

Emotions in *The Story of an Hour*

In “The Story of an Hour” (1894), Kate Chopin focuses on a late nineteenth-century American woman’s dramatic hour of awakening into selfhood, which enables her to live the last moments of her life with an acute consciousness of life’s immeasurable beauty. Mrs. Mallard, who suffers from a weak heart, seems to live a psychologically torpid and anemic life until she hears the news of her husband’s death. This news comes from her husband’s friend, who says that Brently Mallard has died in a railroad accident. Mrs. Mallard’s sister, Josephine, mindful of Mrs. Mallard’s heart condition, breaks the news to her “in broken sentences” and “veiled hints” (193). But when Mrs. Mallard hears the shocking news, she undergoes a profound transformation that empowers her with a “clear and exalted perception” (194). As Chopin demonstrates, this heightened consciousness comes to the protagonist because of her awakened emotions. Revealing her own dynamic and avant-garde understanding, Chopin rejects the tradition of attributing supremacy to the faculty of reason in the act of perception, and she attributes it instead to the faculty of emotions.

When she hears the news of her husband’s death, Mrs. Mallard’s obliviousness to the beauty of life breaks down under the powerful impact of emotion. Until this moment, Mrs. Mallard hardly thinks it worthwhile to continue her existence; as the narrator of the story says, “It was only yesterday [Mrs. Mallard] had thought with a shudder that life might be long” (194). Her life until this point seems devoid of emotion, as the lines in her face “besp[ea]k repression” (193). Upon hearing the news, her sorrow gushes out in a torrent: “She wept at once with sudden, wild abandonment” (193). The narrator points out, however, that Mrs. Mallard is not struck, as “many women” have been, by “a paralyzed inability” to accept the painful sense of loss (193). On the contrary, she is roused from her passivity by an uncontrollable flood of emotion. This “storm” that “haunt[s] her body and seem[s] to reach into her soul” (193) ultimately purges her of the sufferance of a meaningless life, as it becomes the impetus for the revelation that leads to her new freedom.

Until her moment of illumination, Mrs. Mallard’s emotions have been stifled and suppressed to fit into the mold of hollow social conventions. As Chopin implies, Mrs. Mallard’s “heart trouble” (193) is not so much a physical ailment, as the other characters in the story think, as a sign of a woman who has unconsciously surrendered her heart (i.e., her identity as an individual) to the culture of paternalism. This repression has long brewed in the depths of Mrs. Mallard’s heart (emotionally speaking), and it causes her to be generally apathetic toward life. The physiological aspect of Mrs. Mallard’s heart ailment appears to be, then, a result of the psychological burden of allowing another individual’s (i.e., her husband’s) “powerful will” to smother and silence her own will (194). In the patriarchal world of the nineteenth-century United States that Chopin depicts, a woman was not expected to engage in self-assertion. As Norma Basch observes of the American legal and economic milieu of the period, the patriarchy of that time “mandated the complete dependence of wives on husbands,” making marriage “a form of slavery” (349, 355). The virtuous wife, in Mrs. Mallard’s world, was the submissive woman who accepts the convention that her husband has “a right to impose a private will” upon her—as Mrs. Mallard realizes has been true of her marriage (194). So insistent is this artificial life of empty conventions for Mrs. Mallard that it tries to assert itself even after its barriers are broken, as she sits in her room and begins to comprehend the freedom that awaits her as a widow: “She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will” (194). But the excitement in her heart, which is supposed to be frail, is uncontrollable, and her fear soon transforms into joy (193, 194). That is, the power of her emotions conquers the force of conventionality.

