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## Conjured-Up reality shattered: examining the “Uncertain” ideology underlying Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour”

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### Abstract

In studying Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” (1894), stylistic tools seem to advocate and support a seamless reading of the “supposed” ideological undercurrent of the story (i.e. emerging Feminism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century). However, the mainstream interpretation of the story resulting from a stylistic analysis as such can be undermined by unveiling certain textual aporia. The article tries to examine the consequences of a shift from feminist to masculinist conceptual frame of interpretation and to show how the stylistic study of the story does not “objectively” lead to one single interpretation of the text. The study suggests that stylistics can make much of the achievements of other approaches of literary criticism (e.g. deconstruction) to come up with a more comprehensive analysis of literary works.

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### 1. Introduction

Like many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century female writers, Kate Chopin’s works proved to be shocking to her contemporary readers. The cold critical reception of the predominantly male atmosphere of the time made her name and works sink into oblivion until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the continuing rise of feminism thrust her into the limelight again for different reasons. “The Story of an Hour”, the focus of the present article, was first published

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in 1894 in *Vogue* magazine. This, as well as *Century Magazine*, had already refused to print the story. However, when Chopin's collection *Bayou Folk* (1894) was published, the story gained great critical attention.

Later in 1899, Chopin published her belatedly acclaimed novel, *The Awakening*, which was roundly criticized by the critics. The bitter content of the critical reviews was the writer's main source of discouragement who gave up writing in the closing years of her life. She died in 1904, five years after the publication of her novel, what is now considered her masterpiece.

### 1.1. *The Case For Feminism*

"The Story of an Hour" has proved to be one of the favorites of feminist critics since its publication. It has frequently been used as a text to show the domineering nature of the "patriarchal" ideology which has "ruthlessly suppressed" females' rights and identity. Per Seyersted, Chopin's biographer, in his *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969), adopting a biographical approach, relates Chopin's life to her stories. This approach delineates the inextricable links between the historical and biographical background of the writer and her works. In his introduction to *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (1969), Seyersted asserts that the "reason why editors turned down a number of her stories was very likely that her women became more passionate and emancipated" (p. 25). He maintains in his *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (1969) that "The Story of an Hour" is "an extreme example of the theme of self-assertion" (p. 58). Emily Toth in her *Kate Chopin* (1990) describes the story as Chopin's "most radical ... an attack on marriage, on one person's dominance over another" and a "criticism of the ideal of self-sacrifice that still haunted women at the end of the century" (p. 252). In a work published a few years later (1992), Toth comments that "[a]lthough Louise's death is an occasion for deep irony directed at patriarchal blindness about woman's thoughts, Louise dies in the world of her family where she has always sacrificed for others" (p. 24). A more recent study by the same writer entitled *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999) says that "'The Story of an Hour' can be read as the story of Eliza O'Flaherty's [Kate's mother] marriage, the submission of a young woman to someone else's will. It can also be read as a criticism of marriage itself, as an institution that traps women" (p. 10). Ewell (1992) views the story as the protagonist's struggle for self-realization in defiance against "society's decree" for female "selflessness, being for others" (pp. 160, 162). Selina Jamil (2009) relates Mrs. Mallard's final death to the feelings she had repressed during her married life with her husband. Although Jamil admits that there is no evidence in the story pointing to the source of this repression, Mrs Mallard's reaction to her husband's death is enough to persuade the reader that she has been subject to such an unfair way of treatment. This is just a handful of a host of critical views expressed in more or less the same vein showing how the "mainstream" framework of interpretation is essentially a feminist one (See also Bender 1974, Larsson 1981 and Papke 1990).

### 1.2. *The Case Against Feminism*

The forceful argument of some of the staunch supporters of feminist camp is to some extent undermined by the affective stylistic approach adopted by Maddone M. Miner in her essay entitled "Veiled Hints: An Affective Stylist's Reading of Kate Chopin's 'Story of an Hour'". Distancing herself from historical and biographical concerns, the writer draws on a textual analysis of the language of the story and shows how the supposed feminist message can be blurred by the stylistic strategies employed by Chopin to unfold the complexities of the story. However, there are other critics who have come up with well-rounded arguments against the feminist reading. Perhaps one of the most biting indictments against such feminist readings is to be found in Lawrence L. Berkove's essay "Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour'." Taking issue with the feminist critical viewpoint, he asserts that there is "a deeper level of irony in the story" (p. 233). We will return to both arguments after a stylistic reading of the story.

