

## EXPLORING GENDER ROLES AND PATRIARCHY IN "THE STORY OF AN HOUR" BY KATE CHOPIN: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper is a feministic interpretation of the Kate Chopin's "*The Story of an Hour*". This research falls under the category of qualitative descriptive study. This paper employs Judith Butler's theories on gender roles and patriarchy as the theoretical framework. The paper focuses on the societal expectations of women of the late nineteenth century by analyzing the character of Mrs. Mallard and her emotional evolution after the news of her husband's death. In this paper, Chopin's narrative will be analyzed on the basis of Butler's gender performativity and subversiveness to patriarchal norms. This paper affirms that the story presents the brief experience of personal liberty as a sad commentary on the oppression of women. By reading Chopin's texts through the lens of Butler's theories, this study advances the field of feminist literary criticism.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Feminist Analysis, Kate Chopin, The Story of an Hour, Judith Butler, Gender Roles, Patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

Kate Chopin (1850-1904) was an American writer, who left her mark on the literary world. Many of her pieces depicted female independence, essence, and disobedience to tradition. She was best remembered for her nuanced depictions of women's interiority. The novel by Chopin was progressive for its time in terms of gender and women's quest for independence. Some of the most famous stories written by her include "The Story of an Hour" and they have been diagnosed using different analytical lenses.

"*The Story of an Hour*" is one of Chopin's most popular short stories. It is a short, yet intense and thought-provoking story that discusses the issues of female liberation and subjectivity. It revolves around a woman called Louise Mallard, who has heart problems and is informed of the demise of her husband. In the beginning, the protagonist, Louise, feels despair and emotional pain after the death of her husband but she eventually finds herself empowered to live the life she wants. This joy is however, short-lived when her husband who she thought was dead unexpectedly appears at home. Sudden appearance of him results in the death of Louise, who is believed to have died from heart disease.

Judith Butler is among the most influential contemporary radical feminism and postmodern gender theorists whose work "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" was published in 1990. According to Butler, sex is not biologically determined but rather the gendered performances of the norms inherent in a culture. According to Judith Butler, gender is not an innate characteristic but a number of interactions carried out according to the rules of the gender binarism. Gender identity can therefore be said to be a continuous and evolving process rather than a destination. Furthermore, Judith Butler finds the possibilities to destabilize or invert gender norms in the understanding and deconstruction of performativity of gender. Such subversion is very productive in challenging and eradicating patriarchy and gender prejudice.

Judith Butler's theories are highly effective in studying characters and their positions in society and add a deeper layer to the critique of works of literature. Her concepts enable the analysis of how gender roles are portrayed and played out in the narrative. Furthermore, through the lens of Butler, it becomes possible to define the subtle and gross

viewpoints on norms in literature. It becomes apparent that narrative is an act of subversion, and that it allows for the critique of power.

To conclude, Kate Chopin's "*The Story of an Hour*" is a thought-provoking tale of independent womanhood as it was in 19th century marriage. The story gains a deeper dimension when viewed through Judith Butler's feminine lens of gender performances and patriarchy. Butler's ideas of gender performance and the parody of misogyny explain how Chopin challenges the standards as well as the oppressiveness of marriage. This approach also serves to enrich the understanding of Chopin's literary virtuosity, alongside proving the continued applicability of feminism in the analysis of literature. Thus, further analysis of gender and identity by employing Butler's theories will help academics to reveal the multifaceted nature of depicted gender issues and the constant pursuit of women's rights.

