

# The Paradox of Freedom: Examining Louise's Journey in *"The Story of an Hour"*

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## Abstract

*This study provides a thorough survey of Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* exploring themes of liberation, personal autonomy, and societal constraints. Through an in-depth textual examination, this study investigates the complex nature of Louise Mallard's experience, highlighting how societal norms suppress her aspirations and longings. This study argues that Louise's death represents liberation, underscoring the profound impact of a society that restricts women's independence and self-determination. This investigation utilized feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives to examine how social expectations mould and limit Louise's sense of self. In summary, this analysis underscores the continued relevance of *The Story of an Hour* in modern discussions about women's rights and autonomy. This study stresses the importance of on-going dialogue regarding the themes and motifs presented in the story.*

**Keywords:** Self-Determination, Social Norms, Feminist Theory, Psychoanalytic Theory, Women's Right.

## Introduction

The *Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin (1894) is the classic that questions conventional ideas about gender roles and marriage. Even though the protagonist's journey is short, it provides a prism through which to examine the intricacies of social expectations and individual freedom. The dual natures of Louise's experience—her brief happiness at being independent and the terrible certainty of losing it—is examined in this paper.

Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* is often interpreted as a strong criticism of gender bias and patriarchal views that place men at the centre of power, both in the household and in society. This perspective has been important since feminist criticism gained traction in the 1960s. Additionally, many of Chopin's writings focus on the lives of people in Louisiana, highlighting the struggles faced by women in that region, which are often overlooked.

Kate Chopin (1850–1904) was an American author celebrated for her exploration of the complex inner lives of bold and sensitive women. Her novel, *The Awakening*, along with her various short stories, continues to be appreciated globally, establishing her as an important figure in American literature. Chopin's work often goes

into themes of feminism, individuality, and the human experience. She began her writing journey following the death of her husband, Oscar Chopin, a Creole cotton trader in Louisiana, who passed away in 1882 due to swamp related issues. This loss compelled her to write, allowing her to shed light on the struggles faced by women in Louisiana.

### **Theory of Feminism and Psychoanalytic**

Feminism, psychoanalysis, and literary interpretation share more similarities than their initial histories might indicate. Each of these fields challenges established beliefs about text, the mind, and culture. While they sometimes appear to overlook each other, they frequently intersect and clash in surprising and fruitful ways. This discussion will provide an overview of a complex series of interactions, starting with Freud's studies of female hysteria in the 1890s, progressing into the 1920s with the first wave of feminist responses to Freud, and then addressing the early second-wave critiques of Freud's phallogocentric views. It will also explore the potential for pre-oedipal subversion, leading us to our current era characterized by a decentralized, post-Freudian, and post-postmodern perspective.

The history of psychoanalysis can be traced back to Freud's collaborative work, *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1895. This narrative also points around a woman known as Anna O., featured in the case study by Freud and his mentor, Josef Breuer. Anna O. experienced partial paralysis and aphasia, which prevented her from speaking her native German, although she could communicate in English, French, and Italian. Freud and Breuer noted that she managed to heal herself by connecting her symptoms to their roots, which stemmed from her complicated emotions regarding caring for her father during his final illness.

The theory of applied in this story in such a way which made us to understand how Louise's dream was controlled by the societal pressure that leads to patriarchal norms in the terms of feminist theory similarly how Louise's past memories influence her reaction to her husband's death which gives the view on her unconscious mind which pushed her desire for freedom and independence. The news of her husband's death was the real liberation that she felt for an hour but the arrival of her husband that turns into fatal.

### **The Tragic arc of Louise Mallard**

Mrs. Louise Mallard is at her house when her sister, Josephine, and a friend of her husband, Richards, arrive to inform her that her husband has died in a train accident. Richards learned of the tragedy while at the newspaper office and decided to bring Josephine along to gently said the news to Louise, concerned about her heart condition. To overcome by the loss of her husband, Louise retreats to her room and begins to cry.

The narrative takes a different turn from this point onward. As Louise grapples with the news of her husband's passing, she comes to a profound and conflicting realization: she is now free. Initially hesitant to acknowledge this feeling, she soon discovers a sense of peace and happiness in her newfound freedom. While she acknowledges that she will mourn her husband "she had loved him at times," as Chopin notes Louise feels a thrill at the prospect of living for herself. She repeatedly utters the word "free" as she begins to understand the implications of her husband's death on her future.