### 1.3. *Stylistics and Objectivity*

Evidently, the two diametrically divergent arguments referred to above raises a number of questions: Which argument reflects the "truth" about the story? Should any of the two interpretations be labelled as "fallacious"?

Can't we possibly come up with the "single best interpretation" of the text? The approach adopted to answer these questions in this paper is the stylistic approach which has been commonly characterized as "rigorous", "replicable", "empirical", "falsifiable" and, at times, "objective" (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010, pp. 22-24). The question now is: To what extent a stylistic study of the story is conducive to an "objective" analysis of the text? Simpson maintains that few stylisticians claim to be "objective" in the strict sense of the word (1993, p. 3). Nørgaard et.al. (2010) maintains that "in spite of stylisticians' concern with rigour, no stylistic analysis can be totally objective, but it will always be influenced by a myriad of factors, such as the stylistician's individual preferences and foci, as well as the linguistic paradigm employed for analysis or the chosen methodology" (p.2). Short and van Peer (1999) believe that an "objective" stylistician tries to be "(a) clear, detailed and open (so that one's position is unambiguous), and (b) ready to change one's mind if the evidence or subsequent counter-argument demands it" (p. 273). Jeffries and McIntyre (2010) build the notions of context and ideology into the equation and thus modify the notion of objectivity: "Objectivity in stylistic analysis does not mean making impassive comments on the meaning of a text without regard to context and ideology" (p. 23). Here we are not going to unravel the paradoxical nature of the statement; rather, what is intended to be emphasized is that stylistic approach cannot entirely rule out the contextual and ideological concerns altogether. In what is to come, the paper, adopting a couple of tools from the stylistic tool box, is to "objectively" approach the text of the story and examine whether they can lead to "the single best interpretation" of the text or not.

## 2. Stylistic Analysis: Focalization, Voice and Transitivity

The first tool we turn to is focalization. There is no single and consistent focalization strategy adopted throughout the story. The heterodiegetic narrator employs an alternative pattern of external, internal and external focalization throughout the narrative (for the dyadic division of focalization into "internal" and "external" see Mieke Bal 1977 and Rimmon-Kenan 1983). Thus, considering the mode of focalization, the story can be divided into three parts: (1) external: the first 169 words (or so) of the story (out of about 1017) where the omniscient narrator-focalizer of the story informs the reader about the way the news of Brently Mallard's supposed death is broken to his wife and how she initially reacts; (2) internal/external: the next 710 words (or so) where the vehicle of focalization is for the most part Mrs. Mallard (i.e. character-focalizer) in her room upstairs. There are also intermittent comments interspersed by the narrator to show the orientation that the reader's judgment is expected to take; (3) external: the final 130 words (or so) of the narrator-focalizer which relate the unexpected arrival of the husband, giving Mrs. Mallard the fatal shock. The duration of the intermediary phase and the resulting deceleration of the pace of the narrative open a window to the hidden recesses of the central character's mind using the most "normal" way of unfolding the inner world of the character: Indirect Thought (IT) presentation (Leech & Short, 2007, p. 276).

Traditionally, the voice of the verb in a sentence reveals the relationship between the action or state of the verb on one hand and the participants such as subject and object on the other. In the active voice the subject is the doer/agent of the action/state while in the passive voice the subject is the target or the undergoer. In a passive sentence the object is *promoted* to subject position while the subject of the active sentence is *demoted* to a dispensable constituent of prepositional phrase. Such *promotions* and *demotions* naturally result in a shift of focus and emphasis of certain structural elements in the sentence. The process of passivization and activation may be employed by the writer/speaker consciously or unconsciously. Katie Wales (2001) refers to active voice as "more usual" and therefore "unmarked". The passive voice, on the contrary, seems to be "marked". The very grammatical choice made by the writer/speaker, regardless of its being conscious or unconscious, has "particular connotations" and can be considered as "ideologically" loaded (p. 288). Simpson and Mayr (2010) also maintain that "the relationship between Actor and Goal can be ideologically significant if agency is backgrounded through the use of the passive voice" (p. 68). We will discuss the ideological significance later. Examples of passive voice in the traditional sense of the term are scattered in different sections of the story<sup>†</sup>:

--Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently

<sup>†</sup> All references to the story are to *Kate Chopin: The Awakening and Other Stories*. Due to the brevity of the text, page references have been omitted.

as possible the news of her husband's death.

