The Story of an Hour Study Guide

The Story of an Hour by Kate Chopin

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Introduction

Although Kate Chopin is regarded as an important writer today, her reputation has not always been so strong. Known primarily as a Southern regionalist writer, or "local colorist" during her lifetime, Chopin's stories and novels shocked many of her nineteenth-century readers. In the 1960s, with the rise of the feminist movement, critics rediscovered Chopin. "The Story of an Hour," first published in 1894 in *Vogue* magazine, is one of Chopin's briefest and most widely read stories. Louise Mallard's response to the news that her husband has been killed and her demise upon his appearance, exemplifies Chopin's beliefs regarding women's roles in marriage and feminine identity. The story was initially rejected by *Century* magazine, and by *Vogue* as well, and it was published only after Chopin's collection *Bayou Folk* garnered critical acclaim.

Author Biography

Kate Chopin was born in St. Louis in 1851. Her parents, Thomas and Eliza O'Flaherty, were wealthy, slave-owning Catholics who held a prominent position in their community. When Chopin was four, her father died in a train accident, and she was raised by her French-Creole mother and great-grandmother. At seventeen, she graduated from the Academy of the Sacred Heart. Two years later, in 1870, she married Oscar Chopin, a Louisiana businessman of French-Creole descent. In New Orleans, where she and her husband lived until 1879, Chopin was at the center of Southern aristocratic social life. During this period, she bore six children. In 1879, when Oscar's business failed, the family moved to Cloutierville, where Oscar's family owned a farm and a plantation store. When Oscar died in 1882, Chopin was left with six children and meager financial resources. The family moved back to St. Louis in 1884.

At the age of thirty-nine, Chopin began writing poetry and fiction. Her early short stories were published in magazines in St. Louis and New Orleans, and were influenced by writers such as Guy de Maupassant and Moliere. Most of her stories are set in Louisiana, and they portray characters as diverse as Southern belles, Arcadians and Creoles, mulattos and blacks. The stories center around the themes of class relations, relationships between men and women, and feminine sexuality. In the 1890s, Chopin began receiving national attention for her fiction. She published *Bayou Folk* in 1894, and *A Night in Acadie*, which contains her often anthologized short story "The Story of an Hour," in 1897. The success of these two collections made Chopin financially independent and nationally known as a major author. In 1899, Chopin published *The Awakening*, now regarded as her masterpiece. The novel's frank treatment of an independent woman who, after an extramarital affair and a sexual "awakening," commits suicide rather than conform to society's mores, provoked outrage among readers and critics. The novel was banned in St. Louis and elsewhere. As a result of the hostile reception to the novel and difficulties with publishers, Chopin wrote very little at the end of her life. Five years after the publication of *The Awakening*, Chopin died of a stroke in St. Louis on August 22, 1904.

Plot Summary

Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is the story of an hour in the life of Mrs. Louise Mallard, a young woman whose wrinkles portray "repression" and "strength.1' As the story begins, the narrator reveals that Mrs. Mallard has "heart trouble." Her sister Josephine and her husband's friend Richards have come to her after hearing of a railroad disaster that has resulted in the death of Mr. Mallard. Both are concerned that the news will make Mrs. Mallard ill and Josephine takes great care to tell her the news as cautiously as she is able.

Mrs. Mallard reacts to the news with "sudden, wild abandonment" and locks herself in her bedroom. In the solitude of her room Mrs. Mallard understands the fundamental change taking place in her life. She sits in a chair, no longer crying, looking out the window at the "new spring life." She "suspend[s] intelligent thought" and fearfully waits for a "subtle and elusive" idea to "possess her." She begins to comprehend that she is joyful that her husband is dead, but she attempts to suppress the thought.

Once Mrs. Mallard accepts the feeling, even though she knows that her husband had really loved her, she is ecstatic that she will never have to bend her will to his again. Now that her husband is dead, she will be free to assert herself in ways she never before dreamed while he was alive. She recognizes that she had loved her husband sometimes, but that now she would be "Free! Body and soul free!" She begins to look forward to the rest of her life when just the day before she shuddered at the thought of it.

Mrs. Mallard leaves her room and rejoins her sister who has been outside the door worrying. She carries herself "like a goddess of Victory" as she joins her sister to return downstairs where Richards still waits. On their way down the stairs, they hear the front door open and see Mr. Mallard walk in. He had been no where near the accident scene. The short story ends with the abrupt death of Mrs. Mallard, whose heart gives out. Her doctors explain that she died "of joy that kills."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Mrs. Louise Mallard had heart trouble, so she had to be told as gently as possible that her husband had died. Her sister, Josephine, broke the difficult news, as her husband's friend, Richards, sat nearby. Richards was the one who first learned about Brently Mallard's death. He had been in a newspaper office when news of the disaster was received. Brently's name was at the top of the list of those killed. Richards had quickly gone to the Mallards' house because he was afraid that someone else might tell Mrs. Mallard about the death in a way that would shock her weak heart.

Upon hearing that her husband was dead, Mrs. Mallard immediately began to cry in her sister's arms. She then went alone to her room, refusing to allow anyone to go with her. Once alone, she sat in armchair, looking out the window. The news of Brently's death had left her physically exhausted. Mrs. Mallard looked at the open square in front of her home. She noticed the wonderful smell of fresh rain in the air and the sounds of birds singing their songs. She sat, occasionally sobbing. As time passed, Mrs. Mallard began to feel an emotion coming over her that she could not identify. It seemed be coming out of the sky and from the sounds and smells drifting through the window. She suddenly began to feel her chest rising. Her pulse began to beat faster and blood coursed through her body, warming her. "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!'" She did not question whether the joy was pure or monstrous. She immediately decided it did not matter.

