

The Temporal Tapestry: An Analysis of ‘The Story of an Hour’

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Keywords	Abstract
New Criticism, Art for Art’s Sake”, Formalism, Kate Chopin.	<i>The art of literature is not only a reflection of contemporary society but also a display of the writer's craftsmanship in dealing with the intricacy of its tools and art form. Similarly, literature reflects the author's expertise in using words, rhetoric, and structure to create a masterpiece. This research aims to analyse the form and structure of Kate Chopin's ‘The Story of an Hour’ using New Criticism as an approach to studying literature having literary devices and their role in building the form of the literary piece. The chosen methodological framework holds a unique role in studying this piece of literature. After a thorough analysis of the text, the research concludes that the author uses various literary techniques such as symbolism, irony, motifs, and linguistic devices to transform ordinary objects into something different. This unique approach to language helps us see things in a new light and enhances our awareness of the world around us.</i>

1. INTRODUCTION

A formalist criticism focuses on a work's form and method rather than its content. There are two schools of Formalist theory, Russian Formalism and, soon after, Anglo-American New Criticism. Russian Formalism focuses on the practical dimension of the work by studying the literary devices employed in the text, so the form is more important than the content. New Criticism focuses on the internal unity of the work, form and content are inseparable since the form is an embodiment of content and theme (Carter & Long, 1990).

New Criticism, the post-war I school of Anglo-American literary critical theory, insists on the intrinsic value of any piece of literature (Pokrivčák, 2017). It rose against the traditional extrinsic approaches. The work is the center of concentration, and it is examined as a standalone unit of meaning without interference from biographical or historical details. The primary method employed in the New Critical approach is the close and analytical reading of the text as a technique as old as Aristotle’s poetics. The purpose of the New Critic is to show the reader how to reconcile or combine the various, seemingly disparate elements of a book into a coherent, thematic whole. The major goal of the reader is to recognize the text's underlying but hidden unity that is caused by the unifying elements carefully selected and used by the writer.

The New Critics emphasized close reading as a way to engage with the text, and this is how a reader pays close attention to the interaction between the meaning and the form (Clugston, 2010).

1.1. Research Questions

1. In what ways are the features of the New Critical approach reflected in 'The Story of an Hour'?
2. How do specific literary features in 'The Story of an Hour' contribute to its overall meaning when analyzed outside the context of existing literary theories?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

New Criticism, in simple words, is a movement that propagates 'Art for Art's sake'. New Criticism is an approach to literature made popular in the 20th century that evolved out of formalist criticism. New Criticism, coined by John Crowe Ransom in 1941, came to be applied to theory and practice that was prominent in American literary criticism until late in the 1960s (Pokrivčák, 2017).

In one of the research studies, the aim was to highlight Chopin's criticism of 19th-century masculine chauvinism and the institution of marriage in the American world. Chopin regarded these as the reasons for women's oppression and subjugation in all facets of life (Jassam & Jassam, 2020).

A recent study analyzed two literary pieces by Chopin from a feminist perspective using feminist literary criticism. The research revealed that the literary works portrayed female characters who were struggling against repressive patriarchal practices and societal expectations. However, each character had her unique way of dealing with the challenges (Rahman et al., 2023).

A recent study applied the French feminist theories of Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray to two famous literary works - Chopin's 'The Awakening' and 'The Golden Notebook'. The study proposed that women who have been placed outside the Symbolism and language by patriarchal discourses of Freud and Lacan can reposition themselves and write their own stories. The paper used Kristeva's 'signification process' and ideas from the discourses of Irigaray and Cixous, to track the progress of the female protagonist as she moves from abjection to destabilizing patriarchal representations of women and ultimately rewriting herself (Ezeala & Rudaityte, 2018).

The literature review reveals that Kate Chopin's literary work, particularly "The Story of an Hour," has been analyzed from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the oppression of women in a male-dominated American society. However, there has been little attention given to appreciating the art for its own sake, including the complexity of the language's form and structure and how it contributes to the overall meaning of the piece.

After reviewing the relevant literature, the research aims to explore 'The Story of an Hour' for art for art's sake as a unique methodological framework to shed light on the piece of literature, its rhetorical features and components. The research has the following questions.

3. METHODOLOGY

Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour' will be analysed using the New Critical approach (Carter & Long, 1990). The approach allows one to analyse any piece of art for the sake of art only. The approach advocates analysing the piece of art without the boundaries of any theoretical framework, on any theoretical grounding. The research is qualitative, and the textual analysis is done by analysing aspects of symbolism, imagery, themes, motifs and other devices that are used, particularly in bringing out the meaning of the text to analyse overall structure, language and style of the piece of literature. Lombardi (n.d) emphasizes engaging actively with texts. He suggests questioning the author's purpose, analyzing themes and structure, and considering the context of the work. Critical reading enhances understanding and appreciation by encouraging personal interpretations and connections to broader issues.