- It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received....
- Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion....
- ...there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky.

It should be noted, however, that the passive in the sense referred to above can hardly account for all the sense of inaction and submission experienced by the protagonist. If passivity is defined as the conscious or unconscious tendency to conceal the agency, then there are many more structural strategies which communicate this quality. Perhaps one of the best linguistic features that can account for this feature is the choice of transitivity.

According to Simpson and Mayr (2010) "[t]ransitivity is concerned with the semantic structure of clauses and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom, and how. An analysis of transitivity therefore probes a clause to find out who are the actors, the acted upon and what processes are involved in that action" (p.65). Language as a system offers a panoply of "choices" that can be used by the speakers and writers. In the choices thus offered the system of transitivity plays an important role. "[T]he choice of certain linguistic forms has significance, the roots of which are arguably often ideological" (ibid.). Transitivity has three main components: "process" (represented by verb phrase), "participant(s)" (related to the verb phrase and realized in the form of noun phrases) and, sometimes, "circumstances" (adverbial or prepositional phrases adding further information about the process). Halliday (1994, pp. 106-7) identifies six process types: material, mental, behavioural, verbal, relational and existential. For analyzing the transitivity model in the story the following tentative table can be developed based on the ones suggested by Halliday (1994), Simpson (1993), Simpson and Mayr (2010) and Jeffries and McIntyre (2010). However, as Simpson asserts, "the divisions between these processes will always be more provisional than absolute" (2004, p. 22). The participants are described as "animate" and/or "inanimate" based on the *most typical* usage of the processes described:

<i>Main category</i>	<i>Sub-category</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Abbr.</i>
Material	Action Intention	Animate Actor (+Goal)	MAI
	Action Supervention	Animate Actor (+Goal)	MAS
	Event	Inanimate Actor (+Goal)	MAE
Mental	Perception	Animate Senser +Phenomenon	MP
	Affection	Animate Senser +Phenomenon	MA
	Cognition	Animate Senser +Phenomenon	MC
Behaviourial		Animate Behavior (+ Target)	B
Verbal		Animate Sayer (+Verbiage) (+Receiver)	S
Relational	Intensive		RI
	Possessive	Carrier + Attribute	RP
	Circumstantial		RC
Existential		Animate/Inanimate Existent	E

The degree of agency and active involvement of the subject in the verbal process is not the same in all the listed items. The most intentional process is MAI: e.g. "Mary was riding her bike." In MAS and MAE the process does not entail active involvement of the "actor": e.g. "Mary fell off the bike" [MAS]; "The bike hit the wall"[MAE]. In the mental process, although the sensor perceives [MP] (e.g. "Mary saw her bike"), feels [MA] (e.g. "Mary hates her bike") and understands [MC] (e.g. "Mary realized her mistake"), s/he is not actively or intentionally involved in the process described by the verb. Behaviourial processes lies somewhere between the mental and material processes denoting "psychological and physical behavior and are embodied in activities like *watch, taste, stare, dream, breathe, cough, smile, and laugh*" (Simpson and Mayr, 2010, p. 67). Thus the subject cannot be considered as totally responsible for the action and there is always some degree of "passivity" involved. Considering the degree of agency, the verbal process (i.e. the process of saying) when produced by a human agent is mostly active and intentional. Relational processes are divided into three subcategories: *Intensive* (x=y: e.g. "Mary is wise"); *possessive* (x has y: "Mary has a bike") and *circumstantial* (x is in/on/at y: "Mary is in the garden"). Because

relational processes denote a state of being, they do not normally engage the active or conscious involvement of the subject. Finally, existential processes signify the existence of something or somebody and typically use the verb "to be" or other verbs denoting the same meaning as in "There was an accident" or "Chances still exist for Mary to get her bike repaired." When the real agent of the process is left out in the traditional passive form, the structure still retains some degree of implicit agency because there can always be the possibility of posing one pending question: "By *whom* has the action been done?" But in relational and existential cases, agency is removed altogether and the possibility of asking the question is significantly reduced.

