

PAPER DETAILS

TITLE: "Bir Saatin Öyküsü" veya Ataerkil Ideolojinin Gölgesinde Kaybolmus Bir Kadının Hayat Hikâyesi

AUTHORS: Sema Zafer SÜMER

PAGES: 191-196

ORIGINAL PDF URL: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/1724525>

“Bir Saatin Öyküsü” veya Ataerkil İdeolojinin Gölgesinde Kaybolmuş Bir Kadının Hayat Hikâyesi

“The Story of an Hour” or The Story of a Lost Lady in the Shadow of the Patriarchy’s Ideology

Sema Zafer SÜMER*

ÖZET

Feminist edebiyatın öncü romanlarından biri olan *Uyanış*’ın yazarı Kate Chopin, aynı zamanda yazdığı birçok öykü ile tanınır. Amerikan edebiyatının özgün isimlerinden Kate Chopin’in kısa öyküleri, aynı temleri yoğunlaştırılmış bir şekilde dile getirmesi nedeniyle romanlarından daha başarılı olarak kabul edilir. Kendi özgün biçimini geliştiren Chopin, öykülerinde ataerkil toplumun kadına biçtiği rolü yadsır, öznelliklerine sahip olamamış ve seslerini duyuramamış kadınların egemen kültür tarafından dışlanışlarını ve nasıl temsil edildiklerini simgeleyen kadın tipleri yaratır. Yazarın en çok okunan ve bilinen öyküleri arasında yer alan ve bu çalışmanın konusunu oluşturan *The Story of an Hour*’da, Louise Mallard’ın yaşamındaki bir saat anlatılır. Yazar öykü boyunca toplumdaki alışlagelmiş evlilik kurumunu, erkek-kadın ilişkilerini, erkeğin üstünlüğünü ve kadının bastırılmışlığını dile getirir. Yeni bir “ben” ve “kimlik” arayışı içinde olan Louise’in özgürlük arayışı kahramanın karakteri ve psikolojisi ile gözler önüne serilir. Evlilik kurumunun kadın üzerindeki olumsuz etkileri evrende kendisini yapayalnız hissedilen bir kadın imgesi ile okuyucuya aktarılır. Bu anlamda *The Story of an Hour* feminizmin misyonunu günümüzde de devam ettiren politik bir amaca sahiptir. Öykü boyunca Chopin’in sanatsal bir bakışla kadın yaşantısının parçalarını bir araya getirme çabası irdelenir ve kadının var olma savaşında bireysel değerlerle toplumsal değerlerin çatışması gözler önüne serilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Kadın, Evlilik, Ataerkil İdeoloji, Yeni Bir Ben, Yeni Bir Kimlik.

Çalışmanın Türü : Araştırma

ABSTRACT

Kate Chopin, author of the proto-feminist novel, *The Awakening*, was also a prolific writer of short stories. In American literature, because of their economy, Chopin’s short stories can be considered to be more successful than her novel as she uses fewer words to express the same theme. *The Story of an Hour* which is Chopin’s briefest and most widely read stories is the story of the last hour in the life of Mr. Mallard’s wife. Throughout the story Chopin implies a very conventional male-female relationship in marriage where husband is the authority figure and a wife is a submissive dependent. Mrs. Mallard’s search for individuality and freedom: freedom to decide what to be, how to think, and how to live is epitomized in her character and psychology. So *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin represents a negative view of marriage by presenting the reader with a woman who is completely alone in the universe. Chopin’s writings as a new feminist voice put much emphasis on women’s lives and their continual struggles to create an identity of their own within the boundaries of the patriarchy. She repeatedly deals with tabooing subject of women’s sexual urge and sensual experiences.

The Story of an Hour reflects Chopin’s view of the repressive role that marriage played in women’s lives as the protagonist, Louise Mallard, feels immense freedom only when her husband has died. While he is alive, she must live for him, and only when he dies does her life once again become her own. In *The Story of an Hour* Chopin employs specific structural and stylistic techniques to heighten the drama of the hour. The structure Chopin has chosen for *The Story of an Hour* fits the subject matter perfectly. The story is short, made up of a series of short paragraphs, many of which consist of just two or three sentences. Likewise, the story covers only one hour in Louise Mallard’s life from the moment she learns of her husband’s death to the moment he unexpectedly returns alive. The short, dense structure mirrors the intense hour Louise spends contemplating her new independence. Just as Louise is completely immersed in her wild thoughts of the moment, we are immersed along with her in this period of time. The story is very short, but the impact it makes is powerful. In sum, through her story, Kate Chopin undermines patriarchy by endowing “the other”, the woman, with an individual identity and a sense of self, a sense of self to which the letters she leaves behind gives voice. Her writing challenged the American literary tradition by her bold expression of woman’s longing for sexual and personal freedom in a way that was previously unknown. The aim of the study is to present the limitations on women in the traditional role of wife in conventional marriage and the narrow confinement of and the limited range of possibilities for self-fulfillment for women in society through the character, Louise Mallard, of Chopin’s one of daring stories, *The Story of an Hour*.

