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Laura Kight has always enjoyed problem solving and as an English literature major she continually finds fresh ideas for analysis. At Murray State University, she serves as president of Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership Honor Society and vice president of Alumnae and Heritage for Alpha Sigma Alpha sorority. Kight is also a member of Sigma Tau Delta English Honor Society. After graduation, she will pursue a law degree.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Kate Chopin's Exploration of Freedom and Trauma in "The Story of an Hour."**

This research project began as an attempt to highlight the vital connection that exists between authors and their literary creations. In the short story, "The Story of an Hour," by Kate Chopin, a distinct relationship exists between Chopin's personal tragedy and the tragedies that afflict the protagonist, Louise Mallard. Kate Chopin illustrates the shared emotion between herself and the protagonist and in doing so, reveals a message vital to the issue of expression of freedom of emotion for women. Chopin celebrates her personal emancipation from her grief by creating a similar experience for Louise Mallard, though its tragic end conveys Chopin's passionate defense of genuine freedom for women in a society that dictates their expression of emotion.

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# Kate Chopin's Exploration of Freedom and Trauma in "The Story of an Hour."

In Kate Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour" the protagonist, Louise Mallard, dies of more than "heart disease – of joy that kills" (Chopin, 2004, p. 257). Louise suffers from her inability to express the joy and sorrow that commingle when she hears of her husband's death. Chopin's own experiences with loss and grief manifest themselves in Louise Mallard's reaction to Brently's death, though with a different outcome. Chopin's personal experiences parallel Louise Mallard's though the tragic conclusion – that differs from Chopin's own life – to "The Story of an Hour" which illustrates Chopin's acknowledgement of a tragic flaw in the social structure of her time. Chopin celebrates her own personal emancipation from her grief by creating a similar experience for Louise Mallard, though its tragic end conveys Chopin's passionate defense of genuine freedom for women in a society that dictates their expression of emotion.

Chopin experienced several tragedies in her young adulthood that may have prompted her to include tragedy in "The Story of an Hour." Many similarities between Chopin's life and the events of her short story become clear through the exposition of the events of Louise Mallard's experience. Kate's early childhood experiences translate into the events of "The Story of an Hour" easily: "Chopin was an only child when her father died. He had been a founder of the Pacific Railroad, and he was aboard the train on its inaugural journey when it plunged into the Gasconade River after a bridge collapsed" ("Katherine Chopin," 1988, p. 122). This experience when coupled with Chopin's fictional account of Brently Mallard's death in a train wreck leads us to make a vital connection between "The Story of an Hour" and Chopin's desire to express her emotions through her writing. In Cathy Caruth's book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she speaks of the desire of writers to write about their traumatic experiences: "The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life about writers and trauma" (Caruth, 1996, p. 7). For Chopin, including trauma in her story affords her the freedom to express

her emotions – both resolved and unresolved – through Louise's experiences.

Loss remains an intensely painful theme through Chopin's young adulthood: "Around age 11 she endured further heartache when her great-grandmother died. Soon afterwards, Chopin's half-brother, who had been captured as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War, contracted typhoid fever and died." Chopin's experiences with loss encouraged her desire for solitude and immersion in literature as an escape from her sorrow. As she grew older, Chopin found freedom through her expression in music and literature, and "as she reveled in St. Louis society, Chopin became increasingly independent" ("Katherine Chopin," 1988, p. 102). From Chopin's biography, we see the further development of themes of isolation in Chopin's life that influence the manner in which she creates Louise Mallard's experiences with death and isolation, though, Chopin's personal encounter with grief resolves itself more favorably than that of Louise Mallard.

Chopin's account of Louise Mallard's experience with trauma in "The Story of an Hour" contains many of the same elements that appear in biographer's descriptions of Chopin's life. Chopin begins the story with her protagonist, Louise, flanked by her sister, Josephine and Brently's friend, Richards. Chopin saw similar social and familial support through her own painful experiences with tragedy (Chopin, 2004, p. 255). After Louise learns of her husband's death in a train accident – the same manner in which Chopin's father died – Louise immediately begins the grieving process (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). In the initial stages of grief, we find one point at which Chopin's assertions regarding Louise Mallard's grief contradict Louise's later behavior: "She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance" (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). In this quotation, Louise seems as if she instantly comprehends the impact of Brently's death on her life. Throughout the explication of Chopin's story, it remains clear that Louise's grief and freedom through isolation develop methodically during a short period of time.

