

A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE STORM AND THE STORY OF AN HOUR BY KATE CHOPIN

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Abstract: This paper is a comparative study between the female characters in *The Storm* and *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, unveiling the female act of resistance on 19th century. Although her books are sometimes considered as shallow because they have female characters basically trying to get married, it is pertinent to look closer to understand what would happen to a woman who did not marry in that period and also to comprehend her writing as a way to say women are not pleased with this life style, however she could not have written such things in a clearer way, otherwise her books would certainly not be published at all. The narratives subscribe very independent women able to survive without the support of any male figure.

Keywords: Female resistance, comparative literature, Kate Chopin.

ESTUDO COMPARATIVO ENTRE AS PERSONAGENS FEMININAS EM THE STORM E THE STORY OF A HOUR POR KATE CHOPIN

Resumo: Este artigo é um estudo comparativo entre as personagens femininas em *The Storm* e *The Story of a Hour* por Kate Chopin, desvelando os atos de resistência feminina no século XIX. Embora às vezes sejam consideradas superficiais, por as personagens femininas estarem preocupadas em se casar, é perti-

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nente olhar mais para entender o que aconteceria com uma mulher que não se casou nesse período e também para compreender sua escrita como uma maneira de dizer que as mulheres não estão satisfeitas com este estilo de vida. No entanto, ela não poderia ter escrito essas coisas de forma mais clara, caso contrário, seus livros certamente não seriam publicados. As narrativas subscrevem mulheres independentes capazes de sobreviver sem o apoio de qualquer figura masculina, patriarcal.

Palavras-Chave: Resistência feminina, literatura comparada, Kate Chopin.

Introduction

The role women have been playing in society has been highly discussed nowadays, and despite the fact the topic has been more debated and the situation has been improving, for example women now can vote and also have careers only occupied by men, as the presidency for instance, it is essential to mention that it still has a lot to improve considering for example the fact that in some cases, women and men perform the same job activity but the salary is still higher for men. Although many improvements have been made and are still being made, it seems that women cannot be totally free to live in the way they want to, being completely responsible for what they really want in life. Despite the fact the current society sees itself as “modern” it still tries in every way to “force” women into those marriage rules created so many years ago, and it is relevant to mention that marrying or having children are not awful or unacceptable things, however, women should be free to choose it or not.

Nowadays, the social networks seem to be a place in which women can at least try to expose and debate the situation, however as in the past those technological apparatus did not exist, many literature female authors used their writ-

ing to explore the topic probably as an attempt to bring the subject up and maybe to be able to have a shy discussion on the issue, or it could have been an attempt to unburden the situation women, and consequently female writers, lived in which certainly brought no satisfaction to them. Virginia Woolf was one of those authors who wrote about the topic, for example in her essay named *A Room of one's own* in which the author discusses the role played by women in the literary world, clearly dominated by men. Jane Austen was another female writer who wrote on the same subject being very critical on the role women were supposed to play in the nineteenth century, being raised specifically to get married and nothing else. Although her books are sometimes considered as shallow because they have female characters basically trying to get married, it is pertinent to look closer to understand what would happen to a woman who did not marry in that period and also to comprehend her writing as a way to say women are not pleased with this life style, however she could not have written such things in a clearer way, otherwise her books would certainly not be published at all.

Born in 1850, it is in the same context that Kate Chopin is inserted. After the death of her father, Kate lived with her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother who were all widows, and despite of that, they were very independent women able to survive without the support of any male figure. Being raised in an environment like this certainly may have influenced the themes Kate Chopin approached in her short stories including the ones to be analyzed on this essay. The first one is *The Storm*, written by Chopin in 1898, however it was only published in 1969 in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*. The second short story to be analyzed is *The Story of an Hour* written by the same author in 1894, originally published as *The Dream of an Hour* and in the following years been reprinted as *The Story of an Hour*.²¹¹

Due to the date both stories were written, it would be possible to affirm that women from that period lived on the same context, and although the main female characters of both short stories experience different kinds of freedom, at this point is possible to observe how the author portrays marriage as a kind of prison, certainly a different prison to both characters, but yet , prison. Then once the characters have a chance, even if it is just a small one, to scape from that prison for a few minutes, they seem to grasp this chance with their lives in order to live for themselves, even if it would be just for a few minutes, because living a live to please their husbands seems to be quite tiring.