Keywords : Woman, Marriage, Patriarchy’s Ideology, A New Self, A New Identity

The type of study: Research

* Yrd. Doç. Dr., Selçuk Üniversitesi

INTRODUCTION

A popular local colorist during her life time, Kate Chopin is now recognized as an important figure in nineteenth century American fiction and as a major figure in feminist literature. She took an individual step for women's liberation by exploring and representing the complex range of human emotions in several of her short stories many of which were to push out the boundaries of what were considered as acceptable subjects for fiction (Baxter; 1996: 223). Her writing challenged the American literary tradition by her bold expression of woman's longing for sexual and personal freedom in a way that was previously unknown. So many of her heroines preoccupied with the desire to escape the confines of a stifling marriage. Chopin admired independent and active women. And, by refusing to make men the central target of her women characters' despair, she focused more directly on the institutions and social frameworks in which they were trapped (Taylor; 1989: 161).

THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

The *Cult of True Womanhood* which restricted the woman's life was dominant in society through the 19th century. As a woman, Chopin saw the destructive effects of the *cult of true womanhood* and started writing as a way of expressing her frustration and disappointment with life. This ideology shaped the woman's life from childhood to the grave, and made her life unbearable. A woman who wanted to live freely and express her own thoughts experienced destructive results of this ideology which did not allow her to have her own life. Madness, hysterics, and even death were destructive results of this ideology. To be an individual as a woman in society meant to be driven out of society and most women suffered because of this thought, because of this ideology which shaped all parts of their lives and forced them to live as *slaves* of patriarchal system.

Being aware of the fact that she escaped from tradition and authority and entered into herself and looked out upon life through her own being and with her own eyes. She dared to write of the private needs of women by not only admitting the possibility that women have strong sexual needs of their own, but stating it as pure reality (Krauss; 2008: 4). In showing that woman's sexual desires are not confined to motherhood and procreations, she overturns Victorian moral values and supports the idea of pure and joyful female sexuality. Chopin, a master of the short story genre consistently used her fiction to fight for greater freedom and fulfillment for women in their social, sexual and spiritual roles and expressed her expanding thoughts on the female condition in her short stories. As Sandra Gilbert emphasizes "from the first, they were studies of emancipation and often specifically of female emancipation" (1984: 20).

LOVELESS MARRIAGE IN "THE STORY OF AN HOUR"

Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, which was published in *Vogue* under the title *The Dream of an Hour*, is called "one of feminism's sacred texts" by Susan Cahill (1975:39). It is the most prominent example of a woman who is trying to ascertain her identity. The story is about Louise Mallard's unexpected response to her husband's sudden death in a train accident. Having heard of the sudden death of her husband, Mrs. Mallard finds out that she will get rid of her bounds and live an independent life from then on. She is given that chance, quite by accident, and the story tells of the hour in which this freedom is given her. Evans sees this story as "a way of letting out the oppressed feelings by relieving disappointments and enslavements" (2001: 125). It is distinctive from other stories as it overtly explores the previously subtle themes of female freedom and self-fulfillment within marriage. Evans points out that in this story, "Chopin for the first time openly confronts the problems of marriage and shows that a loveless or oppressive marriage is unethical" (2001: 274).

The story opens with the emphasis on the name of the protagonist, Mrs. Mallard, and the report of her *heart trouble*. Calling the main character Mrs. Mallard, Chopin reveals her identity as the wife of Mr. Mallard; it defines her existence in relation to a man, to her husband. It emphasizes her identity as a dependent female. The dictionary meaning of *mallard* contributes to our perception and understanding of the woman. Mallard is a species of wild duck in which the male is very colorful and the female very drab

and submissive. It unfolds to identity of the woman, first as a wife, and furthermore as a subdued wife. The naming implies a very conventional male-female relationship in marriage where husband is the authority figure and wife is a submissive dependent (Stein; 2005: 34).

As the name of a species of bird, *mallard* also connotes a sense of naturalness. It is the name of a bird which is wild and belongs to nature. In this sense it implies what lies behind the surface ... the natural instincts and suppressed emotions of a natural being. The name *mallard* with its two different connotations creates a double-vision which enables the reader to see two different images of the same person: a conventional wife shaped by the traditions and accepted standards of society and a natural woman with a strong sense of freedom. This double-sided image sets a contrast between society and nature, between what is traditional and what is natural (Arima; 2006: 43). It is significant that she is called by her first name only after she goes through a process of renewal, or even a rebirth, during the hour she spends in her room all by herself. Right after she realizes and declares her independence by uttering the words *Free! Body and soul free!* her sister calls her by her first name and she becomes Louise again.