#### **Limitations of Research**

The use of Judith Butler's theories is very helpful but it can only be applied for her theories on gender performativity and the critique of patriarchy. There are other theories and frameworks that could be applied to Chopin's work and that may be more or less useful than those used in this paper. However, the primary concern of the critique is the representation of gender and patriarchy of the late nineteenth century. Although this context is highly important, the study might not capture all the socio-economic and racial factors that also created the context for women in this period. Moreover, there is not much textual matter to analyze in "*The Story of an Hour*" as it is a short story. It may limit the extent to which the analysis can be conducted as well as the number of topics that may be covered relative to larger literary pieces. Further, it is impossible to avoid subjectivity when interpreting Chopin's narrative through the lens of Butler. It is for this reason that depending on the theoretical orientation and bias of a scholar, he may come up with different conclusions from the same text. Moreover, the conclusion drawn from this particular study of 'The Story of an Hour' may not be applicable on other works of Chopin or other authors. Features that may call for specific approaches to analysis can characterize individual literary works. In addition, Feminist theory is dynamic in nature as it is still developing. However, the theories that Butler put forward are far from being the only phase of

feminism. It can be argued that new developments in feminist theory may provide different insights that are not explored in this paper. Finally, effects of Chopin's story and feminism are diverse and depend on readers' experiences and attitudes. This study may not give a comprehensive understanding of the reaction of the readers to the text.

By acknowledging these limitations, this research paper is an attempt to provide a coherent and critically informed perspective on the topic, understanding that there could be other valuable findings with further research and by applying different methods.

#### **Significance of Research**

This research paper seeks to analyze "*The Story of an Hour*" by Kate Chopin, with a special focus on Judith Butler's feminist theory. It provides an analysis of Mrs. Mallard that shows depth and complexity while shedding light on social issues such as gender roles and patriarchy that are present in the short story. Further, using Judith Butler's gender performativity and a critique of patriarchy, this paper links canonical texts to modern feminism. This reveals that Butler's insights can be used to enhance the understanding of literature and vice versa. Furthermore, this paper contributes to the field of feminist literary criticism by analyzing a text that has been previously examined by other critics. It enriches the analysis of gender and identity construction and subversion in literary texts, thus deepening the discussion of feminism. Moreover, the analysis contributes to the understanding of gender identity and the effects that the social norms have on the freedom of people. Through analyzing Mrs. Mallard's temporary freedom, the paper can be useful in the discussion of the ability to go against the male-dominated society and gender issues in feminism. Additionally, this research has practical implications not only for literary scientists but also for gender and cultural scientists and sociologists. It shows that interdisciplinary collaboration can enhance the study of literature and its impact on society. Furthermore, the paper can be useful for educators who focus on the teaching of both feminist theory and literary works. It is an example of how abstract concepts can be used to analyse literary texts and can benefit the intellectual growth of students. Finally, this work promotes the analysis of other literary texts through identical or different feminist

approaches based on the connections between the story by Chopin and the concepts by Butler.

To sum up, this research paper contributes to the further comprehension of one of the most significant novels of the American literature and stresses the perspectives of the feminism conceptualizations in the modern reading. It enriches the knowledge among various academic fields and it carries on the struggle for gender equity and thinking in literary and other areas of life.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent is Chopin's representation of Mrs. Mallard in "*The Story of an Hour*" a commentary on the patriarchal society of the late nineteenth century?
2. How can Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and the subversion of patriarchal codes be used to analyse the character of Mrs. Mallard and her reaction to her husband's death?
3. What does Chopin's narrative propose concerning woman emancipation in a male-dominated society from Butler's standpoint?

### **Research Objectives**

- To understand the portrayal of Mrs. Mallard in "*The Story of an Hour*" and assess the extent to which her character embodies the gender roles and expectations of women in the late nineteenth-century American society.
- In order to understand how Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity and the deconstruction of patriarchal norms can be applied to the character of Mrs. Mallard let us look at how these theories help us understand her reaction to her husband's death and her brief taste of freedom.
- To understand the message of Chopin's story in relation to the theme of possible emancipation of women within the framework of a patriarchal society, it is essential to apply Butler's feminist perspective on the subversive and critical portrayal of gender roles in "*The Story of an Hour*".