She thought that she would cry when she saw her husband's hands folded in his casket. He had always looked at her with love and it would be difficult to see his dead body. However, she could look past the difficult funeral and see the years to come. She opened her arms to welcome the rest of her life. For the first time, she would be in charge of her own existence. No other person would be able to make decisions that affected her or impose their will upon her. She thought about the way men and women often believe they have a right to impose their wishes on someone else. In an instant, it occurred to Mrs. Mallard that bending another person's will is wrong, whether the intention behind the act is cruel or kind.

Mrs. Mallard thought again that she had sometimes loved her husband. Yet, often she did not love him. Then it occurred to her that whether or not she had loved him no longer mattered. Love was small compared to the new revelation that she would be free for the rest of her days. The urge to be free struck her as the strongest impulse she had ever experienced.

Josephine crouched outside of the bedroom door, talking into the keyhole. She begged Louise to open the door. She was afraid her mourning sister would make herself sick. Louise refused, saying she would not make herself ill. In fact, Louise realized she was

drinking in an "elixir of life" through the window. She sat there, thinking about all of the years that would follow. Only the day before, she had wished for a short life. Now, she wanted her life to extend for as long as possible so she could enjoy her new freedom.

Finally, she decided to go to her sister. She walked out of the room triumphantly and put her arms around her sister's waist. They walked downstairs together where Richards was waiting. As they descended, someone was unlocking the front door. Brently Mallard walked in, carrying his bag and an umbrella. He had not been anywhere near the scene of the accident. In fact, he did not even know that an accident had occurred. Josephine cried out and Richards tried to keep Mr. Mallard's wife from seeing her husband. However, Richards acted too late. She instantly died. The doctors diagnosed it as heart disease: "of joy that kills."

Analysis

Kate Chopin started "The Story of an Hour" with immediate, important foreshadowing of the story's climax. With the first sentence, the reader learns that Louise has heart trouble and may not be able to withstand shock or surprise.

It is can also be suggested that Louise's heart problems go much deeper than her physical condition. Her heart problems symbolize her heartbreak over her role in life. Chopin also uses Louise's supposed condition to illustrate the way nineteenth century society treated women as weak beings who must be protected from the harsh realities of life. By carefully wording the explanation of her husband's death, Richards and Josephine treat Louise as a child, not an independent adult.

Louise's immediate reaction to her husband's death foreshadows the joy she will feel a short time later. Upon hearing about the deadly accident, Louise begins to weep with "wild abandonment." The reader is told her reactions are not typical of a woman who has just lost her husband. She does not feel paralyzed or unable to accept his fate. She skips the step of denial in the normal mourning process. Therefore, from almost the start, the reader is given a clue that Louise has wanted to free herself from her marriage. She is quickly willing to abandon her role as wife.

After learning of his death, Louise looses the blank stare and look of terror that had been in her eyes. Ironically, her husband's death makes her to feel alive for the first time. This is further demonstrated in the imagery in the story, which certainly does not reflect the devastation usually experienced at the loss of a loved one. Chopin describes the beautiful transformation from winter to spring, which seems out of place at first. It soon becomes apparent that the new season symbolizes the transformation of Louise's character. The open widow is a symbol of the possibilities that are suddenly available to her. The story's springtime setting also symbolizes her rebirth as an independent person. The rain, the birds and the peddler are all signs of the coming spring, signifying her awaking life.

It is important to note that Louise is not happy that her husband has died. After all, Chopin depicts Brently as generally loving and she gives no indication that Louise is coldhearted or evil. It is not the death that makes Louise exhilarated, but the realization of what his death will mean to the rest of her life. By presenting Brently as a decent man, Chopin shows that even supposedly happy marriages in her era forced women to lose their identity.

For years, Louise had been repressed by her husband, losing her sense of identity. Bending to her husband's will had left her so depressed that she longed for a short life. However, despite her longing for death, Louise seemed to have never fully realized the depth of her despair. It is not until she learns of Brently's passing that she thinks about the toll the marriage has taken on her.

His death allows her to ponder not just her own life, but also the position of women in general. She considers the meaning of free will, and how people feel they have the right to impose their beliefs on others. She knows her husband never meant to be cruel and she does not blame him for making her unhappy. He simply dominated her in a way society expected men to control their wives. However, Louise also realizes that even though her husband's actions may have been common, they were not justifiable. She sees that intentions, whether cruel or kind, do not matter. Bending someone's will is always a crime. With this revelation, Chopin delivers a harsh judgment on society and the oppression of women.

Although "The Story of an Hour" is very short, Chopin manages to pack the narrative with a lot of irony. For instance, when Louise begins to think about Brently's death, her heart begins to race and her pulse quickens. Because she has heart problems, the reader may think that she is experiencing a detrimental physical reaction to the loss. In truth, Louise is coming to life, becoming more alive and stronger than ever. When Josephine begs Louise to come out of the bedroom, she is worried that Louise cannot handle the grief and will make herself ill. She does not realize that Louise's health has improved because of his death. Instead of thinking about life as a widow, Louise ironically sees her future as an endless stream of joyful spring and summer days. Where she once hoped for a short life, she now prays that her life will be long.

The major irony of the story comes in the surprise twist of fate at the climatic end. Louise thought her freedom would come from her husband's death. Instead, she gains freedom from his domination only in her own death. The joyful, long life she imagined lasted for just an hour. However, in that short time she experienced how it felt to be an independent person, unfettered by the constraints of societal oppression. Even more ironic is that the doctors surmised she died because she was overcome with joy at seeing her husband alive. Nothing could be further from the truth. She died upon learning that her new freedom had ended before it could really begin.

It is important to note that Louise's first name is only revealed to the reader when Josephine calls to her through the keyhole. Until that point, she is referred to as "Mrs. Mallard" or simply "she." This is not an accident of narrative. Chopin is showing that while she was married, Louise had ceased to exist as her own person. Her name

"Louise" is returned to her upon his death. However, as Richards sees Brently return, she is no longer called "Louise" and is now referred to as "his wife." Louise dies as Brently's possession.