Louise's isolation parallels Chopin's personal quest for solitude during her early traumatic experiences in order to reflect upon the manner in which the deaths affected her life and her freedom.

Chopin makes a clear distinction between Louise's state of mind directly following her husband's death and her state of mind after her grief has subsided by using symbols and descriptive language to that end. Louise soon realizes that in her solitude and isolation, she finds the freedom to think and express emotions that she had been scared of expressing prior to her husband's death. Chopin uses the word "open" twice to describe Louise's perceptions of her room:

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul. She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life.

(Chopin, 2004, p. 256)

Chopin uses not only the word "open" but also "comfortable, roomy" and "new spring life" (Chopin 256). Louise's recognition of the implied vitality and autonomy of her environment denotes her willingness to embrace any semblance of freedom for freedom's sake. Louise's acknowledgement of these symbols and others, for example, "delicious breath of rain," "patches of blue sky" and the story's setting within the context of springtime and rebirth, creates an entirely different setting for the story (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). Rain in any other season would symbolize sadness, and heartache, and would depict Louise as a downtrodden sort of protagonist. Springtime brings hope to her traumatic situation. Chopin uses the word "facing" twice in the first few moments of Louise's isolation (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). Chopin presents Louise as "facing the open window" and "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" (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). As a symbol, the window limits Louise in some ways and frees her in others. The window allows Louise to view only what faces her, rather than permitting her to take in the bigger picture (256). The window also gives Louise a glimpse of what limited freedom consists, though, as Chopin alludes to through her tragic ending, limited freedom contradicts any notion of genuine freedom. Chopin demonstrates Louise's power to change part of her life because the window represents only a portion of all that lies outside of Louise and that remains beyond her control.

After creating a scene of both beauty and isolation for Louise Mallard, Chopin gives us the first physical description of Louise Mallard. Through this illustration, we begin to realize the depth of repression in Louise, a young woman facing more than an isolated traumatic experience: "She was young, with a fair calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength." (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). Chopin does not even allude to Louise's "repression;" instead, she states it explicitly. We see where Chopin loses control of the text once more and rather than allowing another contradiction within the story, Chopin openly states the perception of Louise that she wants us to create within our minds. In this description, however, Chopin effectively conveys the sympathetic situation of both Louise and other women – young and old – in similar situations who face freedom only within a context of isolation from others and from repressors. Chopin follows her description with an observation of Louise's expression that we may interpret as a warning regarding the effects of repression, sorrow and isolation: "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. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought" (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). Louise appears to us as a shadow of her former self, as indicated by Chopin, and a victim of repression that has stolen her capacity to process all of the events of the past hour.

As we begin to attribute her strange behavior to the death of Brently Mallard, we find that Louise, too, realizes that her emotions come from a place other than her sorrow. Louise's inability to express herself due to societal limitations regarding her behavior – as with many women of this time – creates in her a void that seeks solitude to find what she lacks from the provisions of the social system. Louise's strong dissatisfaction with her ability to express her desires and thoughts encourages us to examine the system or any institution that creates a false perception that freedom comes only through isolation for women. The transition to understanding for Louise begins as: "her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will – as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been" (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). Initially, Louise fights the freedom that she realizes comes from isolation, but its influence intoxicates her after having been repressed for so long. As she "recognizes this thing that was beginning to possess her," Chopin makes an additional reference to her youth by describing her hands once more. The allusion explains her adaptability to such a tempting offer of freedom. The prospect of freedom through isolation tempts

Louise's sensibilities regarding comfort and relief from grief, stress and expectations, and, to a small degree, Louise realizes the fallacy of such ill-gotten freedom.