The female characters in The Storm and The Story of an Hour

The Story of an Hour starts by presenting Mrs. Mallard as a quite fragile woman who was receiving the very sad news about her husband's death on an railroad disaster. "Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death." (CHOPIN, p. 01). She was presented, in the passive voice, as someone quite frail who certainly could not receive such news easily. The author's choice of using the passive voice might be interpreted as the passive role women played in society, being usually told by their fathers and husbands what to do and often what to even think. Her heart trouble is another aspect that can be seen as something physical, as if she has just had a heart attack for instance, but also as something emotional, considering her feelings towards her husband and also towards her marriage which put her in a situation in which she did not feel free at all.

Mrs. Mallard wept at once when she finally hear the news from her sister Josephine, and this might indicate her

husband was not an abusive husband and she was not into an awful marriage.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender, hands folded in death; the face that 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 (CHOPIN, p. 02).

Despite the fact Mrs. Mallard does not seem to suffer any kind of abuse on her marriage, it does not mean she was happy about being married and the idea of having her life and the years to come only to herself seems to be more appealing than spending her years to come looking after someone. Although Mrs. Mallard's reaction was not what was expected from her (perhaps to be paralyzed and unable to accept the reality would be something acceptable for a recent widow), she wept with an wild abandonment, and this might indicate her marriage was not something really unpleasant. Her husband does not seem to be someone cruel who kept her in an invisible prison called marriage, however the idea of happiness usually sold by this "happily ever after" was not the reality of her marriage, and although there were no traces of violence, perhaps she was not happy for being married and that might be what has caused the flow of emotions of this character, who decided to apparently mourn alone in her bedroom.

The Storm begins by presenting the setting in which Bibi, a four years old boy, and his father Bobinot were inserted in:

The leaves were so still that even Bibi thought it was going to rain. Bobinôt, who was accustomed to converse on

terms of perfect equality with his little son, called the child's attention to certain sombre clouds that were rolling with sinister intention from the west, accompanied by a sullen, threatening roar. (CHOPIN, p. 01)

From this quotation, it is evident that he had a weather condition coming and how important was to get shelter before the storm comes. Bobinot, the husband, is also presented to us as a concerning father who was taking care of his child in a careful way, paying attention to everything that could possibly harm the kid. At this point there is no hint about where the mother is or what she could possibly be doing and also there is no evidence about what kind of husband Bobinot is, however judging by the concerning way he takes care of his child, the reader might tend to consider him as a good husband, quite far from being an abusive or violent one. Due to Bibi's concern about his mother because of the storm, it also seems that Calixta was a good mother, loved by her son as well.

It is only on part II that the female character, Calixta, is presented to the reader as a very devoted housekeeper, so involved into the chores that was unable to notice the storm coming.

She sat at a side window sewing furiously on a sewing machine. She was greatly occupied and did not notice the approaching storm. But she felt very warm and often stopped to mop her face on which the perspiration gathered in beads. She unfastened her white sacque at the throat. It began to grow dark, and suddenly realizing the situation she got up hurriedly and went

about closing windows and doors.
(CHOPIN, p. 01)

The housework is an aspect that differs the female characters analyzed on this essay considering that while Calixta was involved on the chores, Mrs. Mallard gives the impression to be on higher social level that did not require her to have to perform such activities, however this is pure speculation considering there is no evidence in the text about that.

After receiving the news and moving to the bedroom, Mrs. Mallard certainly did not behave as a loving wife would possibly behave and although it cannot prove she was not sad about his death, when she sits in that comfortable armchair in front of that open window alone in her bedroom, it seems that from that moment she was able to see what she has never seen before looking from the very same window:

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. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves. There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window.
(CHOPIN, p. 01).

Now that she was allegedly free from her marriage, she could see and hear things she was not able to see or hear before, and the detailed description of things as the trees or even the songs playing on the street are clear examples of

that. The patches of blue sky also mentioned on this quotation, might represent that even the sky was changing to her, as if before she could only see a cloudy sky and now the weather was changing and the sky getting clear again.