Despite the illusions of spring and Louise's excitement, this story is full of tragedy. Chopin makes it clear that women in the nineteenth century who sought self-identity and freedom could ultimately only experience defeat. The realization that she is not free is what kills Louise. The doctors may think she died feeling happy, but the readers know she died of grief. Chopin's short story is therefore more than a clever tale of irony. It is a condemnation of marriage, as it existed in her era. For Louise, freedom through death was preferable to a life of subservience.

Characters

Josephine

Josephine is Mrs. Mallard's sister. It is Josephine who tells Mrs. Mallard of her husband's death and who implores Louise to let her into the room after she has shut herself inside. Josephine, a woman who embodies the feminine ideal, assumes that Louise is suffering terribly from the news, not knowing her sister is actually overjoyed with the prospect of being a widow.

Louise

See Mrs. Mallard

Brently Mallard

Brently Mallard, Mrs. Mallard's husband, is assumed dead after a railroad disaster. When he reappears at the front door, the shock causes Mrs. Mallard's death.

Mrs. Mallard

In the beginning of the story Mrs, Mallard is known simply by her married name. A wife who suffers from "heart trouble," she is described as "young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength." When Mrs. Mallard learns of her husband's death, she becomes "Louise," a woman aware of her own desires, enjoying the prospect of being freed from the confines of marriage. Louise dies of a "joy that kills" when her husband reappears. Her character represents feminine individuality; she is a strong-willed, independent woman excited by the prospect of beginning her life again after the reported demise of her husband.

Themes

Identity and Selfhood

Chopin deals with the issues of female self-discovery and identity in "The Story of an Hour." After Mrs. Mallard learns of her husband's death, she is initially overcome with grief. But quickly she begins to feel a previously unknown sense of freedom and relief. At first, she is frightened of her own awakening: "There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully." Her own feelings come upon her, possessing her. When she first utters the words "free, free, free!" she is described as having "abandoned herself." But after she speaks these words, she relaxes and gains more control over herself. As she imagines life without her husband, she embraces visions of the future. She realizes that whether or not she had loved him was less important than "this possession of self-assertion" she now feels. The happiness Louise gains by this recognition of selfhood is so strong that, when she realizes that her husband is in fact alive, she immediately collapses. Chopin suggests that Louise could not bear to abandon her newfound freedom and return to life with her husband, where she would be required to bend her will to his.

Role of Women in Marriage

Intimately connected with the theme of identity and selfhood is the theme of the role of women in marriage. Mrs. Mallard is known in the beginning of the story only as a wife; very little is revealed concerning Mr. and Mrs. Mallard's relationship. Even Louise is unsure whether or not they had been happily married: "And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter!" Thus, the specifics of the relationship matter less than the conventions of marriage in general. Louise is ecstatic when she realizes that "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." Whether one is acting out of love or not, Chopin seems to be making a comment on nineteenth-century marriages, which granted one person—the man—right to own and dominate another—the woman. This theme, unpopular in an era when women were not even allowed to vote, is examined in many of Chopin's other works, most notably *The Awakening*.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from a detached, third-person limited point of view. The reader identifies with Louise, the only character whose thoughts are accessible. At the beginning of the story, Louise is incapable of reflecting on her own experience. As Louise becomes conscious of her situation and emotions, the reader gains access to her thinking which reveals her character. When she goes back downstairs, the reader is quickly cut off from her thoughts. Thus Chopin skillfully manipulates the narrative point of view to underscore the story's theme.

Setting

The setting of "The Story of an Hour" is unspecified. It takes place in the Mallard's house, but Chopin does not offer many clues as to where or when the action takes place. This generic setting is consistent with the story's thematic focus on the general, commonly accepted views of the appropriate roles for women in society. Given Chopin's other works and the concerns she expresses about women's role in marriage in this story and in other writings, the reader can assume that the story takes place during Chopin's lifetime, the late nineteenth century. However, Chopin was known for being a local colorist, a writer who focuses on a particular people in a particular locale. In Chopin's case, her stories are usually set among the Cajun and Creole societies in Louisiana. For this reason, "The Story of an Hour" is usually assumed to take place in Louisiana.

Irony

Chopin uses irony, a technique that reveals the distance between what appears to be true and what is actually true, to conclude her story. In "The Story of an Hour," there is incongruity between what is understood to be true by the characters within the drama and what is understood by the reader. What killed Mrs. Mallard? While Brently Mallard, Richards, Josephine, and the doctors might believe her weak heart gave out upon such sudden happiness, readers are led to suspect that sudden grief killed her. At the story's conclusion, the story's first line, "Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble," becomes ironic—referring to Mrs. Mallard's spiritual condition and not to a medical condition. The story's concluding line, she died "from the joy that kills," is also ironic.

Symbolism

The story is set during spring, and Louise's "awakening" is symbolized by the rebirth of nature. Through her bedroom window, Louise sees nature, like herself, "all acquiver with

the new spring life." The internal changes taking place within Louise are mirrored by what she views— when she is distraught with grief, rain falls, and when she realizes her freedom, the skies clear up. What occurs outside the window parallels what is occurring to Louise.

Historical Context

"The Story of an Hour" was published in 1894, an era in which many social and cultural questions occupied Americans' minds. One of these, referred to as the "Woman Question," involved which roles were acceptable for women to assume in society. Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1892) had further incited this controversy. Darwin's theory of evolution was used by both sides of the issue; some argued the theory supported female self-assertion and independence, others felt the theory proved that motherhood should be the primary role of a woman in society.

Although women were not granted the right to vote until 1920, the struggle for their enfranchisement began in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention in New York state. The passage of the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution, granting enfranchisement to black men, was passed in 1869. Several prominent feminists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, refused to support the amendment because it denied women the vote. Other suffragists argued that the enfranchisement of women would soon follow black enfranchisement. In 1890, these two factions united in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). That year, Wyoming became the first state to grant women the vote. While the suffrage movement sought reform, mainstream Victorian culture regarded the self-sacrificing wife, dependent on her husband and devoted to her children, as the ideal of femininity.

