply stating Mrs. Mallard had a weak heart. This takes the implication of her condition to a higher symbolic level.
- The heart traditionally, for many years, has been associated with emotional states, primarily love.
- The narration used is **limited omniscient**.
- The closing of the story uses **irony of circumstance**.
(See previous class notes on narration and irony.)

The Story of an Hour

Protagonist's Characterization:

- In the first two-thirds of the story she is presented simply as Mrs. Mallard, a title derived from her husband's last name. She appears without identity or true focus.
- Louise Mallard, the protagonist within "The Story of an Hour," is shown as an example of transformation, emerging from under the control of her husband, moving from a passive victim to "a goddess of Victory" at the top of the stairs. She is not unlike the passive female figure in the Brothers Grimm story "The Goose Girl."
- Chopin strategically holds back describing the physical nature of Mrs. Mallard until the middle of the story.

What is the benefit for this element to be delayed?

Why is the character left with only a vague description up to this point?

The Story of an Hour

Main Setting:

- The majority of the story presents Mrs. Mallard in her own room, sitting at an open window, viewing an open plaza. It is early spring.

Why is this crucial to the story?

What is the significance of the armchair and the open window?

- A slight change in tone falls in place here. Mrs. Mallard senses a change—she is aware that an epiphany moment is about to happen to her.
- Notice the language used in this section. The moment that is arriving wants to “possess her” and she is “powerless” against it—
- and then the transformation unfolds. Here, Chopin uses the word “abandoned”. Her pulse increases, her heart beats faster, blood moves through her body: signs of a surge of excitement.

Why does Chopin use such sexually charged language here?

Setting

1

• In the sitting room she receives news of husband's "death"—ground level. The material world. She is shown frail.

4

3

• Steps out on the landing of the stairs as a Goddess of Victory; above the material world below.

2

• The upstairs studio is isolated from rest of house.
• Mrs. Mallard places herself in a limbo between the exterior, real world and the interior world. Ethereal.
• The reader discovers her first name. She discovers herself.

• Moving down the stairway with her sister (a symbol of one who accepts domesticity and gender roles), Mrs. Mallard descends towards reality and the material world.

Her husband returns unexpectedly.

She collapses on the stairs between heaven and earth.

The Story of an Hour

- Like Poe, Chopin uses irony and understatement strategically.
- The narrator implies that Mrs. Mallard feels an overwhelming joy; she does not understand her own feelings. At this stage she wrestles with her emotions, seeking out her identity.
- Soon however, the protagonist will be shown as exultantly happy.
- Mrs. Mallard is not celebrating her husband's physical death, nor the manner he was apparently killed. She *will* mourn over “his kind, tender hands.”
- Look specifically at how paragraph 14 is phrased; it reads:

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. *(my emphasis)*

Is this the perspective of Mrs. Mallard or of the author?

The Story of an Hour

Items to Consider:

- By actions Mrs. Mallard is unhappy in the marriage but does not know *why*. She is feeling powerless and controlled in the relationship, but does acknowledge he was/is a good man.
- Mrs. Mallard will soon be shown considering the years to follow *after* her husband's funeral. This is what her excitement centers on, her sense of freedom from the marriage. The death of her husband allows a safe exit from the marriage in a time when divorce was a huge scandal.
- Notice Mrs. Mallard remains disconnected from the outside world even through her state of immense joy. She does not go out into the spring environment but remains in her limbo environment.

Why does Chopin show Mrs. Mallard only as a witness to spring, not as a full participant?

The Story of an Hour

- In paragraphs 17-19 show a complex irony with the fact it is through the sister kneeling at the study door the reader learns Mrs. Mallard's first name. Now we know her as Louise and she steps out of her room with a "feverish triumph in her eyes, ... (carrying) herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory." Her transformation is complete; she has found herself and her true identity.
- Comparing Chopin's style to that of Poe, notice that Chopin likewise limits the setting to one major scene; in her case, it is confined largely to a room, a staircase, and a front door.

How does this limitation help express the themes of the story?

How does this mirror the character of Mrs. Mallard?

The Story of an Hour

The reader is now left with some unanswered questions:

1. Is Mrs. Mallard being punished for her sense of independence?
—or like N. Hawthorne’s Georgianna, can mortals only achieve a state of perfection, or sense of independence and self-worth when they are dead?
2. Is the story merely a symbolic tale representing the repression of women?
3. Can the story transcend sexual identity? In other words, can the story be reversed with a Man in Mrs. Mallard’s position?
4. The last line of the story is this: “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease-of joy that kills.”

In what ways is this an ironic statement?