Josephine waits anxiously at Louise's door, urging her to step outside due to her concerns about Louise's heart condition. After a heartfelt prayer for a long life, Louise finally decides to emerge. As she goes down to the stairs, the front door swings open, revealing her husband, who surprisingly survived the accident. Despite Richard's efforts to protect Louise from the shock by blocking her view of her husband, she suddenly collapses and dies. The doctors later conclude that her death was caused by "heart disease of the joy that kills."

## **Louise's Quest for Liberation**

Louise Mallard seeks liberation in search of emotional and personal autonomy after the news of her husband's presumed death. Initially consumed by grief, she retreats into solitude, where she becomes aware of her newfound freedom. She begins to imagine a future in which she can be herself, free from the restrictions and responsibilities imposed by marriage. This transformation in her perspective highlights her deep desire to escape the social conventions that dictate a woman's dependence on her husband. Her moments of introspection serve as a metaphor for her awakening to the potential for autonomy and individuality. However, Louise's quest for freedom is suddenly dashed by the unexpected return of her husband, alive and well. This abrupt rupture in her imagined independence highlights the social constraints that prevent women like Louise from achieving true personal freedom. Her disappearance symbolizes the tragic consequences of deprivation of freedom after a brief experience of it. Through her short but impactful journey, Louise represents the struggle for autonomy in a society that limits women's choices and personal expression. Her story illustrates the difficulties of balancing personal aspirations with the strict expectations of traditional gender roles.

## **The Marriage Paradox**

Prior to her marriage, Louise Mallard likely enjoyed a degree of individuality and autonomy, free from the societal norms that constrained women during her era. As a young woman, she may have harboured personal ambitions and dreams, possessing the freedom to make choices aligned with her own desires. In her life before marriage, Louise probably experienced a lack of the incessant demands to conform to the expectations of a devoted wife, relishing moments of independence and spontaneity that were often diminished by the institution of marriage in the late 19th century. Following her marriage, Louise's existence transformed significantly. Although her husband was characterized as caring and affectionate, the marriage institution imposed limitations on her personal liberties. Her identity became closely linked to her role as a wife, subject to her husband's authority and decisions, a common reality in a patriarchal society. When she briefly perceives herself as a widow, Louise is engulfed by a profound sense of relief and exhilaration, symbolizing the constraints she felt within her married life. This stark contrast emphasizes the oppressive nature of marriage for her and highlights her deep yearning for autonomy and self-identity.

## **Shackles of Societal Expectations**

In the mid-19th century, many women experienced marriage as a form of confinement, where they were expected to remain at home and care for their families. This prolonged dependency and repression led to a hidden resentment towards men among many women. Kate Chopin uses Louise's heart condition as a symbol of her emotional fragility, suggesting it may stem from her unfulfilling marriage. Ironically, Louise is able to endure the shock of her husband's death despite her weak heart, but when he unexpectedly returns home alive, she dies from heart failure upon seeing him.

## **The Open Window to Destiny**

In this story the open window symbolizes freedom and a new life. As in the story it evokes the sense of liberation as if no one could control her life anymore. It represents life and excitement in contrast to dull her immobile life through the window Louise sees nature; she sees the blue sky, fluffy clouds and vibrant trees: all of these represents the renewal of life. When Louise turns back on the window and loses sight of the world outside, she parts with this sense of freedom and ends

up dying. In this story, the window symbolizes a portal to another world, or a means by which one can contemplate the past, present, or future. The outside world is so different from the inside, how something completely different can occur on one side of the window while something else occurs on the other side, much like different worlds. The open window is also an irony since it means truth.

### Conclusion

This brief narrative often illustrates the oppression of women, societal expectations surrounding them, and various related themes; however, in this analysis, I aim to emphasize that Louise Mallard's death stems not only from a heart attack but also from her desire for liberation from oppression, suggesting that for her, death represented the only path to freedom. There might be alternative interpretations if Louise Mallard lived in the Post Modern era. Women in the 19th century largely faced isolation, which profoundly impacted their mental health much like Louise Mallard, who suffered from a weak heart, symbolizing her vulnerability and sensitivity in the face of societal pressure. When we connect this to the postmodern era, women's struggles are informed by identity, and autonomy, among other elements that are pertinent to contemporary feminist theory. By examining these concepts, we can reveal their relevance to present-day literary works.

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