Critical Overview

A popular writer during her lifetime, Chopin is best known today for her psychological novel *The Awakening*. Chopin's depiction of female self-assertion was regarded as immoral. When Chopin submitted "The Story of an Hour" to *Century* magazine, it was rejected. After Chopin's collection of short stories, *Bayou Folk* garnered critical acclaim, *Vogue* published the story. According to Barbara C. Ewell in her book, Kate Chopin, the editor of *Century*, R. W. Gilder, rejected the manuscript because of its feminist message. The magazine had been publishing anti-suffragist articles during this period and upheld a vision of women as selfless wives and mothers.

Since the 1960s, with the rise of the feminist movement, Chopin's fiction, including "The Story of an Hour," has been rediscovered and is now acclaimed for precisely the reasons it was denounced during her lifetime. Per Seyersted, in *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, extols the story's "theme of self-assertion." Burt Bender, in his essay "Kate Chopin's Lyrical Short Stories," argues that the story is a "shockingly unorthodox" expression of the inequities of marriage. Other critics, while agreeing that the story is bold and unconventional, qualify the view that Louise becomes an independent, assertive woman during the hour in which the story takes place. In *Verging on the Abyss: The Social Fiction of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton*, Mary E. Papke considers the darker aspects of Chopin's vision of feminine identity. For Papke, the ending of the story implies that should a woman glimpse herself as an individual and then be denied the chance to live freely, the result will be death, or the dissolution of that new identity. Unless the world changes, Papke argues, Chopin suggests that there is no hope for independent, unconventional women to survive in society.

In addition to her treatment of social issues, "The Story of an Hour" has been heralded for its formal strengths. Chopin's use of irony and ambiguity have been extolled by many critics. Other critics find fault in some of the formal aspects of the story. In an essay published in the *The Markham Review*, Madonne M. Miner analyzes how readers respond to the organization of words in the story. Focusing on Chopin's use of the passive voice, Miner argues that the story's themes of autonomy and identity are undermined by its grammatical structure. For instance, Miner points out that Louise does not possess but is "possessed by" her impulses. Many of the story's key sentences, including the first one, are written in the passive voice. For Miner, although the reader may wish to identify with Louise's possession of self, the language of the story keeps the reader distanced.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Jennifer Hicks is director of the Academic Support and Writing Assessment program at Massachusetts Bay Community College. In the following essay, she discusses the theme of female self-assertion as it relates to "The Story of an Hour,"

In Donald F. Larsson's entry on Kate Chopin in *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*, we learn that "consistently ... strong-willed, independent heroines ... [who] cast a skeptical eye on the institution of marriage" are very characteristic of her stories. In "The Story of an Hour," we do not so much see as intuit Mrs. Mallard's skeptical eye. Certainly, we are told of the joy she feels with the freedom she finds in her husband's death, but we are not specifically told that she is skeptical of marriage in general. Indeed, if we take the last line of the story literally, we would understand that Mrs. Mallard was so enamored of her marriage to her husband that she died from the excitement of knowing he was still alive. Yet, obviously, Chopin is engaging in some heavy handed irony. Mrs. Mallard, the young "repressed" woman who began to look at her widowhood as a rebirth, similar to the "new spring" outside her window, did not die from such excitement. She expired from "a heart problem"— an instantaneous knowledge that her momentary glimpse into a "life she would live for herself," a "life that might be long," was not to be.

Some of Chopin's short stories were rejected for publication on moral grounds, for editors perceived in them an unseemly interest in female self-assertion and sexual liberation. Per Seyersted, Chopin's biographer, writes in his introduction to *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, Volume 1, that the "reason why editors turned down a number of her stories was very likely that her women became more passionate and emancipated." Given that "The Story of an Hour" was published in 1894, several years after it was written, we can comprehend the importance of moral grounds as a basis for rejection. Marriage was considered a sacred institution. Divorce was quite rare in the 1800s and if one was to occur, men were automatically given legal control of all property and children. Even the constitutional amendments of 1868 and 1870, granting rights of citizenship and voting, gave these rights to African-Americans not women. Women were not granted the right to vote in political elections until 1920. Obviously then, a female writer who wrote of women wanting independence would not be received very highly, especially one who wrote of a woman rejoicing in the death of her husband. The fact that she pays for her elation with her life at the end of the story is not enough to redeem either the character or the author.

Although "The Story of an Hour" is brief, Chopin demonstrates her skills as a writer in several ways. Fred Lewis Pattee says in *A History of American Literature Since 1870*, that the strength of Chopin's work comes from "what may be described as a native aptitude for narration amounting almost to genius." Larsson notes her remarkable ability to "convey character and setting simply yet completely." All of these qualities are evidenced in "The Story of an Hour."

The story opens with the narrator telling us that Mrs. Mallard has "a heart trouble." A quick reading of the phrase might mislead the reader into thinking that Mrs. Mallard,

therefore, has heart disease. Yet Chopin chose her phrase with care. She wants her readers to know that Mrs. Mallard has a very specific condition that interferes with the workings of her heart. Later, when we see Mrs. Mallard "warmed and relaxed," we realize that the problem with her heart is that her marriage has not allowed her to "live for herself."

Another instance of Chopin's gift of narration enables the reader to understand that what is being told is more than a tale. This illustration involves Mrs. Mallard's reaction to the news of her husband's death: "She did not hear the story as many women would have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance." If a reader had paused at this sentence, he or she might have wondered what there was in the marriage that would keep Mrs. Mallard from becoming prostrate with grief. The reader might have questioned why Mrs. Mallard was not consumed with wondering how she would go on with her life without her husband. Yet, in the very next line we see that she is assuredly grieving as she cries with "wild abandonment." We find ourselves a bit surprised at this point. Surely a woman in a troubled marriage would not carry on in such a manner. In this instant, Chopin has hinted that a problem exists, but also that Mrs. Mallard is not "paralyzed" by the significance that she is alone. Chopin elaborates upon this when the narrator says that Mrs. Mallard "would have no one follow her." While the implication is that she would have no one follow her to her room, the reader wonders in hindsight whether Mrs. Mallard might have meant also that she would have no one interfere with her life again.