Most of the dominant sense of passivity is conveyed through such uses of the transitivity pattern although it is not the only way to convey this feeling. In the first section, for instance, referring to the cleft structure "It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing", Miner (1982) says that the structure "it was" is a "topicalized instruction that simultaneously focuses upon the agent and objectifies it." It makes the main agent, "her sister, Josephine" suffer "relegation to subordinate clause" (p. 275). The same relegation can be found in another structure in the same section: "It was he [Richards] who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received...." Other structures representing passivity in this section are: RC (e.g. "Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her."); MAE (e.g. "...with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of 'killed'"); MP (e.g. "She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same...."); B (e.g. "She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment,...."). There are a couple of MAI cases which need further elaboration. One of them says that Richards "had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message." Although the verb itself represents intentional action, the tense (i.e. past perfect) has a distal reference to a time prior to the narrative tense (i.e. past). This lack of simultaneity diminishes the force of agency in the subject so it does not have direct bearing on the here and now. The next case of MAI is used with reference to Mrs. Mallard when "she went to her room alone." The verb "went" simply carries her from one location of passivity to the next where still other linguistic ploys enter the equation and further emphasize the sense of reduced agency.

The second section is important in that there is a shift in the method of focalization from external in the previous section to a predominantly internal one with Mrs. Mallard as the focalizer. This provides the reader with the chance to examine the impact of the shocking news on the central character. This section opens with "There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair", an example of the existential process (E). Besides the examples of traditional passive voice mentioned earlier, there are other linguistic choices which finally convey the sense of overwhelmed submission in the character. Examples of such cases are: "Into this [the armchair] she sank..." (MAS); "a sob came up into her throat..." (MAE); "She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees..." (MP); "And yet she had loved him—sometimes" (MP); "She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her..." (MC); "She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long" (B); "It was not a glance of reflection" (RI); "...a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely" (RP).

To intensify the passivity described in a more general sense in this section, in a good number of sentences the action is attributed not to Mrs. Mallard herself but to non-human agents especially different parts of her body as if they were functioning independently: "... a sob came up into her throat and shook her" instead of *She started crying* [even this Behaviourial process is partly mental hence "passive!"]; "[her] gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky" instead of *She was gazing at one of those patches of blue sky*; "... a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips " instead of *She whispered through her slightly parted lips*; etc.

There are also a limited number of MAI cases in this section, however. Examining them shows that in some of them the action does not involve active and intentional involvement of the agent (e.g. "She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless...." / "There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully") or they may appear in a nominalized form (e.g. "It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought"). There are also cases when the natural force of such a verb is mitigated by other semantic elements of the co-text: "... she was striving to beat it back with her will--as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been", implying that she was not perhaps all that successful in doing so.

However, in a moment of heightened elation there is apparently a shift in the passage: "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." "But" seems to strike the contrasting note. Used either literally or metaphorically, the verbs "opened" and "spread" seem to introduce a shift in the tone of the story from "passive" to "active". Stylistically, the MAI processes represented by these words prepare us to witness a change in the character. This naturally leads to the moment of "illumination" and culminates in her exclamatory remark: "Free! Body and soul free!" It is exactly in this part of the story that feminist critics detect the much-desired ray of hope. In the same vein, the following paragraph shows Josephine imploring Louise to open the door. Her answer especially the imperative structure "Go away" clearly delineates that the energy is building up in her: "Go away. I am not making myself ill."

As may be expected the third section represents more signs of the newly acquired energy. In this relatively short part (about 130 words), there are more examples of MAI as compared to the first and the second sections: "She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities." We are subsequently told "She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs." All the underlined verbs have Mrs. Mallard as their agent who reveals a sudden change in her mood and character. A few lines later we are informed that "Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey." The shift in focalization disengages one's attention from Mrs. Mallard as the "center of consciousness" and brings the reader closer for a short time to Mr. Mallard's perspective; however, one can hardly consider him as a new focalizer. As we noted earlier the focalization in the final leg of the story is basically external. The narrator is completely distanced from the characters in the final sentence: "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease-- of joy that kills."

### *2.1. Argument vs. Counterargument: Irony*

The detached stance adopted by the narrator is potentially a rich source for irony. For Leech and Short (2007) irony is "a double significance which arises from the contrast in values associated with two different points of view" (p. 223). Adopting the common feminist framework of analysis, the irony points to the incongruity discerned between Mrs. Mallard's emerging hope for freedom on one hand and her sudden death and how it is interpreted by the predominantly patriarchal society on the other. The feminist critic is ready to blame the society for trampling on the women's rights within a patriarchal institution called marriage. This is what we can call the argument or the mainstream reading of the short story. Kate Chopin's life and oeuvre bear witness to this kind of interpretation and can relevantly be referenced to substantiate the claim.

