

English 1102

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Chopin's Other Awakenings

As a forerunner of the modern feminist movement, Kate Chopin explored bold new characterizations of her female subjects. Chopin is famous for her progressive depiction of the female characters in her stories. Two such stories, "The Storm" and "The Story of an Hour," examine and refute the long held ideal of the subservient wife. "The Storm," written in 1898 but not published until later because of its provocative content, describes the passionate extramarital affair between Calixta and Alcee, a former lover. "The Story of an Hour" follows Louise Mallard as she deals with the death of her husband. Chopin uses the extraordinary events in the characters' lives to bring them out of the coma of submissive living. In both stories, the female protagonist awakens from a marriage-induced trance and into a state of self-awareness as a person separate from her husband.

Up until the early twentieth century, the accepted role of a woman was that of a housewife and mother. In the opening of "The Storm," Calixta exemplifies this homemaker image perfectly; the first time the reader sees Calixta she is "sewing furiously on a sewing machine" (858). When the storm approaches, her first priority is not her own protection; rather, she gets up "hurriedly and [goes] about closing windows and doors" and gathering Bobinot's Sunday clothes, which she had hung out to dry (958). By showing Calixta as a selfless extension of her house and family and not as an individual person, Chopin reiterates the stereotypical inferior image of a woman. After setting up Calixta in this manner, Chopin quickly moves to awaken her with the arrival of her former lover, Alcee Laballiere. His voice "startle[s] her as if from a trance," and immediately Calixta breaks free from the inferiority she suffers as a housewife (858). Alcee helps Calixta safeguard the house, thereby placing them on the same footing as partners. Through the sexual encounter that ensues, Calixta continues to free herself from the confines of the societal constraints of being a woman, moving farther into her own individuality. Chopin describes Calixta's body as finally "knowing for the first time its birthright," that is, freedom from inferiority (860). Since Calixta's awakening comes through a sexual encounter, many argue that the sex she shares with Alcee is the birthright she discovers. By describing a previous encounter they shared in Assumption, Chopin shows that while the sex leads Calixta to her discovery, the breakthrough goes deeper than merely sex. The passion that Calixta finds within herself springs from this very self-awareness and freedom.

With the passing of the storm and the departure of Alcee, Calixta does not revert to her subordinate housewife bonds. Instead, she uses her awakening to discover newfound happiness in her marriage and duties as a wife and mother. When Bobinot and Bibi return, the reader sees a different Calixta than the downtrodden, worried, and selfless Calixta from the beginning of the story. In fact, it is the father and son who must begin "to relax and enjoy themselves," not Calixta, who is already joyously preparing dinner (861). At the dinner table, "they laughed much and so loud that anyone might have heard them" (861). The only other time that the reader sees Calixta laughing is with Alcee. Chopin subtly uses laughing as a metaphor for Calixta's awakening, signaling that while Calixta moves back to her role as housewife, she will never return to her place of inferiority.

Although the circumstances of Louise Mallard's metaphorical awakening are strikingly different, she shares the refusal to give up the freedom she finds. Chopin introduces Louise solely as Mrs. Mallard. Louise is the only character introduced solely by her last name, although she is not the only female. This simple exclusion of her first name instantly sets her up as a mere extension of her husband, not an individual person. It is only in his death that she gains her individuality and thus her first name. Upon first hearing of her husband's death, Mrs. Mallard "did not hear the story as many women have the same [story]." Instead, she "wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment" (862). Chopin shows the reader that, while Mrs. Mallard is truly upset by Brently's death, her grief passes like a storm, giving way to a figurative new day in her life. Alone in her room, Mrs. Mallard first realizes the awakening taking place within her as something "coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully" (862). As the awakening sweeps over her, she moves from fear to joy and from bondage to freedom. The newly christened Louise stands confidently freely in her room. The difference between Calixta's and Louise's newfound freedoms is that Louise's does not free her from her inferiority as a woman, rather it comes from a release of her husband's "powerful will bending hers" (863). However, this will of which Louise speaks is not restricted to women, but to all married couples. Therefore, the joy that she finds is not the freedom from being a wife, but it springs from the freedom to be herself. She no longer must live through her husband, nor have her husband live through her; she only lives for herself. Chopin, omnisciently speaking through Louise, describes this freedom as the "very elixir of life" (863).

However, Louise's awakening is not quite complete. As Louise traverses the staircase back to the main level of the house, Chopin describes her as an unwitting "goddess of Victory" (863). Louise feels victorious not in losing her husband, but in gaining her liberation from submitting to his will (863). It is no small wonder then that upon seeing her husband, and consequently her bondage, walk through the front door, she collapses and dies of a heart attack. Who upon tasting elixir of life would be willing to give it up? In the instant of her death, Louise makes her first truly free decision: to die freely. She does not die from the shock of the return of her husband. She admits that Brently "never looked save with love upon her," and she too "had loved him," if only sometimes (683). However, it is her love of being herself, her joy in her newfound freedom, that kills her. Louise, in the moment of her death, completes her metaphorical awakening by making her first free choice. Moreover, upon completing her awakening, she is truly victorious.

Even though both Calixta and Louise go through two separate awakenings, the central theme of Chopin's stories is clear: the only way for women to gain true freedom is to find individuality apart from the societal constraints placed on them and never to revert from this freedom. Through the Calixta's and Louise's awakenings, Chopin describes two different ways to accomplish the same goal. Both characters make choices to hold onto their newfound freedom, although on the surface it seems as though neither gets to enjoy her freedom fully. Chopin cleverly uses the endings to show that both characters find a freedom that endures, and both make choices to hold onto this happiness.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Storm." *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. 2nd ed. Ed. John Schlib and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 858-61.

Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." *Making Literature Matter: An Anthology for Readers and Writers*. 2nd ed. Ed. John Schlib and John Clifford. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 862-63.