



## The Story of an Hour: A Text Kidnapped by Feminist Criticism

Wenjie Han\* 

*School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, China*

### Article Information

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#### \* Corresponding author:

Wenjie Han

### Abstract:

The Story of an Hour as one of Kate Chopin's classic masterpieces, has always been regarded as a purely feminist work that authentically indicates the awakening of women's consciousness of freedom under the oppression of patriarchal politics. Since Halliday proposed Systemic Functional Grammar and the three metafunctions of language, transitivity has been widely employed in the interpretation of literary works. The present study focuses on the vicissitude of the protagonist Mrs. Mallard's mental status through the transitivity analysis as a useful tool and the stylistic features of the text itself as well to explore the hidden theme which has been neglected, and concludes that this classic work is kidnapped by feminist criticism. It

satirizes the protagonist's pathological emotional state of pursuing the absolute freedom in marriage.

**Keywords:** *The Story of an Hour, transitivity, feminism, Kate Chopin.*

### Introduction

As one of the most prestigious female writers in the history of American literature, many of Kate Chopin's works, especially *The Awakening*, are considered as classics of feminist literature. *The Story of an Hour*, first published in 1894 in *Vogue* magazine, has been the object of intense critical study for nearly half a century, especially since the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise and development of feminist movement and its impact on literature.

This thousand-word short story, with its compact plot, excellent narrative skills and an unexpected ending, depicts the emotional process and mental activity of Mrs. Mallard, who has a heart trouble, was caught in the vicissitude from the sorrow of the death of her husband to the ecstasy of freedom after hearing the news about her husband's death, whereas she died of the heart attack because of her husband's reappearance within an hour. The existing

interpretations of the story are marked through the analysis of the use of irony, the criticism of the patriarchal ideology, and especially feminist criticism, which has almost become the most authentic interpretation that dominates all decodes. For instance, Susan Lancer, the pioneer and leading figure of feminist narratology, claims that Mrs. Mallard is a typical representative of female figures seeking freedom and liberation under the oppression of her patriarchal husband. She believes that the text creates a psychological closeness between the narrator, the reader, and the protagonist Mrs. Mallard. By showing her emotional condition, the reader would sympathize with her, thus indicating a particularly clear feminist consciousness. The interpretation has been regarded as a standard by critics for a long time, which has rarely been questioned by others (Lancer, 1991). Coincidentally, more interpretations of the feminist theme of the work have been made with the upsurge of the feminist movement, and the



interpretation of Lancer also echoes the viewpoints of other feminist scholars. Emily Toth argues that Mrs. Mallard's inner struggle signifies her awakening of self-consciousness (Toth, 1992, p. 23), while Barbara holds that this work is an exhaustive depiction of women's creative struggles against the patriarchal society at the expense of their lives (Ewell, 1998, p. 160-165). However, Professor Shen Dan re-examined the text and Susan Lancer's interpretation, overturning the themes of the already marked feminist works through connections to Kate Chopin's life experience, her diary and other works published during the same period (Shen, 2004). She puts forward that the work does not involve gender politics but the issue of freedom in marriage, and the object of irony in the text is "freedom". According to Professor Shen, Kate Chopin doubted or even denied the absolute freedom that Mrs. Mallard had been pursuing. Moreover, she further explored the reasons for the misunderstanding from the external perspective of narratology, including the cultural environment of feminist interpretation and the theoretical framework adopted by Susan Lancer.

By contrast, the present paper aims to analyze the emotional changes and mental activities of Mrs. Mallard from the internal perspective of the text itself, and combined with transitivity patterning including its secondary concepts as well as the stylistic features, thereby revealing that this story is not a feminist work that resists the oppression of patriarchy in the traditional sense. Instead, it depicts Mrs. Mallard's almost pathological attitude towards marriage and freedom.

## Results and Discussion

Primarily, the current interpretations of critics principally regard Mrs. Mallard as a heroine who sacrificed her life to resist the oppression of the patriarchal society. However, from the perspective of the text itself, there does not seem to be adequate evidence in the story to prove that Mrs. Mallard was oppressed and treated unfairly by her husband in marriage, nor she was taken as an appendage of her husband's

property. On the contrary, there are many details through the text attesting to the meticulous care of Mrs. Mallard by the people around her, including her husband. At the beginning of the story, it is her husband's intimate friend Richards who "hastens to" tell her the news of the death of her husband in a tender tone, "to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message" because everyone was afraid that she could not bear such a heavy blow due to her heart trouble (Chopin, 124). Besides, Richards managed to screen Mr. Mallard from the view of Louise, not to mention that her own sister kept persuading her, for fear that she would make herself ill. In brief, Mrs. Mallard was well protected in her life, whereas she herself constantly managed to pursue "absolute" freedom, which eventually led to her sudden death. She was portrayed as an immature egoist and a victim of the "fatal self-assertion" (125) instead of the woman warrior in the great awakening.