### **Literature Review**

Feminist theories have played an influential role in the interpretation of literature and developed models of study of gender and power relations, as well as the representation of the feminine and the masculine in literature. By the help of the various schools of feminism, researchers have been able to examine the ways in which literature both mirrors and influences the general society's perception on gender and its facets. Another author that has touched on the subject of feminist literary theory is Smith (2010) who compares second-wave feminism to the more contemporary intersectional approach. In this case, she provides the works of theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and bell hooks as a way of showing how feminism has informed debates and the ways it influences literary criticism. However, in the field of literary criticism, Showalter (1979) defined the gynocriticism which concerns women writers and their writings. particularly, she insisted on the idea of male and female literary traditions and women's voice in literature. This has been followed by the gender performativity theory described by Butler (1990) that categorizes gender as an artificial construct that is performed through enacting routines. This framework has been operationalized to deconstruct and reluctant discourses on gender identity in literature and gain a better understanding of how gender is portrayed in literature. Additionally, the concept of intersectionality as defined by Crenshaw (1991) asserts that social categories are mutually connected, such as race, class, and sex and demonstrate the effects of identities intersectionally. Intersecting personal equality school of thought is utilized to access intersectionalities and ability to examine literary works taking into consideration different dimensions of oppression. Jones (2018) examines the ideas of Butler with regard to race and gender, explaining how Black women move in and against patriarchy with the help of their performativity. They build upon Butler's work by emphasizing how multiple dimensions of identity interact and complicate matters beyond mere genders. With the framework of feministic analysis it has been possible understanding freedom, identity, and oppression of women described in "*The Story of an Hour*" by Kate Chopin. Some critics have looked at the representation of Mrs. Mallard and the notion of her freedom as a bird in the framework of postfeminism. According to Berkove (2000), Chopin's

story counteracts marriage conventions in the nineteenth century and the extent to which women's freedom is restrained. He argues that Mrs. Mallard's reaction to her husband's death avows the desire for freedom from the oppressive social standards of the patriarchal society the demand for male dominance. Thus, Toth (1999) uncovers Chopin's feminist agenda and the subversive elements highlighted in "The Story of an Hour." In particular, she focuses on the protagonist's inner transformation and stresses that Chopin uses narrative strategies to reveal Mrs. Mallard's fight for individuality in a patriarchal world. Moreover, in the work by Korb (1995), the author discusses Chopin's Feminist analysis of the story explaining the focus on the transformation of Mrs. Mallard's character. According to Korb, Chopin subverts the conventional views on gender roles by portraying Mrs. Mallard's brief escape from the norms as an act of rebelliousness. Existing scholarly literature on Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" has for the most part concentrated on themes such as freedom, individuation, and patriarchy in marriage. Some scholars such as Lawrence I. Berkove (2000) and Emily Toth (1999) have elaborated on the potential feminism and rebelliousness inherent in Chopin's piece. According to Berkove (2000), Chopin uses the character of Mrs. Mallard to give a social commentary to married institutions and how they confine women. Toth (1999) also focuses on how Chopin's narrative strategies emphasize the process of the protagonist's search for independence within the oppressive culture of the male-dominated society. Nevertheless, this kind of analysis, specifically through the application of Judith Butler's theories concerning gender and patriarchy, has been performed quite sparsely. Based on Butler, the principles of gender performativity and the subversion of identity enable understanding Chopin's text as a rich contribution to the discourse on femininity and gender relations. For Butler (1990), gender is not something one is, but rather what one does based on the standards proactively laid down by the society. From this point of view, it is possible to reveal how Mrs. Mallard's brief moment of liberation subverts the gender normativity she was subjected to. Drawing from Butler's (2004) concepts of gender performativity, identities are fixed through a series of enacted behaviors and social authorization that can be challenged. Basing on this theory, it is possible to have an understanding of Mrs. Mallard's character

and her reaction after the news of her husband's death. It shows how her brief liberation is just an illusion within a Patriarchal framework which puts her in theatrical gendered performance as a wife.

