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Heartache: To Live and Die in Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour"

Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" chronicles more the passing of sixty minutes. Rather, in about one thousand words, Chopin reveals facets of womanhood in the late nineteenth century. Told through the eyes of Mrs. Louise Mallard, her sister Josephine, and family friend Richards, the story shows how Victorian society regarded women. Supposedly, Mrs. Mallard has fragile health and so they treat like an invalid on the edge of death. She requires constant care and runs to her room to weep in grief. However, Mrs. Mallard challenges the stereotype of a delicate, "shrinking violet" and enthusiastically prepares to face life without her husband. Unfortunately, the twist ending negates her efforts, and she dies exactly as she lived: for the sake of her husband. Ultimately, Chopin's short story thus presents the typical woman of her time period as a weak individual due to a rigid system of patriarchy. These gender norms literally drive women like Louise Mallard to death.

Louise Mallard's last day of life is not a happy one. Already confined to her room due to her fragile health, she did not seem to be the type of woman who could handle bad news. Her close friends and family took extra pains to "break" the news of Brently's death to her. Chopin writes Mallard's sister, Josephine, was similarly distressed. Her womanliness made her speak in "broken sentences" and "veiled hints." The only clear-headed individual, Richards, had the foresight to verify Brently's death before rushing to Mrs. Mallard's side. He

knew a “less careful, less tender friend” could very well disturb Mrs. Mallard’s already troubled heart. Mallard immediately flies into hysterics, her female emotions running wild. Chopin notes many other women would have received the notice with a “paralyzed inability to accept its significance.” Indeed, many women would have realized that their main purpose in life—supporting a husband—had vanished. They would have to prepare to face the social stigma of being a widow or try to remarry. Although relatively young, Mrs. Mallard’s poor health and limited lifestyle would preclude her being able to continue as society expects her to. On the surface, Louise Mallard conforms to the late-nineteenth century housewife: loyal to her husband, delicate in health, and unable to live on her own.

Chopin then proceeds to undermine this stereotype. Left alone, Mallard realizes she is finally free from the trappings of a confined life. Although Brently loved her, Chopin reveals Mrs. Mallard “sometimes” loved him but “often she did not.” Rather, Louise Mallard had played a role subscribed to her by society: that of a dutiful wife. Living that artificial existence has drained her of vitality, leaving her shut-upped in a small, sterile room as her only sanctuary. However, Chopin notes there is more to Mrs. Mallard than her family and friends suspect. Mrs. Mallard’s initial reactions—hysteria—might seem typical for an emotional female, but it also gives her a certain strength to act out, rather than passively accept bad news. Her self-assertiveness is also hinted at when she runs to her room and wants no one to go with her. Left alone to sort out her future on her own terms, this form of agency grows. She initially tries to suppress this feeling of freedom. However, her “two white slender hands,” the embodiment of female gentleness and weakness, cannot keep back the rush of independence. After embracing this new-found strength, Mrs. Mallard now looks forward to a

future without her husband. She “would live for herself.” This vitality actually restores her health. She defies her overprotective sister, stating she is not making herself ill any longer and wants Josephine to “go away.” Mrs. Mallard has no intentions to play the bereft widow, needing a new husband. Rather, she plans to live “life for herself” without the will of a man to dictate her actions. Chopin describes Louise Mallard leaving her bedroom “in triumph” and like a “goddess of Victory.” Her emergence reads more like an escape as she starts to descend the stairs to bask in the fresh air of endless summers. Chopin describes this freedom as the “sounds, the scents, the color of the air” as a direct contrast to her husband’s “fixed and gray and dead.” Mrs. Mallard’s possibilities for a future were as limitless as the radiant blue sky itself peering out from the breakup of the spring storm clouds.

Louise Mallard’s victory ends in utter defeat. Brently returns home, safe and sound. Chopin notes Mr. Mallard did not even appear injured: his avoiding the accident completely turns his wife’s independence into a joke because she never had a chance in the first place. Mr. Mallard has lost none of his authority: except for some stains on his suit, he remains unflappable, not having lost his umbrella and latch key. This restoration of the status quo has an immediate impact on the Mallard household. Mr. Mallard’s very presence motivates everyone to return to their prescribed gender roles. Josephine fittingly has her arm around her sister at the last moment: her body contact provides emotional support befitting her status as a nurturing female. At the same time, Josephine also serves as a symbolic embodiment of womanhood restraining Louise in her luckless flight. Even though Mrs. Mallard told her sister to “go away,” Josephine does not. Her continual hovering around her sister and “babying” the weak Louise indicates Mrs. Mallard cannot escape the return of her husband

because her sister will not let her. In this context, Josephine's cry acts as an alarm on multiple levels. It heralds the return of Brently, the survival of the Mallard marriage, and the return to traditional Victorian normalcy. A more negative interpretation is the horror of Mrs. Mallard's realization that her freedom was an elusive dream. Either reading also colors Richards's final act. He plays the guardian figure he had at the beginning, as he tries to shield Mr. Mallard from his wife to protect her fragile health from this sudden shock at seeing him alive. However, Roberts also shields Brently from seeing the terrible disappointment on his wife's face and whatever other expression she may have made in realizing her hopes dashed. This disappointment leads directly to Mrs. Mallard's death.

A popular expression is "A man's home is his castle." However, this old phrase also places his wife on a secondary position. Mrs. Mallard did have "heart trouble," but this ailment was not due to her fragile health as her society/family believed. Rather, her heart had yearned to be free from a terrible marriage. When she thought Brently dead, Chopin describes Mrs. Mallard as possessing "certain strength" and "intelligent thought." She was starting to live for herself and this realization filled her with renewed life and spirit. Her death, from an ironic "joy" at seeing her husband alive and well, was a direct result of this "heart trouble." But it was a form of heartache that stemmed from the limited self-assertion her society had given women, just as the "joy" was a societal assumption that Mrs. Mallard was glad Brently was safe. "Body and soul free!" Mrs. Mallard had whispered. By the end, the soul could not escape the unyielding rigors of her social gender role. Louise Mallard tasted freedom for a brief hour—and when it vanished, her heart and body went with it.