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The Desire to be Undesirable:

The Battle Between Love and Liberty in the 1800s

Would you marry the love of your life for the cost of freedom? In 1889, a British newspaper asked women why they were “spinsters,” or unmarried women. One woman states she has “other professions open to me in which the hours are shorter, the work more agreeable, and the pay possibly better” (Miss Florence Watts). It is into this world that Kate Chopin writes her short story “The Story of an Hour.” Inspired by the gendered norms of society, Chopin, among other authors, wrote stories featuring an exploration of female sexuality and championing of women’s self-worth, often facing controversy. “The Story of an Hour” follows Mrs. Mallard, a woman with heart issues and her journey through the next hour as a recent widow. While initially weeping as she mourns, Mrs. Mallard soon starts to have an epiphany, proclaiming herself as “free” and being filled with seemingly unexplained joy (Chopin 234). She now dismisses her desire for love, shifting focus on her own aspirations for the world, as she has this newly discovered self-satisfaction. The story then ends with Brently Mallard, her husband, returning home entirely unharmed, prompting Mrs. Mallard to die to which the doctors wrongfully proclaim it was “of joy that kills” (236). “The Story of an Hour” reflects the societal expectation that made women be faced with two mutually exclusive choices: self-fulfillment or marriage.

The primary issue with marriage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is the loss of individualism women faced. We see this theme being represented through the character of Mrs. Mallard, and her “breakdown” after receiving the unfortunate news about her husband. The text states that “[Mrs.

Mallard's] fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own" (235). Instead of grieving, Mrs. Mallard is showing excitement for her life ahead. The days mentioned previously belonged to her husband, who had control over what she did and how she spent her life. In marriage, women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were expected to be under the command of their husbands. The Napoleonic code, which still stood relevant in the 1800s, stated that wives are "obliged to live with her husband, and to follow him to every place where he may judge it convenient to reside" (Bonaparte 19). Although this was not a law of America, the mindset of women being inferior when married remained consistent through Western countries. Therefore, wives did not have control over their own days, leading to a loss of individualism. Chopin then goes on to write, "what could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized and the strongest impulse of her being!" (235). Mrs. Mallard's epiphany illustrates the choice women had to make between being married and being self-fulfilled. During her marriage, Mrs. Mallard did not have the freedom to put herself first and explore the world as an individual. This proves an issue as women had to choose between two natural desires while men were entitled to both.

As more women valued individualism, social change became widespread across America, moving toward more gender equality. However, according to scholar, Ruby Maloni, single women were the most prominent female reformers, leading to ten percent of American women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century never marrying (883). If a woman wanted to make change or impact in the world, so that love and liberty could coexist, she could not be "tied down" to a man. Thus, a mental struggle between marriage and individuality arose among women.

Although courtship was optional, women often chose to marry over being self-fulfilled, due to the desire and societal value of being loved outweighing individualistic wants. This led to

an epidemic of depression among women. Feminist and historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes how “Frequently women, especially married women with children, complained of isolation, loneliness, and depression” (657). Women were suffering in marriage. While men obtained love and passion in marriage, women were burdened with the totality of chores and childcare, and the loss of worth and identity. We see this inequality played out when Mrs. Mallard used to shudder at the thought of a long life, but now, she craved and prayed for longevity (Chopin 235). The freedom given from her husband’s death has made Mrs. Mallard excited to live through the world as her own person, not under someone else. The women resented their lives with their husbands, and much like Mrs. Mallard, wished for them to be short, resulting in depression. Although it was commonsense that the ailments stem from childbearing, household responsibilities, and stress, many physicians claimed there would be more difficulties in the life of a single woman, as child-bearing and homemaking was a woman’s natural destiny (Smith-Rosenberg et. al. 336). The entirety of society, including doctors, insisted this life of isolation and slavery under her husband was what is most beneficial to a woman. The prescribed “cure” for women was the very thing that led to this epidemic. Thus, unfair marriage treatment carried on, and women suffered through their marriages.

The women did not despise love from men, however. In fact, in most women, it was greatly desired. Mrs. Mallard for example reflects on how distraught she would be if she had looked upon the body of her late husband (Chopin 235). Mrs. Mallard, much like many women, loved the partner she was with. She often wrestled with complex feelings towards her relationship, loving her husband sometimes, but often not (235). However, the unjust obligations that were expected of women in marriage made the courtship miserable. A married woman “may be highly cultured and accomplished and shine in society, but her future husband will discover

too late that he has married a large outfit of head-aches, backaches, and spine aches, instead of a woman fitted to take up the duties of life” (Smith-Rosenberg et. al 341). Being a wife and being an individual could not coexist within a woman. If a woman wanted love, she must relinquish her freedom, and, if she wishes for freedom, she must give up any chance at finding love.

One may argue “The Story of an Hour” does not reflect the unjustness of marriage in 19<sup>th</sup> century society but instead illustrates a psychotic break from Mrs. Mallard. For example, Mrs. Mallard began the book by grieving for her late husband, but then suddenly became overwhelmed with joy (Chopin 234-5). The sudden happiness could stem as a coping-mechanism over her husband’s death. Throughout the story, Mrs. Mallard experiences complicated feelings towards love, with some days loving her husband, but other days she had not (235). The protagonist was consistently wrestling with her feelings throughout her marriage. While she had loved him, she hated the life she had to live while being married to him. Women were seen as mad when dealing with complicated feelings towards marriage. Hysteria was common among most people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however the psychic fault line corresponded more to distinctions of gender (Smith-Rosenberg 659-60). When speaking on the cause of hysteria, Smith-Rosenberg writes how the family and gender role socialization remained inflexible, despite the social changes for women. This caused many women anxiety when having to adapt to marriage where the gender roles were now enforced (659).

Others argue that Mrs. Mallard could have reached out professionally for her depression and avoided her death entirely. However, women were treated unfairly in healthcare. In the contemporaneous short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a post-partum mother documents life in her diary. The mother writes how her husband does not believe she is sick, and, despite her feelings, does not question her husband nor the physicians assuring her relatives she is well

(Perkins Gilman 237). At the end of the short story, the woman has a psychotic breakdown, creating irony in which the “treatment” prescribed lead to her becoming sicker than she was. Since adapting to the wife-life style was seen as a woman’s destiny, doctors dismissed any ailments that could have resulted from mistreatment in marriage. Scholar Martha H Verbrugge states that “medicine is governed either by progressive science or by psychological and social forces” (962). The health industry, due to the social forces of gender roles, did not care for women the same way they cared for men. Thus, women were neglected treatment, furthering the suffering they obtained in courtship.

“The Story of an Hour” describes the primary issue of marriage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the social viewpoint and societal norms and expectations of women. Smith-Rosenberg writes that women are expected to reward male protectors with dependence and submission, not being expected to achieve in any area deemed important by society (Smith-Rosenberg 656). Chopin describes the choice women had to make between self-fulfillment and love through Mrs. Mallard. In a society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with expectations and limitations, it was not possible for the two to coexist. While life for women has drastically improved two centuries later, “The Story of an Hour” acts as a reminder that everyone, regardless of body, should not have to give up liberty for the sake of falling in love.

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