### Research Methodology

This research paper employs the qualitative descriptive method of analyzing Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" with a focus on the feminist lens. The theoretical framework adopted by this research is Judith Butler's Gender Roles and Patriarchy. The researcher attempts to analyze the main passages in accordance with Butler's gender performativity and the critique of patriarchal culture. According to Butler, gender is something that is performed and thus it is performed in a way that fits into the society's expectations. This research will also aim at investigating how Mrs. Mallard's short period of liberation is a way of coming out from these performances. However, it will also reflect on power and control in the marriage of Mrs. Mallard's and her response to her husband's death using Butler's critique of patriarchal structures. This work's main goals are to analyze Chopin's story as a satire of the 19th-century gender expectations and to find out Butler's insights on Mrs. Mallard's transformation and her short experience of freedom. Finally, it contributes to the understanding of the relationship between literature and gender theory, showing how the novella by Chopin and the ideas of Butler remain relevant in the contemporary world.

### Discussion & Analysis

The species of feminism that Chopin displays through Mrs. Mallard in 'The Story of an Hour' is indeed the oppressive role and repression of women during late nineteenth century through such textual lines.

Submission to Marriage: Based on this, the initial response of Mrs. Mallard, which is sad but seems happy at first as she has lost her husband who she was expected to be loyal to, depict her position in the society. As; "She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment". This burst of passionate feelings illustrates compliance with the societal demand to be emotionally vulnerable to her husband, which ultimately aligns with the belief that a woman should be subordinate to man in marriage.

Identity Defined by Husband: This strategy also reinforces the fact that Mrs. Mallard's identity is majorly defined under the status of a wife and the



title Mrs. underscores this aspect. As; *"Mrs. Mallard, afflicted with a heart trouble"*. When she speaks the name of her husband, Mreton Brently Mallard, it underscores how her role in the marriage is subservient to his.

**Confinement to Domestic Sphere:** The story also illustrates the fact that Mrs. Mallard was a woman who was expected to be confined to her home during the late 19th century. As; *"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"*. From this passage, one can infer that both physical and psychological sickness of Mrs. Mallard were perceived as more grounds for her protection from the realities of the outside world, thus amplifying her exclusion to her place in the home sphere.

**Limited Agency and Independence:** Another aspect of the oppression and lack of freedom for Mrs. Mallard is evidenced by her submission and passiveness in the wake of her husband's death. While she may experience a feeling of joy the moment she hears it, her first thoughts are not of the freedom she has gained but worry for her husband. As; *"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"*. In this passage, there is evidence of Mrs. Mallard's affection towards her husband and her incapability to consider life without him, which was her marriage.

In conclusion, the character of Mrs. Mallard in Kate Chopin's *"The Story of an Hour"* remains another portrayal of a woman whose liberty, decision-making, and individualism are conditioned and contained by the socially defined norms of the Victorian era. Moving through the textual lines that describing Mrs. Mallard as a downtrodden wife, a woman who is trapped in her home, and a woman who is voiceless and powerless against the existing culture of marriage, Chopin portrays the living conditions of women of that period quite vividly.

### **Patriarchal Norms**

**Gender Performativity:** According to Butler the notion of the gender is not an essential attribute but the way a person performs with reference to the gender roles in society. To some extent, the performative aspect of gender is evident in Mrs. Mallard's reaction to her husband's death up until the very last hour in Chopin's *"The Story of an Hour"*.

As; *"She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms"*. Mrs. Mallard's rapid emotional reaction of screaming and fainting also evokes the stereotypical portrayal of women as hysterical creatures who have to rely on men as their husbands, thus imposing the conventional gender roles on the reader. But as the play progresses, one realizes that Mrs. Mallard's reaction to her husband's death is not as simple as it seems, or as it is expected from a woman of her class and status – she is battling with her restraints of being a female in the society. After the initial display of grieves, she goes to her room, which implies that she wants to grief alone and in private, not conforming to a performance expected from a widow. This moment of isolation is transformed into Mrs. Mallard's opportunity to think of herself as a free woman who can live her life as she sees fit while defying her stereotypically gendered role.