It is also easy to come to the same conclusion as Larsson does, that the setting is simple but definitely complete. The breaking of the news takes place in an unspecified room within the Mallard's house. The revelation of freedom occurs in the bedroom, and Mrs. Mallard's demise occurs on the stairway leading to the front door that her husband opened. Chopin gives us no details about the stairway or the room in which we first meet Mrs. Mallard. Although news of death and death itself occur in these areas and are certainly among a few of life's most tragic and momentous events, the setting could be anywhere. Conversely, we are inundated, or overwhelmed, with details in the bedroom where Mrs. Mallard becomes her own person. We see the "comfortable, roomy armchair" in which she sits with "her head thrown back upon the cushion." We see the "tops of trees... aquiver with new spring life" that we can hear and smell from her window.

Some critics argue that Chopin wisely tempers the emotional elements inherent in Mrs. Mallard's situation. Although the emotion in Mrs. Mallard's bedroom is indisputable, the "suspension of intelligent thought" removes from the reader the need to share in the widow's grief and instead allows him or her to remain an onlooker, as eager as Mrs. Mallard to see "what was approaching to possess her." Other critics credit Chopin's readings of Charles Darwin and other scientists who prescribed to the "survival of the fittest" theory as the impetus, or driving force, behind her questioning of contemporary mores and the constraints placed upon women. In "The Story of an Hour" Chopin implicitly questions the institution of marriage, perhaps as a by-product or her scientific questioning of mores, but she does so in a cleverly tempered way.

Chopin, fatherless at four, was certainly a product of her Creole heritage, and was strongly influenced by her mother and her maternal grandmother. Perhaps it is because she grew up in a female-dominated environment that she was not a stereotypical product of her times and so could not conform to socially acceptable themes in her writing. Chopin even went so far as to assume the managerial role of her husband's business after he died in 1883. This behavior, in addition to her fascination with scientific principles, her upbringing, and her penchant for feminist characters would seem to indicate that individuality, freedom, and joy were as important to Chopin as they are to the characters in her stories. Yet it appears to be as difficult for critics to agree on Chopin's view of her own life as it is for them to accept the heroines of her stories. Per Seyersted believes that Chopin enjoyed "living alone as an independent writer," but other critics have argued that Chopin was happily married and bore little resemblance to the characters in her stories.

Perhaps Larsson's analysis of Chopin in *Critical Survey of Short Fiction* best sums up the importance of Chopin to present-day readers. He writes: "Her concern with women's place in society and in marriage, her refusal to mix guilt with sexuality, and her narrative stance of sympathetic detachment make her as relevant to modern readers as her marked ability to convey character and setting." It can be inspiring to know that more than a century ago, women were not necessarily so different from what they are today. Certainly, woman have experienced and benefited from many newer technologies and changing attitudes, but, for a woman, finding her way in life can still present temporary difficulties. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" illustrates many of these issues.

Source: Jennifer Hicks, for Short Stones for Students, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following portion of a chapter from a longer work, Papke interprets ['The Story of an Hour" as a story that warns against the consequences of what happens when "the individual changes and not the world."

....' "The Story of an Hour," for instance, details a very ordinary reality and conscientiously analyzes that moment in a woman's life when the boundaries of the accepted everyday world are suddenly shattered and the process of self-consciousness begins. Louise Mallard, dutiful wife and true woman, is gently told that her husband has been killed in a train accident. Her response is atypical, however, and that is the subject of the story: what Louise thinks and feels as she finds herself thrust into solitude and self-contemplation for the first time.

Louise appears in the opening as the frail, genteel, devoted wife of a prosperous businessman; she is at first only named as such: Mrs. Mallard. However, her first response to the tragedy indicates a second Louise nestling within that social shell: "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." Chopin thus implies that perhaps some part of Louise readily accepts the news. She also intimates that since Louise unconsciously chooses to enfold herself in a female embrace and not in the arms of the male friend who tells her of Mallard's death, Louise has already turned to a female world, one in which she is central. It is in the mid-section of the story, set in Louise's room, that Louise and Chopin's reader explore and come to understand reaction and potential action, social self—Mrs. Mallard—and private, female self—Louise.

Louise sits before an open window at first thinking nothing but merely letting impressions of the outer and inner worlds wash over her. She is physically and spiritually depleted but is still sensuously receptive. She sees the "new spring life" in budding trees, smells rain, hears human and animal songs as well as a man "crying his wares." She is like both a tired child dreaming a sad dream and a young woman self-restrained but with hidden strengths. She is yet Mrs. Mallard.

As she sits in "a suspension of intelligent thought," she feels something unnameable coming to her through her senses. It is frightening because it is not of her true womanhood world; it reaches to her from the larger world outside and would "possess her." the unnameable is, of course, her self-consciousness that is embraced once she names her experience as emancipation and not destitution: "she said it over and over under her breath: 'free, free, free!'... Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood wanned and relaxed every inch of her body." It is at this point that she begins to think, the point at which she is reborn through and in her body, an experience analogous to that of Edna PontelUer in *The Awakening*.

Louise then immediately recognizes her two selves and comprehends how each will co-exist, the old finally giving way to the one new self. Mrs. Mallard will grieve for the

husband who had loved her, but Louise will eventually revel in the "monstrous joy" of self-fulfillment, beyond ideological strictures and the repressive effects of love:

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 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!