On the other side, in Chopin's story, the report of Mrs. Mallard's *heart disease* or *heart trouble* becomes a part of her mask. It indicates her emotional problems and her unconscious dissatisfaction with her lot in life. It also reveals her as a sensitive woman with a potential for strong emotional experiences. So her heart disease reinforces her identity as a woman who is supposed to be weak and frail in conventional society.

After the announcement of Mrs. Mallard's identity as a dependent and frail woman, the motif of protection is introduced in the first two paragraphs. The news of her husband's death is given to her *as gently as possible*. Her sister and her husband's friend are there to take care of her. After learning of the death of the husband, his friend takes over the protective male role and hastens *to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message*. The protective forces of society, the sister Josephine as the representative of her own family—protection as a daughter- and the friend Richards as the protective male attitude towards women come together to shelter and to protect Mrs. Mallard, who is the paradigm of the ideal of woman in society as a weak, delicate and gentle creature (Wan; 2009: 169).

Her reaction to the news of death gives the first sign of her individuality: *she did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance* (198). The way Mrs. Mallard reacts to new is different and untraditional. She wails with *wild abandonment* and steals away to be alone in her room, shunning her sister and slumping into one of her armchairs in a state of shock. At this point one would expect her to be hysterical, but instead she sits facing the open window and for a moment just feels hollow before suddenly noticing the world outside. It is spring and the world outside of her window is buzzing and alive. She notices that the trees *were all aquiver with the new spring life*. As Barbara Ewell stated: "this marks a turning point in *The Story of an Hour* as the main character looks outward and begins to realize something important about her life" (1986: 89). So, the motif of naturalness in contrast with the motif of conventionality comes out here and introduced another dimension in her existence: as a wife in a conventional society she has an imposed traditional veil; however, behind it lies a natural being capable of violent emotions. In the absence of authority, she asserts herself and rejecting the representatives of society she chooses solitude. Her insistence on solitude is both rejection of society and the first step of the process of being an individual, not the submissive and obedient wife of an assertive and domineering husband (Deneau; 2003: 212).

In the room which suggests the image of the womb, a prenatal state of existence, she is as calm as it is after *storm* in nature. From the open window she sees the open square before her house. The open window functions as a kind of life cord (Toth; 1999: 57). Through the open window an invitation to a new life comes to her: *the new spring life* enters the room and reaches her. The spring life comes to her in every possible way ... through sights, tastes, smells, sounds and activities: the blooming trees, the smell and feel of the rain in the air, the birds' twitter, a pedlar's cry, and a distant song reach her through the open window. She takes them in, she opens herself to these sensual impressions.

With the opening of her senses, the state of dormancy is over; it is the time of awakening; it is freedom—a new and free life for her. Like a skin- shedding animal, a new person emerges from under the dead skin: *Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body* (199). Papke points out

that "as a dynamic character Mrs. Mallard goes from dormancy to vitality, from the repressed to the assertive: it is the birth of new self, a new identity, and the preceding change is almost a mystical experience" (1990: 64). As it is stated in Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* she can no longer ignore that voice within herself that says *I want something more than my husband and my home* (2001: 78).

Louise then immediately recognizes her two selves and comprehends how each will co-exist, the old finally giving way to the one new self. Mrs. Mallard will grieve for the husband who had loved her, but Louise will eventually revel in the *monstrous joy* of self-fulfillment, beyond ideological strictures and the repressive effects of love:

"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.

And yet she had loved him –sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being" (199).

She realizes that *love* or *kind intensions* do not change the action. Love, *the unsolved mystery*, brings dependence and self-annihilation to woman. The death of her husband relieves her from both. She doesn't want to be a flower any more as it was written in Margaret Fuller's Journal: "Woman is the flower, man the bee. She sighs out of melodious fragrance, and invites the winged laborer. He drains her cup, and carries off the honey. She dies on the stalk; he returns to the hive, well fed, and praised as an active member of the community" (Showalter; 1988: 53). And also she doesn't want to be alone any more as it was written in a story called *Solitude* by Guy de Maupassant, which Kate Chopin translated for the St. Louis Magazine and was effected much: "Whatever we may do or attempt, despite the embrace and transports of love, the hunger of the lips, we are always alone. I have dragged you out into the night in the vain hope of a moment's escape from the horrible solitude which overpowers me. But what is the use! I speak and you answer me, still each of us is alone; side by side but alone" (Showalter; 1998: 33). So, "How could we ever really know or love each other as long as we played those roles that kept us from knowing or being ourselves?" asks Betty Freidan in her masterpiece *The Feminine Mystique* (2001: 521).