In addition, the story begins with an omniscient angle of view, which appears to be presented in an objective method, however, there is a subjective control concealed. It seems that other's concern about Mrs. Mallard's suffering from heart trouble is unnecessary for she has shown an unusual behavior from the beginning. She did not paralyze to the ground like many women who completely unable to accept it, instead, she immediately wept. When "the storm of grief" (124) ended quickly, she returned to the room, only sobbing occasionally. The situational irony is resulted from the conflict between her id and superego. On the one hand, she couldn't hold back the strange sense rising from her heart, and she also needed to behave more in line with the conventional norms on the other. Mrs. Mallard's mental state began to change dramatically when she observed the scenery outside the window after returned to her room. Using the pattern of transitivity as offered by Halliday, it can be said that most of the description of the scene belongs to the Existential processes and Behavioral processes, and she acts as Participant in 2 processes out of 9 (22.2%) because it is from here that the narrative of the story turns to the limited

perspective of Mrs. Mallard herself. She perceived the “new spring life”, “the delicious breath of rain” and “a distant song” (ibid). However, the way of perception is expressed in a material process with Mrs. Mallard acting as a passive role involved. Chopin portrayed these external scenes as images of an invader, while as the target of the invasion, Mrs. Mallard’s rationality gradually dissipated. She had only “a dull stare” with “a suspension of intelligent thought” (ibid), and the irrational nature of freedom pursued by her also gradually unfolded in the following. The object she stared at was “freedom” which almost creeping out of the sky to occupy both her body and soul, where Chopin concretizes the abstract concept of “freedom”, externalizing it as “the sounds”, “the scents” and “the color” (ibid), which invade Mrs. Mallard and replace her rationality. In the case of “The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her faintly” (ibid), the process of her perception of external surroundings and the sense of freedom should be completed by the sub-category of perception in the Mental process, however, it is realized by the Material process with Mrs. Mallard as the Goal instead of the Actor. The verb “reach” illustrates the protagonist’s passive acceptance or intrusive role in the vicissitude of thought rather than her active perception. Coincidentally, there is another Material process “...creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her...” (125) also applies the same verb to imply the passive role of Mrs. Mallard. Here Chopin created a kind of deviation from literary conventions for her concretization of the notion of “freedom”, and the description of Mrs. Mallard’s “a dull stare” and “a vacant stare” (ibid) apparently portrays freedom as a ghostly existence, which also coincides with Chopin’s application of freedom as the object of irony through the whole text. Furthermore, Mrs. Mallard struggled with the awakened freedom in the room space, and she felt terrified and desperately tried to suppress such feeling, which hints the process by which the superego in her personality works to suppress the forbidden desire. There was an unstoppable and inexplicable impulse that was coming to her, which could not be controlled by her id. It is obviously a manifestation of the pursuit of

absolute freedom hidden in Mrs. Mallard’s id. However, her superego did not give up control of the id at this stage, and this struggle ended in the failure of the superego, which indicates that Mrs. Mallard was about to be controlled by the ghostly freedom and became completely irrational gradually.

Quite different from the former part, Mrs. Mallard, including part of her body and her soul, acts as Participant in 12 processes out of the total 16 (75%), an overwhelming proportion which suggests that her emotional state is continuing to undergo tremendous changes, as if she is trying to free herself from the current environment. However, after Mrs. Mallard received the signal of freedom, she did not immediately express the excitement or resistance of a feminist in the traditional sense. After being swept over both the body and soul by this ghostly freedom, she revealed “a vacant stare” and “the look of terror” from her eyes as before, which is depicted as “keen and bright” and therefore hints that she was still in a dominated irrational state. In addition, Mrs. Mallard’s mental activity is strictly limited to the category of cognition (recognize): an inert subtype of Mental process. The process of cognition (recognize, know) indicates that the more active and complex thinking process remains absent. At this stage, Mrs. Mallard was in the irrational state under the occupation of demonic freedom. Similarly, it is worth noting that there appear the Verbal processes externalized as the mumbling of her. The repetition of the word “free” as Verbiage escaped from her lips actually is the result of Mrs. Mallard being manipulated by this ghostly spirit. The word “free” that appeared five times as Verbiage is a “Freudian slip” according to psychoanalytical criticism, which refers to that some hidden desires, fears and irrational thoughts of human beings are stored in the unconscious in a disguised truth, and they will manifest themselves in the form of dreams, art, or slips (Bressler, 1999). Therefore, Mrs. Mallard’s yearning for absolute freedom was realized in the form of a slip, which undoubtedly implied Mrs. Mallard’s unconscious state after being invaded by demonic and ghost-like freedom.