**Patriarchal Deconstruction and Resistance:** Subsequently, in response to gender performativity, other aspects of Judith Butler's theories pertain to the decentralization of patriarchal constructs and the possibility of subversion. Mrs. Mallard's moments of looking at the things and realizing the actual situations after the death of her husband can be seen as a liberation and rebellion against the male authority. As; *"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"*. Here, Mrs. Mallard sees the lack of her husband's dominating will, thus resigning from the capitulation to the patriarchal rulership. Additionally, Mrs. Mallard's eager expectation of something unknown which will turn up at the door also points to a rebellion against dominant patriarchy norms. While awaiting this indeterminate prognosis that she keeps expecting, not without a touch of fear, she confronts the norms of gender identification set in by society. This moment of freedom is a sudden opportunity that leads the reader observe Mrs. Mallard's newly found liberation and freedom for women other than being just a wife.

**Intersectionality and Complexity:** Butler's theories also encourage multiple approaches to the gender and power relations in *"The Story of an Hour"*. Although Butler concentrates on the performance of gender, her theory could be broad to encompass race, class, and sexual oppression. For instance, the observation that Mrs. Mallard is a middle aged, white, middle-

class woman implies that the events portrayed in the story may not hold similar significances for women from oppressed groups. Intersectional analysis enables one to capture the ways in which varying identities combine and recombine to create power and oppression in people's lived experiences. Furthermore, Butler speaks of gender as a construction that is not fixed but is constantly in a process of construction, which adds a layer of depth to Mrs. Mallard's character. The simple binary construct of 'woman' versus 'man' cannot contain Mrs. Mallard's character as she wades through a sea of mixed feelings and emotions. Her moment of freedom is also a moment of defiance and autonomy that eats away at the patriarchy and its domineering structure.

In short, Butler's theories of gender performativity of deconstruction of the patriarchal norms seem to be a useful tool for analyzing Kate Chopin's *Story of an Hour*. Through using Butler's framework one is able to understand how gender performativity is both regulated and resisted, which adds to the textual analysis of "The Story of an Hour," helping to emphasize its position in today's feminism.

### **Potential for Female Liberation within a Patriarchal Society**

**Resistance against Patriarchal Control:** The conflict between the main character and male domination is one of the focuses when analyzing the short story "The Story of an Hour". The feminist analysis by Judith Butler proves to be useful in comprehending Mrs. Mallard's acts of rebelliousness and attempts at achieving independence in a male-dominated society. As; *"There would be no powerful will bending hers..."*. These lines underscore Mrs. Mallard's realization of her husband's lack of will, an emancipatory experience from the masculinist domination. Butler's feminism sees this as a form of rebellion against the tyrannical power deployed by men in societies that are compounding of patriarchal structures. Mrs. Mallard's effort of trying to 'bash down' this feeling of oppression also emphasizes the narrator's desire to stand up to male domination. According to Butler, this can be viewed as a manifestation of power, as Mrs. Mallard goes against what women of her status at the time should do and stay independent.

**Moments of Liberation and Empowerment:** It also shows the opportunities of freedom and regaining voices and agency for Mrs. Mallard at some points in

the story. Therefore, using Judith Butler's feminist perspective, one can respond to these scenes as radical exercises of the independence, despite the restrictions of patriarchy. When Mrs. Mallard exclaims, As; *"Free! Body and soul free!"*. It represents a time when she has if not broken, then at least loosened the chains of her marriage. According to Butler's lens, it can be a sign of domination to the patriarchal structures that had earlier on sufficed women to be inferior and voiceless; a clue to the possibility of women attaining freedom in a patriarchal society. That Mrs. Mallard clearly saw her self as having a future where things would 'belong' to her 'absolutely' underscored her new found freedoms and rights over herself and her property. Butler's *All About Evil* brings a different perspective to this vision and turns what is a usual vision for a horror film into a symbol of hope and the possibility of change in relation with gender roles and norms.