4. ANALYSIS

'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin is famous for its unexpected twists and turns, and that is why it is an appropriate selection for its analysis through the lens of the New Critical approach. Our first impression of the story's heroine is of a fragile woman who is easily hurt.

Line 1: 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".

In this opening phrase, we find two aspects that will later surprise the readers. The first surprise is the beautiful depiction of the character Mr. Mallard, and the second is the way the readers are informed about her cardiac issues. We are instantly lured in by the news that she is soon to learn she is a widow. In this short narrative, the continuous amalgamation of twists and turns, both regarding the events happening in the story and the reactions of the characters, not only heightens the plot intrigue but also makes it an appropriate choice from a formalist perspective.

The unexpected twists in this short narrative are what distinguish it and make it unforgettable. In a short time, the story's introductory words will return to torment the reader, culminating in a surprising conclusion. This narrative lends itself to the New Critical approach since it is full of unexpected twists. The wife had a strong reaction after learning of her husband's death, as revealed in the following lines.

Line 2: "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. When the storm of grief had spent itself, she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow."

The image of a particularly bereaved widow comes to mind upon reading these sentences. The reader witnesses this woman's complete breakdown, as she thrashes around in anguish and then withdraws to grieve in isolation away from everyone in her own room. She goes upstairs and looks out of the window, observing the garden and spring outside.

Line 3: "She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life".

The scenic depiction of the blooming flowers, spring and singing birds actually sketches a sharp contrast with the mental and emotional state of a widow who is dealing with the grave reality of the death of her spouse. Here, the deliberate employment of the setting of spring, a garden with its beautiful sky and birds' chirping, is used as a metaphor for life. The readers are skillfully drawn into this vision of life and contrasted with death. Also, to keep us intrigued, a tactic of foreshadowing is being employed by the narrator.

Line 4: "There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air."

The reader is filled with dread, and we anticipate unpleasant news. In the minds of the readers, there is a sense of impending suspense. They anticipate something chaotic and terrible to occur. The first shock comes as a complete surprise. We are on the verge of calamity, yet the young widow, her face unlined and tears pouring down her cheeks, appears to be at rest.

Line 5: "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."

The reader is left shocked. The use of the word "free" repeatedly in these lines not only adds a surprising twist to the story but also is a completely contradictory reaction to such sad and shocking news of her husband's sudden death. This also arouses a sudden curiosity in the thoughts of the readers as to what may potentially be the source of the protagonist's inappropriate behaviour.

In the lines that follow, a typical husband-and-wife relationship is expertly described while also elucidating the widow's reaction to receiving her husband's body. However, the response is once more profoundly paradoxical to what the readers were expecting.

Line 6: "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. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome".

The readers are taken aback by this change of events, but they accept that she loved him and felt relieved. With the widow's response to her husband's death being regularly and expertly described, readers' sympathy declines. The widow is overjoyed at the thought of being a widow.

The ultimate surprise is revealed at the conclusion of the narrative. Even though the reader is thoroughly informed about Mrs. Mallard's newfound independence, she still expects her happiness on seeing her loving husband as he steps through the front door looking very much alive. However, to heighten the feeling of suspense and surprise to the extreme, the widow dies of a heart attack on seeing his husband alive.

Line 7: "When the doctors came, they said she had died of heart disease – of joy that kills"

The final irony and twist in this brief but intriguing narrative is this. The reader was informed about the widow's heart condition from the beginning, yet there was never a clue throughout the

story that she would die from the shock of seeing her husband alive rather than from receiving the news of his death.

If we consider the title 'The Story of an Hour', we suspect that it is a suspenseful thriller that depicts the truth of what a single hour may hold in the course of life's unexpected ups and downs. The plot is very artistically arranged to reflect the unforeseen occurrences that might happen at any point in our lives.

If we look at the structure of 'The Story of an Hour', it is notable since it is so brief. The work's short length (a few pages) emphasizes that the entire tale takes place in under an hour. Despite this, the main character, Louise, undergoes a life-altering shift and the consequent damage. The point of view that big changes may occur in a short period of time is emphasized to a great extent by keeping the narrative so short. The harsh character of Louise's marriage is also a subject in 'The Story of an Hour'. It is learnt through the narrative and a detailed description of the reactions of the protagonist that many marriages, despite their outward looks, are harmful to their women, especially if they refuse to accept the reality at times, e.g., Louise confesses she loves her husband at times.