It is only after Louise embraces this new consciousness, her sense of personal and spiritual freedom in a new world, that she is named as female self by her sister. This is no doubt ironic since her sister only unconsciously recognizes her; she can have little idea of the revolution that has taken place in Louise's own room. Yet Chopin does not allow simple Utopian endings, and Louise's sister's intrusion into Louise's world also prefigures the abrupt end to her "drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window."

Louise leaves her room and descends again into her past world. Though she carries herself "like a goddess of Victory" and has transcended the boundaries of her past self, she is not armed for the lethal intrusion of the past world through her front door. Brently Mallard unlocks his door and enters unharmed. His return from the dead kills Louise, and Chopin's conclusion is the critical and caustic remark that all believed "she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills."

It is easy for the reader to be overwhelmed by the pathos of the story, a natural response since the reader comes to consciousness of the text just as Louise awakens to self-consciousness. Chopin offers the reader only that one point of identification—Louise, whose powers of reflection have been repressed, suddenly shocked into being, and then brutally cut off. It is a disorienting reading experience to be cut off as well after being awakened to Louise's new self-possibilities. It is also beyond irony to be left at the conclusion with the knowledge that only Louise and the reader perceived the earlier "death" of the true woman Mrs. Mallard; and that what murdered her was, indeed, a monstrous joy, the birth of individual self, and the erasure of that joy when her husband and, necessarily, her old self returned. Far from being a melodramatic ending, the conclusion both informs and warns: should a woman see the real world and her individual self within it only to be denied the right to live out that vision, then in her way lies non-sense, self-division, and dissolution. Chopin's analysis of womanhood ideology and quest for self here takes on a darker hue. Her earlier stories examined the destruction of women who lived within traditional society; this piece offers no escape for those who live outside that world but who do so only in a private world in themselves. Either way, Chopin seems to be saying, there lies self-oblivion if only the individual changes and not the world___

Source: Mary E. Papke, "Kate Chopin's Social Fiction," in *Verging on the Abyss*, *Greenwood Press*, 1990, pp. 62-4.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Ewell analyzes "The Story of an Hour," noting in particular the dramatic tension caused by the shift in point of view towards the end of the story.

... ."The Story of an Hour" recounts Louise Mallard's unexpected response to the reported death of her husband, Brently, in a train accident. Grieving alone in her room, she slowly recognizes that she has lost only chains: "'Free! Body and soul free!' she kept whispering." Then when her husband suddenly reappears, the report of his death a mistake, she drops dead at the sight of him—of "heart disease," the doctors announce, "of joy that kills."

Chopin's handling of details illustrates how subtly she manages this controversial material. Louise Mallard's heart disease, for example, the key to the final ironies and ambiguities, is introduced in the first sentence, like the loaded gun of melodrama.

But her illness gradually deepens in significance from a physical detail—a symptom of delicacy and a reason to break the bad news gently—to a deeply spiritual problem. The more we learn about Brently Mallard's overbearing nature and the greater his wife's relief grows, the better we understand her "heart trouble." Indeed, that "trouble" vanishes with Brently's death and returns—fatally—only when he reappears.

But Chopin also exposes Louise's complicity in Mallard's subtle oppression. Her submission to his "blind persistence" has been the guise of Love, that self-sacrificing Victorian ideal. Glorified in fiction Chopin had often decried, this love has been, for Louise and others, the primary purpose of life. But through her new perspective, she comprehends that "love, the unsolved mystery" counts for very little "in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!" As Chopin often insists, love is not a substitute for selfhood; indeed, serfhood is love's pre-condition. Such a strong and unconventional assertion of feminine independence likely explains Century's rejection. Its editor, R. W. Gilder, had zealously guarded the feminine ideal of self-denying love, and was that very summer publishing editorials against women's suffrage as a threat to family and home.

The setting, too, reflecting Chopin's local-color lessons, buttresses her themes. Louise stares through an "open window" at a scene which is "all aquiver with the new spring life." A renewing rain accompanies her "storm of grief," followed by "patches of blue sky." Then, explicitly "through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air," "it" comes "creeping out of the sky" upon her. Louise at first dutifully resists and then helplessly succumbs. The sense of physical, even sexual, release that accompanies her acquiescence to this nameless "thing" underpins a vision of freedom that Chopin characteristically affirms as a human right—as natural as generation, spring, or even death.

The transforming power of that insight is echoed in Louise's altered view of the future, whose length "only yesterday" she had dreaded, but to which she now "opened and

spread her arms ... in welcome." But it is a false vision. The habit of repression has so weakened Louise that her glimpse of freedom—her birthright—does not empower her, but leaves her unable to cope with the everyday reality to which she is abruptly restored. In her conventional marriage, the vision is truly illusory.

Chopin skillfully manipulates the point of view to intensify the final revelation and the shifting perspectives on Louise's life. "Mrs. Mallard" appears to us at first from a distance; but the focus gradually internalizes, until we are confined within her thoughts, struggling with "Louise" toward insight. As she leaves the private room of her inner self, our point of view retreats; we see her "like a goddess of Victory" as she descends the stairs, and then, as the door opens, we are identified with the unsuspecting Brently, sharing his amazement at his sister-in-law's outcry and his friend's futile effort to block his wife's view. The final sentence, giving the doctors' clinical interpretation of her death, is still more distant. That distance—and the shift it represents—is crucial. To outsiders, Louise Mallard's demise is as misunderstood as is her reaction to Brently's death. That even the respected medical profession misinterprets her collapse indicts the conventional view of female devotion and suggests that Louise Mallard is not the only woman whose behavior has been misread....

Source: Barbara C Ewell, "'*A Night in Acadie*': The Confidence of Success," in Kate Chopin, Ungar Publishing, 1986, pp. 88-91.

Critical Essay #4

In the following scholarly essay, Miner interprets "The Story of an Hour" from the viewpoint of an affective stylist—one who is concerned with the specific meanings and pairings of words for effect.