In short, the conflict between Chopin's *"The Story of an Hour"* and Butler's feminism has been demonstrated to provide a strong picture of liberation from social oppression. As for the character of Mrs. Mallard, Chopin shows that she is a woman who gains some freedom in the male-dominant society, which contradicts the norms of the time and reflects on the modern construction of the female character. By employing Butler's theories of gender performativity and expanding the presence of the gender power dynamic within the text, it could lead to further examination of woman's liberation in literature and in society.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper has endeavored to shed light on the complex issues of feminism in Kate Chopin's *"The Story of an Hour"* with the help of Judith Butler's gender theory. Thus, analyzing Mrs. Mallard's character and her brief taste of freedom, the work demonstrates Chopin's protest against the oppressive norms of the mid-nineteenth-century society and highlights the impact of patriarchal culture on women. Following Butler's ideas of gender performativity and subversive subjectivity this paper reveals how Mrs. Mallard's reaction to her husband's death briefly subverts hegemonic femininity and opens a possibility of female agency and subjectivity. Thus, incorporating Butler's theories improves the analysis of Chopin's story as well as proves the significance of these feministic

concepts today. The paper also recognizes the limitations of this approach such as the limit of theoretical application and the subjectivity in the interpretative analysis. Nevertheless, the study offers a crucial understanding of combining literary texts analysis with the principles of feminism in the overall discourse of gender and identity construction. Finally, the findings of this research point to the value of interdisciplinary approaches to enhance the understanding of literary works and to develop the field of feminism. Thus, the paper breaks the link between the traditional works of literature and contemporary theoretical analysis and promotes the further discussion about gender issues in literature while raising people's awareness of the constant fight for gender equality and the impact of the literature in this process.

### Recommendations for Future Related Studies

- Future research might extend further the analysis by including other types of feminism beyond Judith Butler. Gender and intersectionality could be investigated in further detail through the use of theoretical frameworks of some other theorists, like bell hooks, Simone de Beauvoir or Kimberlé Crenshaw.
- The future scholars should read "*The Story of an Hour*" in the context of other works of a similar author, Kate Chopin or the contemporary writers. Lakoff's method can show how individual writers and works across time and place express and innovate on the gender and patriarchy, providing a depth analysis of works in a broader social and cultural context.
- It is recommended that other researchers further look into the socio-economic, racial and cultural similars of the late nineteenth century with an aim of having a better understanding of the inhibitions of the likes of Mrs. Mallard. It may include the contextual approach which involves the examination of the Chopin work in relation to the other establishments of women's movements and the generated culture of the same period.
- Subsequent researchers need to harness the examination of inter-disciplinary approaches combining sociology, psychology and

cultural studies. This can enlighten the understanding of goals and desires of characters, obligatory roles that society, specifically male-dominated environment, imposes on women, and psychological effects of such treatment.

- Other scholars must examine how different readers over time have construed the "*The Story of an Hour*". This may involve preparing a reception history study, where the doing of the text involves investigating how specific socio-political realities affected the comprehending of Chopin's account.
- Future research should extend the presented research to consider a wider range of gender and sexual minorities. Thus, reconsideration of how Chopin's work fits or diverges from the modern discourses of gender and sexuality might shed new light on its importance today.
- Further studies could extend to analyzing the application of literary devices and narratives in the work of Chopin in relation to feminism. A critical analysis of her symbolism, irony, and chosen narrative perspective may provide a reader with a better understanding of how her works influenced the development of the feminist novel.

Through implementing these suggestions, further research can build and develop more knowledge about Kate Chopin's "*The Story of an Hour*" and deepen the meaning of the text in the sociology of gender in the literary analysis.

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