As she sets aside the world of social conventions, her emotions underscore the individuality that is awakening in her. “[T]his thing” that is approaching her is her consciousness of her own individuality, and she waits for it “fear-fully” (193). Accompanying it is “a monstrous joy” that highlights the colossal significance of self-discovery at the expense of the hollow conventions that would dismiss her joy as horribly inappropriate and unbecoming (194). Now, however, joy and hope lead her to an awareness that she has become, as she realizes, “Free! Body and soul free!” (194). Just as she locks herself in her room and locks out her social world, she also locks out social conventions. And thus, purging her repressed emotions, she awakens to all the individual elements of her natural environment: she notices, as she looks out her bedroom window, the trees, the rain, the air, the peddler’s voice, the notes of a song, the

sparrows, the sky, and the clouds (193). Because her emotions are no longer bottled, Louise Mallard attends to “the sounds, the scents, the color” in the natural world (193), and they teach her of the sounds, the scents, and the color within her own soul. That is, they teach her of the particular combination of attributes within her soul that make her a unique individual. Clearly, her new emotional freedom leads to the awakening of her mind.

Chopin’s investigation of emotion in this story clearly fits R. J. Dolan’s argument that emotion influences not simply attention, but also “pre-attentive processing” (1191, 1192). As Chopin shows through Louise, the act of watching nature and engaging in sense perception is the act of processing emotional stimuli: “She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air” (193). These objects inspire joy and hope in her, which, in turn, stir Louise’s attention: “[S]he felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air” (193). The “it” that she feels emerging from nature is the vision, or perception, of her freedom, which occurs through her aroused emotions. The presence of emotion signifies Louise’s sensitivity, responsiveness, and mindfulness.

Indeed, it is not the rational faculty that enables Louise’s discovery of her individuality. As Chopin carefully points out, the coming of consciousness occurs suddenly, spontaneously, intuitively. As Louise looks out her window, her face shows “not a glance of reflection, but rather . . . a suspension of intelligent thought” (193). The discovery of her individuality is “too subtle and elusive” for the rational faculty to analyze and grasp. It can only be “felt” first with instinct and then with emotions (193). Alone and unencumbered in her room, Louise spontaneously opens herself to the sublimity and grandeur of the physical world around her, of which she herself is a part.

As Chopin demonstrates through the physical changes in Louise, emotion connects the soul to the body. As her body responds to her emotions, she feels a rhythmic connection to the physical world. As John Deigh defines emotion, it is “a state through which the world engages our thinking and elicits our pleasure or displeasure” (829–30), for it is the “turbulence of the mind” that “captures our attention, orients our thoughts, and touches our sensibilities” (829). Fittingly, Louise’s emotions enable her to feel harmony between her body and soul. According to William James, a psychologist who was a contemporary of Chopin’s, “bodily feelings” are “characteristics” of “various emotional moods” (1066). Fittingly, Chopin underscores Louise’s physical state: “Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously” (194). At this point Louise’s apparent emotional anemia has given way to healthy blood circulation: “Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body” (194). Indeed, if James argues that “the immediate cause of emotion is a physical effect on the nerves” (1073), Chopin demonstrates that emotion is accompanied by physical changes: Louise’s “coursing blood” reflects her profound joy about her new sense of life’s sacred beauty (194).

Chopin also shows the influence of Romanticism in her emphasis on the creative role of emotions. As M. H. Abrams argues, for the Romantics, the poet “modif[ies] or transform[s] the materials of sense” (55): “objects of sense are fused and remolded in the crucible of emotion and the passionate imagination” (54). Similarly, Louise’s passion influences her imagination: “Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her” (194). Evidently, her feelings of curiosity and wonder influence her “fancy,” which here is synonymous with the creative faculty of imagination. But, in using the word “fancy” instead of imagination, Chopin suggests that it is emotions that are prompting the creative work. As Abrams interprets the Romantic viewpoint, “[feelings project a light—especially a colored light—on objects of sense” (54). Stepping beyond the Romantics, not only does Chopin make Louise’s flooding emotions vitalize the landscape, but she also makes the latter’s emotions create a meaningful, purposeful landscape: it symbolizes the stirring, creative, dynamic forces of life.