The major theme to examine is the significance of time in the short narrative. The events in 'The Story of an Hour' unfold in a flash. Even though the descriptions are comprehensive, the purposeful use of a brief format effectively illustrates how a person's life may change dramatically in a relatively short period. The main character barely needs an hour to process the death of her spouse and adjust to the new stage of her life. There is a quick transition from despair to the joyful awareness that she is now free. The central subject of time is skillfully woven throughout the progression from one occurrence to the next. Instead of sobbing for the guy she only sometimes loved, Mrs. Mallard is entirely prepared to enjoy life without the constraints of her marriage in less than an hour. This entire transition, which would normally take years for a normal individual in a normal relationship, is depicted in such a little period of time on purpose to highlight the striking effects of an unhappy marriage. To everyone's surprise, in a matter of seconds, seeing her spouse alive and well, she loses her life just like the loss of her newfound hope for a future of freedom.

Although 'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin is quite brief, it is highly rich and full. Every phrase and sentiment in it has a lot of depth and meaning. It is about an unstable marriage and a wife who longs to get rid of that meaningless relationship, and the underlying tension between a normal, perfectly subservient wife and her quest for individuality.

Another very important theme of the story is that unhealthy marriages deprive women of their independence. The confinement of Mrs. Mallard is shown in many ways, such as in her marriage, her heart sickness and her imprisonment in the room or house. She first struggles to express her feelings out loud due to physical, mental, and emotional restrictions because independence seemed to be a taboo concept to her. His existence seems to be similar to that of a trapped bird waiting for the opportunity to take flight and explore the vast and free world outside its confined surroundings. Although it might seem paradoxical, it is clear that she is pleased to learn of her husband's passing. She uses the term "free" often, implying that she wants to be rid of all the aches and pains associated with her marriage. She enjoys this mental and emotional independence while being confined to a room, and the narrator describes this delight brilliantly.

Unfortunately, the instant she leaves that chamber, her independence is taken away just as she starts to understand it.

Line 8: “There would be no one to live for during those coming years; 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.”

As soon as Mrs. Mallard learns of her husband's unexpected death, she begins to cry. She cries till the anguish that is coursing through her body stops. Then comes the phase where she realizes she was sobbing not for her spouse but rather to let all the unpleasant memories of their recently terminated marriage out. As a result, she is overjoyed at the prospects of having the entire upcoming year to herself, all to herself.

Mrs. Mallard declares that there will no longer be any "powerful will bending hers" and refutes the "blind belief that men and women have the right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature." Following that, her statements reflect the comfort she feels as a result of her husband's death, “Free! Body and soul free!”

The passage is startling because it expresses Mrs. Mallard's true wants. Regrettably, the silent or unnoticed contentment that seems to govern her life is only understood when she learns of her husband's death.

Another important feature is the setting that depicts the confinement of the protagonist. Mrs. Mallard's room is used to demonstrate her limitations. When she hears the news of her husband's death, she feels in charge for the first time.

The element of irony is also exclusively inculcated in “‘The Story of an Hour’”. Throughout the narrative, irony is conveyed in a variety of ways.

- a. When Mrs. Mallard, who suffers from a terrible heart problem, learns of her husband's untimely demise. Despite the facts that she seems devastated on the death of her spouse and the way she rushes to her room to mourn alone, she calmly and contently looks out of the window and thinks about a plethora of fresh chances ahead of her.
- b. It is also ironic that Mrs. Mallard's sister is scared she'll die of sadness in her room alone. She had no idea that this is the most joyous hour of her life.
- c. Mrs. Mallard dies at the end of the narrative due to heart attack, despite the fact that she learns that her husband is still alive.
- d. The ultimate irony is that Mrs. Mallard's death frees her from her miserable restricted life.
- e. In the end, the physicians conclude she died from "the joy that kills," not from heart problems. Ironically, it is her understanding that the joy she felt after only one hour is ended, not the delight of seeing her spouse alive.

If we talk about Symbolism, in ‘The Story of an Hour’ there are a variety of terms and phrases that symbolize something deeper and more meaningful, especially the use of “Heart Problem”, “The Open Door” and “The Spring”.

i. Heart Problems

The narrator purposefully discusses Mrs. Mallard's heart problems as a real and metaphorical matter. This sickness symbolizes her ambivalence associated with her marriage and the dissatisfaction of hers being devoid of her rightful independence. When she considers her newfound freedom, she experiences a strong surge of blood. Her sudden death after seeing her spouse alive provides more evidence that the diagnosis of "heart disease" was correct. The doctor concluded that she passed away from the overwhelming "joy", as would be anticipated in a typical and healthy relationship. Paradoxically, Mrs. Mallard's demise in this specific case was brought on by the loss of "joy" that comes with being independent and free. Her wounded heart was unable to withstand the agony of losing the freedom she so much desired and cherished.

