

The Story of an Hour

Kate Chopin

About the author

Kate Chopin (1850–1904) was born Katherine O’Flaherty at St Louis in Missouri. Due to her keen insight into women’s issues, many regard her as a precursor of feminist authors of the twentieth century. Writing in the nineteenth century, Chopin was ahead of her time in the way she dealt with issues of feminine sexuality and marital mistrust and betrayal. Her writings record the relentless pursuit of some assertive women to establish their identity in the wake of an oppressive and conservative society. Her writing style incorporates the individual’s point of view, delineating minutely a person’s intimate thoughts and feelings and the tone of her writings reveal a depth of human sympathy. *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897) are two of her important collections of short stories and *At Fault* (1890) and *The Awakening* (1899) are her two notable novels.

About the text

Kate Chopin’s ‘The Story of an Hour’ is a sensitive portrayal of a woman coming to terms with the news of her husband’s death. After her grief expends itself, she feels liberated from the constraints of a matrimony that had not always been to her advantage. It’s not that her husband had been unkind to her, but she had suffered under the ‘blind persistence’ of a ‘powerful will’ attempting to crush her own. Not only does Chopin bemoan the lack of private space and will in traditional relationships, but also poignantly reveals how joy can find simultaneous expression with sorrow.

Knowing that Mrs Mallard was **afflicted with** a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death.

afflicted with: suffering from

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences: **veiled** hints that **revealed** in half concealing. Her husband’s friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when **intelligence** of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard’s name leading the list of ‘killed’. He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to **forestall** any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a **paralyzed** inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild **abandonment**, in her sister’s arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

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. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the **eaves**.

There were 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.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke **repression** and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes,

veiled: (here) attempted to conceal; covert

revealed: exposed

intelligence: information

forestall: anticipate the action of and act in advance in some way

paralyzed: rendered powerless

abandonment: self-surrender; the act of giving up something or oneself

exhaustion: extreme tiredness

aquiver: trembling or vibrating with a slight rapid motion

eaves: overhanging edges of a roof or a thatch

repression: restraint; suppression

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.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too **subtle** and **elusive** to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now 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.

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 the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed **keen** and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the **coursing** blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

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**.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and **gray** and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

reflection: idea arising in the mind; deep reverie

suspension: a temporary inoperative state

subtle: hard to grasp or trace

elusive: difficult to grapple with, baffling; mysterious

tumultuously: agitatedly

slender: slight

vacant: listless; empty-headed

keen: sharp and penetrating

coursing: onward movement

monstrous: outrageously wrong or absurd

exalted: sublime; of a higher order

perception: intuitive recognition

dismiss: to put out of or remove from one's thoughts

trivial: trifling

gray: dull

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 hers 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 make 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.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. 'Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door.'

'Go away. I am not making myself ill.' No; she was drinking in a very **elixir** of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a **shudder** that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's **importunities**. There was a **feverish** triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself **unwittingly** like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and

blind persistence: reckless or obstinate insistence

illumination: (here) sudden realisation

possession: the state of having or owning something

self-assertion: affirmation of one's conscious self

elixir: potion meant to prolong life indefinitely

shudder: a sudden shiver due to repugnance

importunities: persistent requests to do something

feverish: excited; fitful

unwittingly: unintentionally

did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

COMPREHENSION

A. Choose the correct answer from the given options.

- What did Mrs Mallard suffer from?
 - diabetes
 - hypertension
 - heart ailment
- What news did Mrs Mallard receive?
 - that her husband was no more
 - that her father was no more
 - that her mother was no more
- How does Mrs Mallard react when she hears the news?
 - She cries and wails.
 - She sits alone in her room.
 - She asks her sister to join her.
- What is Mrs Mallard first thought after she hears of the demise?
 - that she is alone
 - that she is poor
 - that she is free
- Mrs Mallard had had a marriage.
 - troubled
 - violent
 - happy
- What had Mrs Mallard prayed for before news of the demise?
 - that life should be short
 - that life should be long
 - that life should be joyful
- What happens when Mrs Mallard walks down the stairs?
 - Her sister collapses.
 - Her husband walks in.
 - Her husband's friend screams.

B. Answer the following questions in 80–100 words each.

- How was the news of her husband's death broken to Mrs Mallard? Why was it done in this way?
- How did Mrs Mallard receive the news of her husband's death and what did she do just after that?
- What did she see through the open window, both literally and figuratively?
- What kind of a husband had Brently Mallard been to Mrs Mallard right through his life?
- What caused Mrs Mallard's sudden death at the end?
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