
Society and Culture on Gender Roles

Historically, during the late nineteenth century, there was a high importance set on women to fulfill their roles of motherhood and housewife. Society set ideals into place where a woman had to provide her husband with a “happy home,” so that her husband had a place to rest after doing his noblest duties of fatherhood and manhood. In “The Story of an Hour,” Louise clearly shows that this lifestyle is not for her. Her self-centeredness shows that she is looking forward to experiencing the zest that life has to offer her. She is, however, conflicted with herself at the same time and struggles to identify if she has feelings for her husband. Due to Louise’s disbelief of her husband’s death, she ends up being her own demise because of the internal issues she struggles with, the cultural norms she has to live by, and the overwhelming toll on her heart when she saw her husband.

When the news of Mr. Mallard’s death came back to Louise, she was in disbelief. She had trouble identifying how to feel, at first, until reality sank in. Her abnormal response to receiving the news of her husband’s death and the lack of emotions suggests she struggled with the news. At one point in the story, the narrator exclaims, “Free! Body and soul free!” (129) From Lawrence Berkove’s perspective, this implies that “there is a significance with Louise and that she wants to ‘live for herself.’ It could also be commonly interpreted that she had to sacrifice her own freedom to her husband” (234). The reaction Louise had at the news of her husband’s death revealed that she likely had been subjected to the oppression of her husband’s authority. Her undiagnosed mental health disorder exacerbates Louise’s struggle with her internal issues, which demonstrates her indecisiveness to not leave her husband contributes to her own demise.

“Legally and culturally, however, the lives of women were still much constrained when compared with those of men, and Chopin’s story reflects both these constraints and the growing desire of many women for ‘liberation’ of various kinds” (“Introduction”). In “The Story of an Hour,” Chopin thoroughly explains these ideals that women had to live by during the nineteenth century by stating, “There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself” (Chopin 129). The severity of the restraint that Louise experienced while she was married to Mr. Mallard was evident by the enthusiasm she expressed in the minutes following the news of her husband’s death. In the nineteenth century, many women were trying to escape the social norms that were imposed upon them during the time. According to Michael O’Malley, “Some argued that women should concentrate on the home and domesticity—that women had an especially loving and gentle nature, and that they were naturally suited to child care and to the ‘domestic arts’ of decoration and nurture.” O’Malley continues by stating, “The man’s world was understood as tough, rational, self-advancing, competitive,

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and harsh, and the woman's world was soft, irrational, emotional, self-sacrificing and loving.” The stigma women faced during the nineteenth century contributed to why Louise felt like she had no control during the duration of her marriage to Mr. Mallard. Because the nineteenth century was viewed as a “man’s world,” the lack of worth that a woman’s role played in society led to the death of Louise.

Near the end of the story, Chopin reveals that Louise’s husband all along was not dead. Chopin mentions, “[Someone] was opening the front door with a latch key. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his gripsack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of the accident, and did not even know there had been one” (Chopin 130). When Brently Mallard walked in the door, Richard tried to shield him from Louise. Unfortunately, Richard was too late. According to the doctors, Louise had passed away “of heart disease—of joy that kills” (130). Chopin’s description of the moment that Louise finds out her husband is not dead after all implies how serious Louise had taken the news. During the duration of Louise’s marriage to Mr. Mallard, Louise dealt with a lot of emotional highs and lows, which likely led to her development of heart disease.

The oppression Louise experienced during the nineteenth century played a role in her inability to speak up for herself. Louise likely dealt with an undiagnosed mental health disorder because of the stigma that women faced during the time period. Louise’s underlying heart disorder added to the shock she experienced when she saw her husband. The contributing factors that ultimately led to Louise’s own demise are: the internalization of her personal issues, the cultural standards, the development of her heart disease, the overwhelming news of her husband’s supposed death, and the shock she experienced when she saw him alive led to her experiencing a heart attack.

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