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## Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

Kate Chopin's thousand-word short story, "The Story of an Hour," has understandably become a favorite selection for collections of short stories as well as for anthologies of American literature. Few other stories say so much in so few words. There has been, moreover, virtual critical agreement on what the story says: its heroine dies, ironically and tragically, just as she has been freed from a constricting marriage and has realized self-assertion as the deepest element of her being. Confidence in this interpretation, however, may be misplaced, for using the standard proposed for the story by Toth and Seyersted—"every detail contributes to the emotional impact"<sup>1</sup>—there is evidence of a deeper level of irony in the story which does not regard Louise Mallard as a heroine but as an immature egotist and a victim of her own extreme self-assertion. This self-assertion is achieved not by reflection but, on the contrary, by "a suspension of intelligent thought" masked as "illumination." As a result, a pattern of basic contradictions and abnormal attitudes emerges which gives structure to the story and forecasts its conclusion. The key to recognizing this deeper, ironic level is to carefully distinguish between the story's narrator, author, and unreliable protagonist.

Seyersted's early biography of Chopin describes the story neutrally as "an extreme example of the theme of self-assertion."<sup>2</sup> More recent interpretation has largely followed a strong, and at times an extreme, feminist bent. Representative of this in both approach and language is Emily Toth's well-known characterization of the story as one of Chopin's "most radical . . . an attack on marriage, on one person's dominance over another."<sup>3</sup> Toth further elaborates this position in a later article in which she comments that

"[a]lthough Louise's death is an occasion for deep irony directed at patriarchal blindness about women's thoughts, Louise dies in the world of her family where she has always sacrificed for others."<sup>4</sup> Ewell similarly sees in the story's "surfaces" Louise's struggle for selfhood against "society's decree" for female "selflessness, being for others."<sup>5</sup>

But in the text of this very short story there is no hard evidence whatsoever of patriarchal blindness or suppression, constant or selfless sacrifice by Louise, or an ongoing struggle for selfhood. These positions are all read into the story from non-textual assumptions.<sup>6</sup> The simple truth is that this story is not about society or marriage, but about Louise Mallard. The single possible reference in the text to difficulties in her life is a sentence, which says that the lines of her face "bespoke repression and a certain strength."<sup>7</sup> It is not at all clear, however, what the cause of that "repression" was; whether, for instance, it might have been external, in society or in her marriage, or whether it was internal, a recognition that it takes strength to control one's feelings or whims. Such few hints as the story supplies incline toward the latter position. While the text enables us to make certain inferences about Louise, it does not supply us with any information about the truth of her life except her perceptions, and these, as I intend to show, are unreliable and, insofar as they are taken as the statements of the story's omniscient narrator, misleading and contradicted by other textual evidence.

Support for this position is spread throughout the story but the most dramatic elements appear in the following three paragraphs:

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending her 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 as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

In these paragraphs, the story's omniscient narrator takes us into Louise's mind. However, while the attitudes expressed are definitely Louise's there is no textual justification for also ascribing them to the narrator. Further, it would be a mistake to project them onto Chopin, for that would confuse narrator with author, a move that denies Chopin the full range of literary technique, and that would reduce this brilliant and subtle work of fiction to behind-the-scenes sermonizing.

It is significant, in the quotation's first line, that Louise wishes to "live for herself." This has been generally understood to imply that she had hitherto sacrificed herself for her husband; however, there is no evidence for this in the text. Nor is there any evidence that her husband had done her living "for her," whatever that might mean. It is an *ipse dixit* comment, arbitrary, without support, one of several she makes.

In the quotation's second paragraph, Louise discounts love as secondary to self-assertion. While this is undoubtedly her position, there is no textual reason to assume it is also Chopin's. Louise also recognizes self-assertion "as the strongest impulse of her being." This is a peculiar value for a married person and is indeed incompatible with marriage, where an emphasis upon shared goals and mutual commitment is the opposite of self-assertion. The unreasoning self-centeredness of Louise partly explains the first two sentences of the quotation's second paragraph, and they tell us more about her than about her husband. Of course, even married people who sincerely love each other have occasional disagreements and may not feel much love for the other at particular times. For most lovers this is not so much a contradiction as a paradox; the moments of hate occur within the larger context of love. But the warmest sentiment that Louise can express after being married to a man whose benevolence the previous paragraph explicitly affirms with its description of his "kind, tender hands" and his face "that had never looked save with love upon her" is the niggardly concession that she had loved him "sometimes."

It is obvious that there is quite a discrepancy between the way Louise and Brently Mallard feel about each other, but all the mystery of the difference is on Louise's side.

Whatever her original reason had been for marrying Brently, it is clear now that feeling the way she does about him she would be better off not being married. Her love for herself—"she would live only for herself"—does not leave room for anyone else. How, then, would she live?