ii. The Wide-Open Door

Mrs. Mallard may be seen gazing out of the window throughout the most of the story, signifying her freedom from the constraints of that sad marriage. The opportunities that her life would soon afford following her husband's passing are symbolized by this open window. The clear sky, fluffy clouds, and tall tree tops represent a new beginning and fresh opportunities in life. She is ecstatic and happy over everything she sees and observes out the window. It's a lovely fresh start and a new chapter in her LIFE. The window is open to symbolize her new, bright future, which is much more obvious and clear after the turmoil and instability brought on by her erratic marriage have been cleared away.

iii. The Season of Spring

The story's Spring might be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Spring may mean season, but it also connotes a new beginning, a metamorphosis, and a newfound freedom. Mrs Mallard believes she is about to embark on a new and adventurous life.

If we look for the feature of the motif in this narrative we find that the idea of "freedom" and "self discovery" are being again and again reinforced through the use of certain phrases like "Free! Body and soul free!", "open window", "free, free, free!", "moment of illumination", "elixir of life". Through this feature, the theme was also being contributed to throughout the narrative.

If we talk about Hypotaxis and Parataxis, we see that the narrator has hardly used simple phrases linked with conjunctions (Parataxis). Mostly, the description of the character's reactions, setting and scenes are produced through complex or compound sentences. This style depicts that though the ideas and concepts exhibited in the narrative appear to be simple, if they are analyzed deeply, many complex realities are surfaced.

Line 9: "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."

"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."

We also find the use of repetition intentionally by the narrator in order to emphasize certain ideas, e.g. the word “free” to show Mrs. Mallard’s freedom of both body and soul from the shackles of an unhappy marriage, and the clause “that might be long” in the lines given below.

Line 10: “She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.”

The author utilizes this sentence to suggest two states of consciousness in a really elegant way. Initially, Mrs. Mallard wished for a short life since she was trapped in an unhappy marriage, then after learning of her husband's passing, she prayed for a long life so she could live it to the utmost. Thus, the narrator skillfully conveys not only the two distinct periods of the protagonist's life but also the two emotional and psychological states that she experienced throughout those periods.

4.1. FINDINGS

The application of the New Critical approach offers some interesting findings when applied to ‘The Story of an Hour’. The subtleties in a story are sometimes missed by readers or are dismissed as coincidences, but closer examination reveals that they are far more complicated. Going further, New Critical analysis assists in bringing out all of the story's amazing, hidden characteristics. According to Howe (1957), once formalist literary ideas are discovered inside, the reader's perception of the tale changes dramatically. It has been noted that this narrative has skillfully woven all of the pieces together to support the story's two key themes, which are both evident in the story simultaneously. Overall, Leech and Short's (1981) highlight the importance of style in enhancing the richness of literary works and providing deeper insights into characters and themes. Symbolism, irony, meaningful setting, motif and the purposefully short structure utilized to emphasize the effect of the title ‘The Story of an Hour’ are the key aspects that make up the story's form. All of these aspects are masterfully put together in such a way that the language gradually exposes the purpose it serves. The precise descriptions of the situations, people, and their reactions not only create a sense of tension and intrigue in the story but also reveal the true core of the characters and explain the themes in a logical manner. The plot grows more intriguing as paradoxical adjectives and responses are instilled in areas where they are least anticipated to be utilized, resulting in numerous twists and revelations. The rising action, climax, and falling action in the story are also aided by words and phrases that reveal deeper and hidden meanings. The text is made unique by the employment of the features indicated above, which help in communicating the story's issues and themes.

5. CONCLUSION

The techniques of symbolism, irony, motifs, themes, and linguistic devices are employed in ‘The Story of an Hour’ in such a way that ordinary and familiar objects are made to look different. It is a transformational process in which language displays its ability to influence our perspective. The poetic usage of language through this powerful narrative imparts uniqueness to this literary work. The basic goal of this particular piece of literature is to mould the world of everyday perception and rejuvenate the readers' lost ability for fresh feeling by emphasizing its linguistics and breaking the patterns of common linguistic dialogue. As a result, the literary language of this narrative is a common language that has been distorted and turned unusual. By

bringing us into a dramatic consciousness of language, this strategy refreshes our typical perceptions and renders things more perceptible.

5.1. Recommendations for Further Research

The current research analyzed Chopin's literary work, specifically a single piece. Future research could expand beyond the form and structure of the story to explore how it contributes to feminist perspectives and reflects contemporary social values. This approach would blend the concepts of "art for art's sake" with art that reflects society, creating an ideal combination.

Acknowledgements: This article is based on the original work by the author.

Author Contributions: The author is solely responsible for the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation, and writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Funding Information: This research did not receive any grant from any agency.

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