"The Story of an Hour" is built around the "expression of a woman's shockingly unorthodox feelings about her marriage"; so says Bert Bender, in an essay devoted to Chopin's short fiction. Similarly, Per Seyersted calls the story "an extreme example of the theme of self-assertion." Although both critics display considerable perception and insight, neither adequately accounts for the actual effect of the story. As we move through this short story, one element in our experience certainly points to self-assertion, encouraging us to hope for it in ourselves and Louise Mallard both. But the text also undermines, with its qualifications and negatives, all possibility for the fulfillment of this hope. In contrast to the thematic movement toward self-assertion, affective stylistics reveals a more subtle movement, in the reader, toward doubt. Chopin stimulates a sense that something, a vague something, is askew. Upon close analysis, word-byword and sentence-by-sentence, a reader finds that Chopin denies her reader information about those figures who instigate or are responsible for action in the story. Further, as she manipulates grammatical structures and conventions, Chopin thwarts the reader's expectations and confidence.

The plot of "The Story of an Hour" may be summarized quite simply. After hearing of her husband's death, Louise Mallard leaves her sister Josephine and her husband's friend Richards for the solitude of her upstairs bedroom. Josephine and Richards allow her to go, assuming that she needs time alone to vent her grief. As Louise contemplates the fact of Brently Mallard's death, however, her grief gives way to a far more powerful feeling—a feeling of joy in her own freedom. Louise realizes that she will feel sad when she sees Brently's "kind, tender hands folded in death," but she also realizes that for the first time in years she actually wants to live. While Louise is intoxicated with this newfound joy, Josephine, who fears that Louise might harm herself in her anguish over Brently's death, implores her to leave the locked room and come downstairs. As the two women descend the staircase, Brently Mallard walks in the front door. Chopin comments, "he had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one." Upon seeing her husband, Louise suffers a heart attack and dies. This simple surface action belies the complexities of the prose style.

The first sentence of "The Story of an Hour" reads: "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." If we approach this sentence merely as factual communique, we might say that it conveys three messages: Mrs. Mallard suffers from a heart trouble; Mrs. Mallard's husband has died; someone has taken great care to inform Mrs. Mallard of her husband's death. If, however, we analyze the way in which we proceed through the sentence, we discover a more complex layer of meaning. The first word of the sentence, knowing, introduces a participial phrase. A reader expects, and grammatical usage requires, that a primary position participle modify the subject of the

subsequent independent clause. Chopin violates our expectations. As we move through the participial phrase and into the independent clause, we expect to be told who knows that Mrs. Mallard suffers from a heart condition, but Chopin's passive construction —"great care was taken"—denies us this knowledge. The agent remains unidentified. This denial is the first and perhaps most powerful instance of Chopin's manipulation of sentence structure in order to withhold information about an agent. In this instance, although we know what the sentence says, we cannot be positive about what it means. We must wonder why the author refuses to divulge the agent of an action after she has structured her sentence to anticipate this information.

The reader's experience of the first sentence actually opposes the surface communication of its main clause: "great care was taken to break the news to Mrs. Mallard." This clause suggests that the situation is under control, but Chopin's ungrammatical construction hints at just the opposite: our experience generates a very vague feeling that despite "great care," something is amiss. We are as ignorant about the source of our feeling as we are about the agent of the first sentence, and our ignorance fosters a skepticism that further colors our reading. As a result, we may question yet another small deviation from common usage within the first sentence: why does Chopin choose to modify Mrs. Mallard's heart trouble with the indefinite article ai The more usual construction would be simply, "Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble." 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. The prose style thus withholds information and undermines our confidence as readers, and so we enter Chopin's story with some hesitation, some trepidation.

The second paragraph opens by identifying the agent who eluded us in the first: "It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences, veiled hints that revealed in half concealing." This identification is qualified, however, by Chopin's cool reportorial tone and the construction "it was," a topicalized construction that simultaneously focuses upon the agent and objectifies her. As focus of the sentence, Josephine should be its grammatical subject; instead, she suffers relegation to the subordinate clause. Thus, although we are told who instigated an action, this agent's power diminishes. The meaningless "it was" assumes priority. Chopin chose not to use the simpler "Josephine told her," apparently because this more direct construction does not hint at the uncertainty that the more distanced phrasing allows. In her description of Josephine's broken sentences, Chopin pinpoints the source of the uncertainty that the reader experiences while progressing through the story: "veiled hints that revealed in half concealing." We are meant to infer that Josephine intentionally obscures the details of Brently's death in order to spare Louise pain, but another inference is possible: Josephine's hints are "veiled" and "half concealing" because, without knowing it herself, Josephine delivers information that is not wholly true. Although Chopin identifies the agent in this sentence ("It was Josephine") the sentence as a whole undermines the competence of that agent. Thus, within the first two paragraphs of "The Story of an Hour," we are confronted with two instances in which matter and manner conflict. Neither of these instances is blatant, but a reader informed by affective stylistics cannot help but feel that he experiences something unusual here, and something that bodes ill.

The next two sentences in the second paragraph do nothing to alleviate these sensations. "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'." This sentence also appears straightforward: we are told who Richards is ("her husband's friend") as well as where he is ("there near her"); and these simple statements of fact reassure the reader. The reassurance is, however, only momentary. The next sentence opens with "it was," which has the same effect here as earlier: it focuses, then subordinates, thereby reducing the power associated with a fully realized agent-verb construction. Three other aspects of this sentence also diminish or deny our sense of agent. First, through the passive verb in the adverbial clause "when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received," Chopin refuses to provide any information about who sent the news. Second, she tells us that Brently Mallard's name leads the list of killed. Although it is not unusual to relay information of a man's death by stating that his "name" (only a part of the man) leads a list, this synecdoche distances a reader, if ever so slightly, from the death of the whole man. Finally, Chopin encloses killed in quotation marks; again, this may be idiomatic, but within the context of the first three sentences of this story, even idioms become suspect....