Her justification for preferring to live for herself, the second and third sentences of the quotation's first paragraph, are extravagant, unrealistic statements, each segment of which is controversial. She views her husband's constant love as a "powerful will bending hers in [a] blind persistence." Blind? Why is it blind? Inasmuch as Louise has apparently repressed her true feelings about her husband and marriage, if his love for her is blind it is because she has blinded him. In the absence of open communication about her feelings, how would he know what she wants, or what to do or say? In that circumstance, his persistence, which clearly annoys her, may only be a natural attempt on his part to please her and to convince her of his love. The failure of Brently's persistence is due at least in part to Louise's

strange view of love—and the wording of the second sentence includes her as well as her husband—as a “crime,” a powerful will that “bends” the other person. This is a distorted view of love, which typically delights in pleasing and giving to the other. Believing love a “crime” cannot be considered a normal attitude, much less an emotionally healthy one.

But even if we grant this point of view, where can we go where the presence of other people does not “impose” some conditions upon us that limit our freedom? There are only two places on earth that meet this specification: an uninhabited spot or the grave. If we have friends, it is assumed that we hold values that are in concord with theirs, and that we do not act in such a way as to violate friends or their principles. Even if we do not have friends but just live in society, there are laws and mores which, out of mere civility, we follow as a condition of being acceptable members of society. And this works equally in reverse. Does Louise not expect that friends will somehow fulfill and continue to meet her personal standards and thereby be more desirable for a closer relationship with her than would strangers? Is this “imposition”? Is she not by her contentions denying herself both friends and society, unless she has no expectations that fellow creatures will observe certain basic laws and mores? If this is true for friends and fellow members of society, how much more is this so for people in love, and especially those who are married! How can the extreme sort of freedom that Louise contemplates, in which there are no expectations or obligations upon anyone, co-exist with living with other human beings?

Marriage of course restricts freedom. Whoever marries, or even loves, gives up large areas of freedom—usually willingly. It is aberrant, therefore, to reduce love merely to an “imposition” of a “private will upon a fellow creature.” Inasmuch as Brently loves her “tenderly,” her attitude about imposition reveals that she is only irritated by a display of affection and equates it with a loss of freedom. One paragraph later, Louise first characterizes love as an “unsolved mystery,” and then immediately dismisses what she admittedly does not understand in preference for the “impulse” of self-assertion, which she, ironically, also appears not to understand either in its form of self-love or in its consequence of radical loneliness.

Even more astonishingly, why is no distinction to be made between a kind and a cruel intention? Here is yet another product of her “suspension of intelligent thought,” another arbitrary and whimsical dictum that would incriminate both friend and spouse. But the proposition is contradicted by actions in the story. At the beginning of the story, for example, her husband’s friend Richards hastens to tell Louise himself the news of her husband’s death, “to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.” At the end, Richards attempts vainly to screen Brently

from the view of his wife. Are these loving acts of kind intentions crimes? Even more to the point, Louise's whims imperiously put her husband into a no-win situation where *anything* he does is not only wrong, but also a crime against her absolute freedom. These conceits go beyond being merely strange and impossible views for any social relations, let alone a marriage. What Louise regards as "illumination" are dark and twisted fantasies that reflect a confused and unhealthy mind.

In truth, Louise is sick, emotionally as well as physically. The story's first line tells us that "Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble." The phraseology is vague; however, the rest of the story gradually makes clear the nature of the heart trouble. Alone in her room, when she "abandoned" herself, a whispered word "escaped" her lips: "Free!" The conjunction first of abandonment and then of something escaping her is significant. What was then in her heart is made clear by the two lines of the next paragraph: "She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial." Again, Chopin's omniscient narrator makes a subtle but very significant shift from reporting "objectively" in the first line what Louise is thinking to letting us, in the second line, know Louise's opinion about her thinking process. First, she believes that she is enjoying a "clear and exalted perception." Two paragraphs later she exalts this self-congratulatory perception to an "illumination" when she concludes that love is a crime. Here again, while these extravagant value judgments are certainly Louise's, they cannot be confidently ascribed to either the narrator or Chopin.

Next, Louise dismisses as "trivial" the suggestion of doubt as to whether or not her joy was "monstrous." But the question most certainly is not trivial. It is a natural question, an important and a healthy one, an intelligent check on unreflected impulse, and the fact that Louise does not address it is ominous. She does not give the question a chance; she does not even face it; she dismisses it out of hand. What Chopin is doing, very subtly, is depicting Louise in the early stages of the delusion that is perturbing her precariously unstable health by aggravating her pathological heart condition. The "monstrous" surge of joy she experiences is both the cause and first sign of a fatal overload to her feeble heart.

In the next paragraph Louise contemplates "a long procession of years . . . that would belong to her absolutely." "Absolutely" is a loaded word, further evidence of her extreme and unrealistic egotism in preferring her own company exclusively. In light of Aristotle's statement that "whosoever is delighted in solitude, is either a wild beast or a god,"<sup>78</sup> the joy that Louise takes in the thought of absolute possession of future years may indeed qualify as "monstrous." And for someone afflicted with heart trouble, the

anticipation that those future years will be a long procession is also presumptuous. Louise is not thinking clearly. Insofar as her anticipation reflects growing mental confusion and raises unrealistic hopes, it is also perilous.