The narrator of this story does not reveal how Mrs. Mallard was actually feeling, the reader must read into her actions to understand the flow of emotions she goes through from the moment she hear the news. So far, the only thing that is quite evident is that she cried at the moment she received the news, and all the minimalistic actions she performed in that bedroom afterwards. It seems she was actually enjoying the moment, not quite certain about what she was feeling: "She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams." (CHOPIN, p. 01). At first she was motionless, maybe digesting what has happened, and the sobbing might be what was trying to wake her up to reality, and a reality she seems to be quite happy to be part of.

Mrs. Mallard and Calixta were both experiencing a certain kind of freedom, however Mrs. Mallard was certain her freedom would last forever, while Calixta was experiencing a temporary kind of freedom, considering she was alone in the house, which might not happen very often because her son was still quite young and probably depending on her most of the time. Her freedom would be over once the storm ceased and on this temporary freedom moment, while she was still trying to get the chores done, Calixta was surprised by Alcée Laballiere, who was someone from her past that she has not seen since her marriage and never alone.

Their first conversation was quite shy:

- May I come and wait on your gallery till the storm is over, Calixta? - He asked.

- Come 'long in, M'sier Alcée. (CHOPIN, p. 01)

Considering the period Calixta lived in, she found herself in a problematic situation, because due to society rules at the time, it would not be advisable for a woman to receive a man in her house when her husband was not there. However, maybe even taking into account whatever happened between them in the past, she would be quite uncomfortable if she had to deny shelter in such a terrible weather condition. Understanding how complicated the situation might be for Calixta, Alcée intended to wait for the storm to be over outside, however due to the severity of the weather, he had to wait inside the house.

He expressed an intention to remain outside, but it was soon apparent that he might as well have been out in the open: the water beat in upon the boards in driving sheets, and he went inside, closing the door after him. It was even necessary to put something beneath the door to keep the water out. (CHOPIN, p. 02).

While on *The Storm* there are two male characters who somehow relate to the female characters, in *The Story of an Hour* there is the figure of Mrs. Mallard's brother and the ghost figure of her husband and once she found out she was no longer a married woman, the detailed flow of emotions described in the text might show how much she was enjoying that moment and her new life.

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!" 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 (p-01). Mrs. Mallard probably has not experienced freedom in a long time, and that is precisely why this moment might be so delightful to her. Not having anyone to live for her, as the narrator emphasizes, seems to be a great joy to this character.

Calixta was also experiencing a certain kind of freedom, and despite the fact she demonstrates her concern towards her husband and son, it did not stop Alcée to make the first move towards her: "Calixta put her hands to her eyes, and with a cry, staggered backward. Alcée's arm encircled her, and for an instant he drew her close and spasmodically to him." (CHOPIN, p. 02). Touching is certainly something quite emotional in literature and considering the period in which the story is told, it might symbolize a very intimate act. Nowadays the body, especially the female one, has been taken for granted considering it is very easy to see a naked woman and instantaneously put it in a sexual context, however in the past, seeing a woman's ankle, for example, would be something quite important and maybe sexual to men. A 1993 movie, named *The piano*, also brings this idea of how sexual touching can be when the characters Ada and George fell in love and the first time he actually touched her in a sexual context, was through a small role on her socks. By watching the movie, it is possible to observe how such a small action like this, could have such a sexual impact on both characters.

On the same page, the author makes clear how this touching was able to make them revive the past: "The contact of her warm, palpitating body when he had unthinkingly drawn her into his arms, had aroused all the old-time infatua-

tion and desire for her flesh.” (CHOPIN, p. 03). The author's choice of words is another aspect to be paid close attention, the word “unthinkingly” might be understood as this flow of emotion that took control of Alcée’s actions, having him to act in a way he was not able to think about all the consequences of what he was doing, and Calixta’s “palpitating body” could be seen as how nervous she was for being in such a situation that she was strangely enjoying.