Louise responds immediately to the news of Brently's death: "She wept at once, with a sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone." Chopin presents us with a pattern of assertion and negation; we read one sentence in which Louise appears to act only to learn in the next that she is subjected to something that acts upon her. Louise weeps, but she has abandoned herself to "the storm of grief that must spend itself before Louise is free to go to her room. Repetition of this pattern increases its effectiveness. Only two sentences after the sentences above we come upon the following: "Into this armchair she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul." We cannot even credit Louise with responsibility for her own sinking; "a physical exhaustion" presses her down. But the most forceful example of this pattern occurs a few paragraphs later. Louise sits in a chair near the window, observing the "signs of new spring life":

"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." Louise obviously has far less control than does this sob, which shakes her and which, curiously, appears to act independently of the woman in whose throat it arises....

At this point we want to applaud Louise's action; we want to encourage her independence. But our experience with ambiguity requires us to hesitate before approving Louise's surrender to an unknown "something"; schooled by the text, we sense the danger here. Words describing this surrender do nothing to mitigate our fear. We read a series of sentences that focus on parts instead of wholes (her eyes "stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body"), and then we are told: "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," Louise may not pause to question the possibly monstrous

quality of her joy, but we do. After all, the joy is only vaguely specified (it may be monstrous, but we do not know precisely), but it is "holding" Louise. Then, too, we might question the adjectives "clear and exalted" as modifiers for "perception." To this point, nothing within our experience has been clear and exalted; having been exposed to one ambiguity after the next, we feel skeptical about the flat assertion of clarity.

We follow Louise's mental and physical movements during her "brief moment of illumination." She remembers the "kind, tender hands" of her husband and realizes that she will weep anew when she views the corpse. But looking yet further into the future, she knows that she will delight in her solitude; she opens her arms to the long procession of years "that would belong to her absolutely." Given Louise's history of powerlessness, however, we suspect her ability to commandeer these years. Chopin substantiates this suspicion a few sentences later, in a statement of Louise's feelings about love and self-assertion: "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." The sentence itself seems to imply that Louise possesses this impulse, but all description up to this point suggests that Louise is possessed by the impulse. Because of Chopin's phrasing, both active and passive possibilities exist simultaneously; Louise is both subject and object___

Josephine, afraid that Louise will make herself ill {ironically, Josephine's perception of Louise's illness differs both from that of the reader and of Louise) calls to her from outside the locked door. Louise opens the door and the two women descend the staircase. After the momentous occurrence in the preceding paragraphs—Louise's decision to live for herself—the rhythm of the sentences here appears too easy, A fault lies beneath this smooth surface. Then: "Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered." Within the space of two sentences, our unspoken questions, our unconscious suspicions, all stemming from Chopin's refusal to supply us with expected information, fall into place. The first sentence, "Some one was opening," prompts us to recall the description of Louise's joy: "There was something coming to her... What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name." The sentences merge; in both instances, we feel thwarted by insufficient information. In the second instance, however, Chopin grants us a full report: no longer "subtle and elusive," the agent is realized in the shape of Brently Mallard. Although couched in the reportorial "it was" construction, this emphatic identification is stunning. We sensed throughout the story that something is wrong, but the verification is terribly frustrating. We do not want the story to end this way: against all evidence, we hope that we are wrong and that our suspicions are misplaced. But the story ends. Louise sees her husband. "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills."

An almost inevitable response to reading this story for this first time is to read it again. Multiple readings reveal even more clearly the cumulative effect of Chopin's subtle textual manipulations. If we review the story as a whole, we realize that the disquieting effect of the first sentence is heightened as we confront instances of agent disjunction and pronominalization, ambiguity, and diminution. Our positive feelings about Louise's self-assertion are qualified word by word. Although Louise struggles with a few

moments of fearful anticipation, her progression toward self-assertion is predicated on "news" and "veiled hints," and she gives herself up to an undefined "something" without stopping to ask if it is or is not a "monstrous joy." As much as we would like to follow her, the route is closed to us. The cumulative experience of the text does not allow such simple complicity.

Source: Madonne M. Miner, "Veiled Hints: An Affective Stylist's Reading of Kate Chopin's 'Story of an Hour'," in *The Markham Review*, Vol 11, Winter, 1982, pp 29-32

Adaptations

"The Story of an Hour," was adapted in 1985 into a 56-minute long video, *Kate Chopin: The Joy That Kills*, available through Films for the Humanities & Sciences.

An audio cassette of "The Story of an Hour," is available through Books in Motion (1992).

Topics for Further Study

Research marriage law in the 1890s and compare this to contemporary marriage laws. How has the institution of marriage changed in the last one-hundred years?

Discuss Mrs. Mallard as a sympathetic character or as a cruel and selfish character. How might your own gender, age, class or ethnicity influence your response?

Do you think Chopin's critique of the institution of marriage, as expressed by Louise, is applicable today?

Research the suffrage movement of the late nineteenth century. How do Louise's reflections of her situation in society reflect the concerns of this movement? Which concerns are still issues today?

Compare and Contrast

1890s: The suffragist movement unites in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Wyoming becomes the first state to grant women the vote.

Today: Although efforts to add an Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution failed in 1982, women continue to gain political and cultural independence. As of 1988, over 56 percent of women in the country hold jobs.

1890s: Though there are more women than men attending high school by 1890, higher education is largely closed to women. Employment opportunities for women include housekeeping, nursing, and elementary education.

Today: Opportunities in both education and employment are virtually equal for men and women, although many issues regarding equality remain.

1890s: Though a few women writers have achieved some degree of success, it is still considered improper for a woman to be a writer. Louisa May Alcott and Sarah Orne Jewett are two women writers who gain success and popularity.

Today: Many women writers of the late nineteenth century are being rediscovered, including Chopin, who gained popularity during the women's movement of the 1960s.

Further Study

Twentieth-Century Literature Criticism, Vol. 14, Gale Research, 1984.

Contains a useful introduction and previously published criticism of Chopin's work, both positive and negative

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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