When it comes to the description of her husband, Brently Mallard, Chopin applies words of Mrs. Mallard to portray him in a few word groups like “tender hands” and “the face that had never looked save with love upon her” through the sub-category of perception and cognition of the Mental process with the following paragraphs in which can be seen as Phenomenon involved. The use of perceptive verbs such as “know” and “see” reveals the discrepancy between the way Mrs. Mallard and her husband feel about each other. Although he loves her “tenderly” (126), she regards his love as secondary to self-assertion or freedom that she had pursued, and she even portrays love as “the unsolved mystery”, a crime against her absolute freedom. For Mrs. Mallard, marriage and freedom are binary opposites. However, it is universally known that the maintenance of a marriage must be based on some degree of freedom of sacrifice by both sides, for there is no way for a couple to possess complete freedom, and Mrs. Mallard’s crazy and extreme behavior of pursuing absolute freedom indicates that she was not only physically sick with a heart disease, but also emotionally sick. The “monstrous joy” she immersed in was her fatal and unrealistic egotism. Moreover, the two conspicuous Existential processes (2 out of 12, 16.7%) in this part dominated by the Mental processes which depicts Mrs. Mallard’s attitude towards marriage and her husband further explain her pathological psychological state. For instance, the narrator composed the sentence “There would be no one to live for her during those coming years” instead of “She would no longer live for anyone during those coming years” (ibid), which hints that her husband Brently Mallard had been living for her before, and it was not that Louise had received oppression and unfair treatment from her husband. Similarly, she regarded her husband’s tender love as “powerful will” which “bends her in that blind persistence” (ibid). The Existential process is generally used to describe objective things or universal truths (Thompson, 343), while here it is applied to paint Mrs. Mallard’s subjective attitudes towards marriage. The seemingly objective statements further strengthen her distorted viewpoint of love, that

is, she considered her husband and the marriage as obstacles to the absolute freedom.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Mallard’s irrational emotional state and behavior did not end, and it continued until the end of the story. The Material processes and Relational processes are applied to reveal the final stage where she was about to be completely invaded and occupied by the ghostly freedom. Taking a material process “Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her” (125) as an example, the Participant “her fancy” with its connotations of fantastic and capricious imaginings indicates that Mrs. Mallard’s pursuit of absolute freedom was just a fantasy and thus was pathological and unachievable. The process “running riot” provides an additional indication that she was still on her way of losing control. In a nutshell, Chopin compared “freedom” to “a very elixir of life” (124), whereas the protagonist died of the “heart disease-of joy” brought about by the ghostly freedom.

## Conclusion

To sum up, Kate Chopin took freedom as the object of irony throughout the text, and adequate evidence within the text itself hints that *The Story of an Hour* is not a mere feminist literary work interpreted by feminist critics. Instead, by tracing a series of mental activities of Mrs. Mallard, it deflects the irony of the morbid psychology of the pursuit of absolute freedom in marriage rather than the confrontation between men and women and the oppression of patriarchy that involved in traditional sense. The phenomenon of its single interpretation from the perspective of feminist criticism in decades might be closely related to the external political situation of the upsurge of the feminist movement, and the application of feminist criticism to interpret literary texts has to achieved, to some extent, political correctness.

In conclusion, the analysis of transitivity and stylistic features of the text itself of Kate Chopin’s *The story of an Hour* marked by the emotional change of the protagonist Mrs. Mallard and her pathological pursuit of freedom within her marriage challenges the traditional



interpretation of critics, who considered this story and the protagonist's pursuit of freedom as the distinct feminism. Since Halliday creatively proposed the notion of transitivity, it has been widely used in the interpretation of literary texts to dig out more details about the "mind style" of characters (Halliday, 331). The present study indicates that with the help of transitivity analysis, the changes in the actions and mental states of the characters in literary works will clearly emerge, and it has also made a great contribution to the exploration of the theme hidden in literary works.

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# Appendix

Table 1 Frequencies of transitivity clause types in The Story of an Hour

Process	Material	Mental	Relational	Verbal	Behavioral	Existential
Number	42	29	27	7	5	10
Proportion	35%	24.17%	22.5%	5.83%	4.16%	8.33%