

Fatal Assertion in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*

Posted on September 21, 2018

According to Lawrence I. Berkove's critique, "Fatal Self-Assertion in [Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*](#)," the short story is considered to be a highly famed literary piece of work from the collection of short stories in American literature (Berkove). The short story, as Berkove says, is ironic and tragic at the same time, as the protagonist dies after being freed from a restricting marriage. In the article, the author reflects on how the story, despite being extremely short, a mere thousand words, reflects the condition of women during Chopin's time.

He begins his essay by incorporating the views of two intellectuals, Toth and Seyersted, who believed that each aspect of the short story left an emotional impact on the readers. Berkove asserts in the article that the story is more ironic than meets the eye. His purpose in writing the critical analysis is to show that Chopin's views are biased in criticizing the patriarchal society without providing any solid evidence.

Berkove claims that Chopin's story fails to provide proof of whether Louise Mallard was struggling with her married life or not. The assertion that she was finally free does not point toward her husband being harsh or making her miserable. The author also claims that what Chopin labels as self-assertion in the case of Louise is, in reality, nothing more than a mere thought on the part of the protagonist. Berkove does not look at Louise as a heroine. Rather, he calls her an egoist who falls victim to her own imagination. The sudden thought that emerges in Louise's mind gives way to certain attitudes and contradictory statements, which foreshadow the ending of the story. Berkove presents the views of Toth and Seyersted alongside his own to refute their statements regarding the story being a true depiction of a woman struggling to survive in a patriarchal society.

Berkove counter-argues that the story falls short of proving that the protagonist was blindly following the patriarchal society and was constantly sacrificing her needs for the needs of another or that there was some sort of suppression that had been inflicted on her by her husband, Brently. Berkove claims that Chopin only pointed out in one scene that Louise's facial expressions were indicative of her having undergone repression. However, the cause of Louise's repression is unclear as Chopin does not go into the details in any instance in the story. Berkove also claims in the article that the focus of the story was not on marriage or the restrictions imposed on a woman by her society; rather, the story was only centered on Louise Mallard's character. The author also states that the faint hints that Chopin provided are not sufficient to prove that the society of her time was oppressing women and restricting them from living their lives the way they wanted to.

In my opinion, Berkove is justified in his argument that the author failed to provide the audience with proof that the nineteenth century was marked by the oppression of women. From the onset of the

story, Chopin provides no information about the protagonist's husband or the kind of a person he is; instead, his name is only brought up after the news of a train accident spreads around. The lack of background justifies Berkove's claims that Louise was not being oppressed by her husband. I agree with Berkove's claim that the lack of proof regarding society's bias gives space for open critique against Chopin. The only instance where there is a subtle hint of Louise being freed from a life of oppression is when she imagines her husband lying motionless (Chopin). Her thoughts regarding her husband can be seen from the following lines,

"But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely" (p. 3)

The above-quoted lines are implicit in their meaning as there is no history of the married couple in the story that would justify the way Louise feels after hearing of her husband's death. As Berkove writes in his essay, the story's main focus lies on Louise Mallard only and not on her society or her married life, so the quoted lines are proof enough that Louise's feelings of freedom were self-assertion. Aside from the thoughts that take over Louise at that moment, it should be noted that the narrator's assertion regarding Louise finally being free from the restraints of marriage cannot be linked with suppression, as there is no evidence of it taking place in the story. The situation Louise upon hearing of her husband's death only highlights the misconceptions that surround marriages. Women most often believe that marriage will turn them into slaves and that the needs of the husband are to be taken care of above anything else. Louise's perspective regarding marriage has been shown through the following lines,

"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." (p. 3)

In addition to the absence of any strong evidence about Louise being oppressed by her husband, the feelings that Louise exhibits seem like an exaggeration in her case, as the readers are unaware of whether Louise was unhappy with her life or not. The following lines show a contradiction in Louise's feelings regarding a husband,

“She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead.” (p. 3)

The mentioned lines highlight that Brently had been kind to his wife even though the author only reflected Brently’s affection through his facial expressions. However, it still stands to show that he was not the kind of man to oppress his wife. Moreover, Louise has contradictory feelings when she thinks about her husband. As the following lines show,

“And yet she had loved him—sometimes.”

Louise’s acceptance of her feelings for her husband shows that she is not unhappy with her married life. These lines justify Berkove’s assertion that Chopin was unable to show the male possession that she so claimed was prevalent in her society during the nineteenth century. Moreover, the phrase that Berkove quoted in his essay “Live for Herself” points toward Louise rejoicing at the thought of not being bound anymore. While the line does show that Louise might have slaved away her youth in service of her husband, Chopin fails to provide any evidence to prove the protagonist’s assertion.

From the above discussion, it is evident that Chopin’s short story is based on facts that do not have strong evidence to prove that what the author says lies parallel to how her society was. While it is true that there is a subtle hint that Louise might have spent all her life fulfilling the needs of her husband, the story lacks evidence that Brently had oppressed Louise. While most people might agree with Chopin on her themes of female oppression while living in a patriarchal society, it should be noted that a story such as this, in which the author only focused on Louise’s thoughts and perceptions, shows that Chopin was biased in her views regarding marriage and the society that she was a part of.

Works Cited

Berkove, Lawrence I. “Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin’s” *The Story of an Hour.*” *American Literary Realism*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, pp. 152–158.

Chopin, Kate. *The Story of an Hour*. Blackstone Audio, 2013.