After she puts off her sister Josephine, who “implores” admission to the room out of fear that Louise will make herself ill (another case of a “crime” of a powerful will attempting to bend her by imposing a kind intention?), we are told in the next paragraph that “[h]er fancy was running riot.” “Fancy,” with its connotations of fantastic and capricious imaginings, is another signal that Louise is not thinking clearly, and the narrator’s observation that it is “running riot” is an additional indication that she is well on the way to losing control of her mind.

This prospect is enhanced by a sentence in the next paragraph: “There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory.” Here Chopin displays her remarkable ability to compress layers of complexity and irony into a single line. “Feverish” is the key word that diagnoses Louise’s pathological condition, and the phrase in which it occurs ironically suggests that the fever has already progressed to the point where it is fatally triumphant over her. The rest of the short sentence rapidly but elegantly elaborates on the situation. “Unwittingly,” with its connotation of the absence of reason, reinforces the idea that Louise’s fever has triumphed, and her assumption of the posture of the “goddess of Victory” is a double delusion: she is no goddess and she has achieved no victory.

Her husband’s unexpected reappearance ends the delusion based on “a monstrous joy.” It has long been recognized that the story’s last line is ironic, but it is even more ironic than has previously been surmised. The doctors were technically correct: she did die “of joy that kills.” Louise was indeed doubly afflicted with heart trouble. Physically, her heart was weak, and emotionally, it had no room for anyone else.

We can infer from both the way the description of Louise unfolds and from the absurd nature of Louise’s ideal that Kate Chopin was not a romantic. On the one hand, Chopin did not regard marriage as a state of pure and unbroken bliss, but on the other, she could not intelligently believe that it was desirable, healthy, or even possible for anyone to live as Louise, in the grip of her feverish delusion, wishes: to be *absolutely* free and to live totally and solely for oneself. Absolute freedom is possible only for a divinity, and Louise demonstrates by her death as well as her life that she is not divine. Although earthly love is not ideally perfect, it may at least be the closest thing to the ideal that we can know. Louise’s “self-assertion,” really in her case a manifestation of an extreme of self-love, is exposed in this story as an emotional affliction of her heart that has physical consequences. What

she wants is, literally, not obtainable in this life. It is a fantasy, a dream, and "A Story of an Hour" was indeed first published in *Vogue* magazine in 1894 under the more revealing title of "The Dream of an Hour."<sup>9</sup>

Given her dissatisfaction with the best that life has to offer her and her unrealistic expectations of absolute freedom, therefore, there is no other option for Louise except death. The conclusion of the story follows logically upon Louise's specifications of her deepest wishes. Chopin's exposé of the fanciful dream of Louise is richly subtle, and is an exquisite example of her remarkable ability to present an untenable view in a seemingly sympathetic way.<sup>10</sup> In "The Story of an Hour" Chopin projects with delicately incisive irony what would happen if an immature and shallow egotist were to face the earthly consequence of an impossible dream of her afflicted heart.

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### Notes

1. Emily Toth and Per Seyersted, eds., *Kate Chopin's Private Papers* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1998), p. 245.

2. Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969), p. 58.

3. Emily Toth, *Kate Chopin* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), pp. 252–53. Similarly, the story's emphasis upon a woman was equated in a subsequent article by another critic with an attack on the institution of marriage, which is treated as the "culprit" of the story because by its means "[p]atriarchy's social conditioning creates codes of social behavior to ensure the suppression of feminine desires." Angelyn Mitchell, "Feminine Double Consciousness in Kate Chopin," *CEA Magazine*, 3 (Fall 1993), 59–64.

4. Emily Toth, "Kate Chopin Thinks Back Through Her Mothers: Three Stories by Kate Chopin," *Kate Chopin Reconsidered*, ed. Lynda S. Boren and Sara deSaussure Davis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1992), p. 24.

5. Barbara C. Ewell, "Chopin and the Dream of Female Selfhood," *Kate Chopin Reconsidered*, pp. 160, 162.

6. The film, "Five Stories of an Hour" (Films for the Humanities, Inc., 1991), widely available and used in educational settings, is a testimony as to how the sparseness of the text invites explanations which require additional text and details. Although the skits which comprise this film complement the story's fictile possibilities by means of creative reader responses, in modifying and going beyond the text those skits do not and cannot explain the text itself.

7. Kate Chopin, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 52–54. The entire story occupies only three pages, so page numbers are not used.

8. Aristotle, *Politics* I, qtd. in Francis Bacon, "Of Friendship."

9. Toth, "Kate Chopin Thinks Back," pp. 22–23.

10. For an example of how this phenomenon appears in other of her stories, see my article, "'Acting Like Fools': The Ill-Fated Romances of 'At the 'Cadian Ball' and 'The Storm,'" *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (New York: G. K. Hall, 1996), pp. 184–96.