The physical and emotional effects of Louise's newfound freedom supercede her sense of reason regarding the origin of freedom. Chopin develops a scene akin to a spiritual revival, as Louise discovers the liberating effects of freedom: "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 look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes" (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). Freedom becomes a sensual experience for Louise, rather than an intellectual or logical encounter. She reconciles herself to the death of her husband quite easily compared with her prior demonstration of grief: "She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the fact that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead" (Chopin, 2004, p. 256). In this quotation, we affirm our assertion that Louise Mallard's repression results from the society in which she lives, not a tyrannical husband. Chopin uses this to reinforce the blame upon the society of her time for disallowing by social convention the expression of strong emotion and personal freedom. Chopin constructs this scene in a manner that demands fast reading of Louise's embrace of isolation and freedom. While Louise asserts that she loves her husband, she also begins to discard him as part of her old life – a life without freedom through isolation. She speaks of her freedom to "live for herself" and her realization regarding her husband that "she had loved him – sometimes. Often she had not" (Chopin, 2004, pp. 256-57). At this point in the story, we recognize both gender-related issues and possible questions regarding her sexuality that she had previously found herself too confined by society to ask. The physical and emotional effects of this freedom upon Louise make her death and the subsequent absence of her freedom altogether dramatic and painful.

The death of Louise's short-lived personal freedom of expression and realization coincides with her physical death and arrives as abruptly as does the news of her husband's death in the beginning and news of his life at the end. Louise's death illustrates the danger of allowing society's critical flaw to take hold of one's sensibilities to the point of robbing one's personal liberties. As Josephine comes to the door, we realize the threat to Louise's freedom within isolation, from the outside: "What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door" (Chopin, 2004, p. 257). Josephine symbolizes society, figuratively beating down the door

of Louise's newborn confidence and freedom. Louise's reply brings the experience to a fevered pitch: "'Go away. I am not making myself ill.' No; she was drinking in the very elixir of life through that open window" (Chopin, 2004, p. 257). The window emerges as a symbol again, and, when Louise finally exits her sanctuary, she finds herself far-removed from the condition of the world around her. Her emotional condition exudes joyful freedom and confidence that her flawed society had stolen from her (Chopin, 2004, p. 257). The final scene, in which the doctor describes the cause of Louise's death as "heart disease – of joy that kills," represents both the beginning and the end of Louise's emancipation through isolation. Her isolation now comes through death. Chopin presents Louise as a victim of the tempting embrace of false freedom. The abrupt nature of Louise's death and her subsequently complete removal from the social structure epitomizes Chopin's message regarding the hasty embrace of freedom through isolation or allowing the embrace to go on past its advantageousness.

"The Story of an Hour" reveals Kate Chopin's need for catharsis, as well providing insight into a symbolic account of her personal experiences with grief. Chopin uses her protagonist, Louise Mallard, to represent the brief respite from grief that comes from isolating oneself to gather one's thoughts. Chopin also exposes the dangers of seeking isolation as a refuge from repression by societal, familial, and personal obligations and expectations. We realize through the story of Louise Mallard that isolation as a temporary substitute for freedom constitutes a failure of genuine freedom on all accounts. Chopin's personal experience with solitude allowed her to recover from the tragedies that plagued her early adulthood and encouraged her to move beyond the freedom to explore her emotions through solitude. Louise Mallard's experiences contrast with Chopin's personal experiences in that Mallard's brief encounter becomes a near-religious experience with isolation that overcomes all of her sensibilities. Chopin convinces us by the end of "The Story of an Hour" that Mallard's experience, however short-lived, would have had a lasting impact on the way in which she views freedom. Chopin recognizes the critical flaws within the social structure and its accompanying expectations of its members. When the members of a society seek refuge from societal expectations and constraints, as Louise Mallard does in "The Story of an Hour," a reevaluation of priorities and the expectations of the society becomes necessary. Chopin creates a skillful depiction of the dangers of seeking freedom through isolation of oneself from society and others and the inherent flaw of a society that forces its members to do so.

## **References**

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