However, if we change the framework of analysis and adopt a "masculinist" stance instead, the text seems to lend itself equally well to this mode of reading which can be termed as the counterargument. Perhaps one of the best examples of this framework of interpretation is Lawrence Berkove's essay entitled "Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour'". The story opens with a sentence in which the poor health condition of the character is described: "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." To Berkove, the phraseology of this part of the sentence is vague. Miner asks the reason why Chopin has modified Mrs. Mallard's heart trouble with the indefinite article "a". He then goes on to account for this deviation: "The indefinite article implies that Mrs. Mallard suffers from a particular kind of heart trouble, and yet, because we are not told which kind, our desire for more knowledge is frustrated at the same time that we learn that this information does exist" (p. 275). Apart from the more obvious reference to her physical condition, the problem can be interpreted in two diametrically different ways: the feminist reading may consider it to be the result of the troubled relationship between the couple while the masculinist framework may consider it to be the cause of it. Her reaction to her husband's death, "She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance", can be a foreshadowing to her "abnormal" sense of pleasure experienced while indulging herself in the sweet dreams of her imminent freedom. In the absence of enough textual evidence to account for this antipathy, one is naturally and logically driven to doubt the legitimacy of the expressed feelings. Mrs. Mallard's description of her husband's hands as "kind" and "tender" and his "face that had never looked save with love upon her" make the reader suspect the mental and emotional sanity of the wife. The suspicion further grows when her emotion towards her husband is described: "And yet she had loved him--sometimes. Often she had not." The reader is not provided with sufficient reason why the central character should feel the way she does. Can't it be because of the same emotional paralysis

symbolized, and not perhaps noticed, in her heart trouble? Berkove also detects traces of selfishness in the following sentence: "But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely." To him, "absolutely" is a loaded word, further evidence of her extreme and unrealistic egotism. The joy that Louise feels in the thought of absolute possession of future years may indeed qualify as "monstrous" (p. 235). Louise suspects that the kind of elation experienced as a result of her husband's death can be "monstrous"; however, the "exalted perception" enables "her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial." The dismissal of the warning does not totally do away with the lingering presence of the feeling. Negating or dismissing a possibility, as Jeffries asserts, "has the capacity to construct in the reader/hearer's mind a version of the situation which is clearly at odds with the one being otherwise confirmed in the text concerned" (p. 106). This normally has a range of potential ideological effects. One is invited to consider the contrasting possibilities directly negated in the passage and ponder over the legitimacy of the claim made by the negated form. Pragmatically the dismissal of the suggestion as trivial conjures up the contrasting possibility: the profound significance of the issue raised.

### 3. Conclusion

Depending on whether you adopt the argument or counterargument as the framework of your interpretation, the closing statement of the story can be interpreted differently: "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease-- of joy that kills." The mainstream feminist reading of the statement directs the edge of criticism against the patriarchal system (represented by "the doctors" here) which fails to understand the true cause of Mrs. Mallard's death and attributes it to a physical problem (i.e. "heart disease" without "a" here!). On the contrary, within the masculinist framework, the butt of the irony turns out to be not the patriarchal system but Mrs. Mallard herself. Based on the speculations in the counterargument, the central character is the victim of her own egotism and ill-intention. It seems that textual evidence can sufficiently support both interpretations regardless of the authorial intention.

It has been reasonably argued that "no use of language is considered truly neutral, objective and value-free" (Simpson, 1993, p. 7); however, the role of the reader and the ideological framework s/he adopts in reading the text can hardly be ignored in interpreting the textual evidence. Michael Toolan maintains that stylistics points to a "way" of reading the text, a way which is "a confessedly partial or oriented act of intervention, a reading which is strategic, as all readings necessarily are" (1990, p. 11).

Stylistic analysis of Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" reveals that there can be no "single best interpretation" in reading what Roland Barthes calls a "writerly" text. The story has proved to be challengingly "open" to opposing interpretations when divers elements such as text, co-text, context and readers involved in "creating" the meaning are taken into account.

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