However, Louise grieves for her husband as a person; but after that momentary grief of loss she *sees a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely* (198). She recognizes self-assertion as *the strongest impulse of her (new) being*. She begins to look forward to the rest of her life when just the day before she shuddered at the thought of it.

When she leaves the room to join her sister to return downstairs where Richards still waits, she carries herself *like a goddess of Victory*. She is not the same woman who entered the room an hour ago, and she welcomes the new life hoping that it will be long. But, a moment later, the *opening* of the door bring in Mr. Mallard and his entrance brings both the end of the story and the death of Louise whose heart gives out. Her doctors explain that she died *of joy that kills*.

Mrs. Mallard's heart fails in the end, of course, not because of her overwhelming happiness at seeing her husband alive, as the doctors suggest, but ironically, as Cunningham states that "what murdered her was a monstrous joy, the birth of individual self and erasure of that joy when her husband and, necessarily her old self returned" (2004: 54).

CONCLUSION

The Story of an Hour which demonstrate not only Chopin's daring, but also growing artistic mastery of an author seem to follow the pattern of a tale Kate Chopin wrote at the beginning of her story-writing career. Here Chopin narrates of *an animal born ... in a cage*". This animal has all the necessities of life within reach. "Hungering, food was ever at hand. When he thirsted water was brought, and when he felt the need of rest, he was provided a bed of straw upon which to lie. One day, the door of the cage is left open and animal tastes the *spell of the unknown* and goes to the open door, seeing each time more light. At last he leaves his cage where all his

necessities are provided for him and *in his mad flight* he sees, smells, touches all the things and puts *his lips to the noxious pool, thinking it may be sweet*. He gets pleasure out of the struggle for the purpose of finding food and water. Although out of the cage, he has to put an extra effort to survive, he realizes that the true meaning of life lies both in *joying and suffering* (Gilbert; 1984: 177). Just like the caged animal Chopin narrates, the heroine of *The Story of an Hour* had all her life long been accustomed to harbor thoughts and emotions which never voiced themselves. They had never taken the form of struggles. But now it is the mime of awakening and searching for individuality and freedom: freedom to decide what to be, how to think, and how to live. Finally, Louise created herself she was *the artist with the courageous soul that dares and defies* and she had strong wings to soar *above the level plain of tradition and prejudice* (Chopin; 1972: 106).

WORKS CITED

- Arima, H. (2006). **Beyond and Alone!: The Theme of Isolation in Selected Short Fiction of Kate Chopin, Katherine Anne Porter, and Eudora Welty**. Lanham, MD: Up of America.
- Baxter, J. (1996). **The Awakening and Other Stories**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beer, J. (2005). **Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction**. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cahill, S. (1975). **Women and Fiction: Short Stories by and about Women**. New York: New American Library.
- Chopin, K. (1972). **The Awakening**, Avon Books Printing, New York: Harper Publishers In. USA
- Deneau, D.P. (2003). "Chopin's The Story of an Hour", **Explicator**, 61: 210-213.
- Evans R.C. (2001). **Kate Chopin's Short Fiction: A Critical Companion**. West Cornwall, CT: Lout Hill Press.
- Ewel, B.C. (1986). "A Night in Acadie: The Confidence of Success", in **Kate Chopin**, Ungar Publishing, 88-91.
- Friedan, B. (2001). **The Feminine Mystique**, W. W. Norton & Company Inc., New York USA.
- Gilbert, S.M. (1984). Ed. **The Awakening and Selected Stories by Kate Chopin**, Virginia R. R. Donnelley&Sons Company.
- Koloski, B. (1996). **Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction**, New York: Twayne Publishers.
- Krauss, K. (2008). **Kate Chopin: The Storm of the Storm**. University of North Texas. 3450 American Short Stories, English Department, Winter Semester, 2004/2005.
- Papke, M.E. (1990). "Kate Chopin's Social Fiction" in *Versing on the Abyss*, Greenwood Press, 62-64.
- Showalter, E. (1988). "Tradition and the Female Talent: The Awakening as a Solitary Book" in **New Essays on The Awakening**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, USA.: 33-59.
- Stein, A. F. (2005). **Women and Autonomy in Kate Chopin's Short Fiction**. New York: Peter Lang.
- Taylor, H. (1989). **Gender, Race and Region in the Writing of Grace King, Ruth Mc Energy Stuart and Kate Chopin, Baton Rouge**. Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press.
- Toth, E. (1999). **Unveiling Kate Chopin**. Jackson: Up of Mississippi.
- Wan, X. (2009). "Kate Chopin's View on Death and Freedom in *The Story of an Hour*", **English Language Teaching**, 2.4(2009): 167-170