Further, Chopin uses nature—the objects of sense—as a symbol of the powerful faculty of emotions, which creates design and harmony. Just as spring symbolizes the “new . . . life,” so the natural world symbolizes the vigor and power of Louise’s “wild abandonment,” her passionate outburst (193). As nature returns to life after winter, so Louise’s emotions return to life after a prolonged winter of patriarchal confinement. Furthermore, just as nature awakens instinctively, so do Louise’s repressed emotions. That is, as nature bursts with energy and vitality, so does Louise’s love of life. Louise’s emotions bring together all the individual elements of the natural world in such a way that they form a new pattern, a unique living picture. Because her husband, the source of her suppressed and repressed

emotions, suddenly seems to have disappeared, her bottled emotions gush out to taste freedom just as the world of nature (“the sounds, the scents, the color that fill[] the air”) breaks out spontaneously (193). And yet her society rejects this natural world of emotions and associates it with illness. Thus Josephine implores, “Louise, open the door . . . you will make yourself ill” (194). While Chopin associates emotions with sound health, the nineteenth-century patriarchy associates them with ill health. Louise’s responsiveness to the sounds, scents, and color is her excited and intense responsiveness to beauty. To *feel* life’s beauty, then, is to *see* the beauty of one’s own life. For to look at the world of nature is to feel life’s innate, spontaneous beauty: “she was drinking in a very elixir of life through the open window” (194). Indeed, the base metal of her own life is now transformed to invaluable gold because of her “abandon[ment]” to her own nature (194). As Chopin illustrates through Louise’s sense of freedom, the latter engages in an interpretive act that shows how the individual creates meaning for herself through the faculty of emotions. So profound is this awakening that in that one hour of self-fulfillment, Louise experiences a taste of eternity.

In that one hour, then, Louise sees and creates a new identity with her newly awakened faculty of emotions (193). Chopin illustrates the role of the emotions in creating the moment of illumination by highlighting the connection between her eyes and her emotions: “The vacant stare and the look of terror . . . went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright” (194). The awareness that transforms Mrs. Mallard into Louise, the individual, and that makes her “[see] beyond” the stifling past into a promising future is the product of acute emotions: “There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory” (194). Louise breaks the shackles of the patriarchal culture as she comprehends that she can “live for herself” instead of living the life that her husband sanctions for her (194). And this comprehension has to be felt with emotions. Thus Chopin shows how Louise’s faculty of emotions influences her faculty of reason: she now comprehends her “possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being” (194). As Dolan observes, there is a strong relationship between emotion and cognition: “the growth of emotional awareness informs mechanisms that underwrite the emergence of self-identity and social competence” (1194). Standing confidently at the top of the stairs, the height of which represents Louise’s exalted state, she has reached the zenith of self-awareness.

Thus it is no surprise that Louise suffers an acutely painful—and ultimately fatal—shock when her husband returns home. It turns out that he has missed his train and thus has been spared the accident that otherwise would have killed him. He arrives home and enters through the front door just as Louise, at the end of her “brief moment of illumination” (194), is making her symbolic descent down the stairs. When she spots her husband, Louise seems to realize in an instant not only that her husband, as a proponent of patriarchal culture, would never allow for a woman’s self-discovery, but also that she could never reverse her progress and once again take up the confinement of her former life. At the sight of her husband she is at once profoundly aware of her newfound freedom and the fact that it will not last. The shock that kills her must, then, be the realization that she has lost this freedom, and with it her human individuality. Her emotions spread through her entire being so profoundly that they lead to another severe physical change, and she dies immediately.

As Chopin demonstrates, then, so powerful is emotion that it enables clarity of perception in Louise. It allows her to perceive life’s immeasurable beauty, without which, as she realizes with the suddenness of acutely shocking pain at the sudden entry of her husband, there is only death: the “joy” that kills Louise is the joy that (unbeknownst to the doctors who ironically assume that it is joy at her husband’s return that kills her [194]) she refuses to surrender, as the patriarchy would require her to do at Brently’s return. But, for one climactic hour of her life, Louise does truly taste joy. For one hour of emotion, Louise does glimpse meaning and fulfillment. To be fully alive, then, is to engage in heightened consciousness, to observe and connect with the world around one’s self. Indeed, Chopin makes clear that to simply observe the world through one’s rational faculty is nowhere near as powerful as observing it with the vibrant, vigorous, acute, and heightened awareness that emotion makes possible.

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