On this flow of new emotions, Alcée mentions Assumption:

Do you remember — in Assumption, Calixta?” he asked in a low voice broken by passion. Oh! she remembered; for in Assumption he had kissed her and kissed and kissed her; until his senses would well nigh fail, and to save her he would resort to a desperate flight. If she was not an immaculate dove in those days, she was still inviolate; a passionate creature whose very defenselessness had made her defense, against which his honor forbade him to prevail. Now — well, now — her lips seemed in a manner free to be tasted, as well as her round, white throat and her whiter breasts. (CHOPIN, p. 03)

Assumption is the name of a small city in which they met and share some kisses, however they did not have sex on this time. The word assumption has a religious connotation resembling something immaculate and virginal. Instead of getting carnal in a place associated with virginity, they ended up having sex in Calixta’s home, which resembles a certain kind of maturity, considering this time they were both adults and responsible for their actions (Shmoop Editorial Team). All those uncompleted actions from their time in Assumption

might have been the trigger for the actions who took place in Calixta's home.

Beyond being the title of the short story, the storm is actually used by Chopin to create the perfect environment for adultery considering the only reason why Alcée entered into Calixta's house was because of the terrible weather conditions, and having this in mind, they knew nobody would come to her door, so in a certain way they were free to give in to the flesh pleasure they were unable to have in the past. The Storm also represents the movement of the story considering there would be no story if the storm has not happened. (Shmoop Editorial Team).

The last line of the story is: " So the storm passed and everyone was happy" (CHOPIN, p. 05). As mentioned shortly before, the movement of the story is directly related to the storm, and once it was over, Calixta and Alcée went back to their husband and wife respectively. She had her passionate freedom moments, but now it was time to come back to her mother and wife reality, which again, certainly was not an abusive reality considering there is no evidence in the text about that. An intriguing point about the end is that although there is an affair in the story, and despite all the problems this kind of relationship might bring to the involved ones, the short story ends with a happy ending, leaving only the speculation whether the affair ended that day or not.

While in *The Storm* the whole story develops in a few hours, in *The Story of an Hour* the facts happen in an hour, and this hour might represent how fast someone's life can be changed and it is also relevant to mention how death plays an important role on this story considering the whole plot focuses on the news relieved to Mrs. Mallard about her allegedly dead husband, and once she discovers this death was actually a wrong information, her life turns upside down again.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richard stood waiting for them at the bottom. (CHOPIN, p. 02).

For the last minutes, Mrs. Mallard have being tasting her new life, a life in which she could live only to herself, but once she opens the door and look at her sister, she might have understood something has happened, and judging by her goddess of Victory looking, it is likely to assume something quite opposite have happened at that moment.

While *The Storm* brings a linear narrative in which an affair starts and ends, *The Story of an Hour* brings something surprisingly considering in the beginning of the text, it is clear Mr. Mallard has died and his wife was perfectly fine, even enjoying those moments. However, by the end of the narrative, Chopin surprises by revealing he was actually alive and that Mrs. Mallard was the one who has died.

Someone was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife. But Richards was too late. When the doctor came they said she had died of heart disease - of joy that kills. (CHOPIN, p. 02)

The doctor concluded that Mrs. Mallard had died because her heart could not bare the happiness she felt for seeing her husband alive, however, considering all the evidence presented in the text, all her freedom moments were only experienced when she heard of his death which gives the idea that she actually died because she experienced a free life for a few minutes and was not able to went back to that life in which she could not be as free as she wanted.

Mrs. Mallard and Calixta were two married women who lived in a period in which women were not supposed to have a voice, and certainly were raised to be married and have kids. Freedom do not seem to be a word that belonged to their vocabulary of life, considering the marriage would not allow such a thing. Calixta found her freedom moments in Alcées's arms for a few hours, however due to the end of the story, she certainly did not need to carry on that infatuation or even the affair. She seemed to be fine on her marriage, however tasting a little bit of freedom certainly made her feel good and alive.

Differently from Calixta, Mrs. Mallard did not have a son, but she had a husband, who, according to the evidences presented in the text was a good man, however the lack of liberty her marriage imposed to her was a huge problem and once she had the chance to experience freedom, she could never go back to a life which lacks liberty .Having someone to live and often to think for her was definitely too much for her heart to take.

Final Words

In this study, we aim at studying the female characters in *The Storm* and *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, unveiling the female act of resistance on 19th century. The analysis shows that Chopin books are pertinent to look closer to understand what would happen to a woman who did not

frame social standards in that period and also to comprehend her writing as a way of women resistance against this life style of submission.

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