

Suzy Student

Mrs. Petix

English 11 – 5th

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The Impact of Technology on Kate Chopin's Louise Mallard in "The Story of an Hour"

Kate Chopin is one of the most notable feminist voices of American Literature. Because she is a Realist, her characters are relatable and utterly human. They are flawed, and they represent the traits that many readers recognize in themselves—even when it is difficult to admit. One such character is Louise Mallard, the young wife in "The Story of an Hour." In this story, which is set during a time of great change, Louise receives news by telegram that her husband has been killed in a railroad accident. Within the space of an hour, Louise digests this news and begins to envision a new, independent life for herself. Before the hour is up, however, her husband, who had missed his train, arrives home, and Louise dies upon seeing him. Chopin uses the untimely death of this young character to make bold statements about the changes that are taking place at the end of the Nineteenth Century. Chopin proves that the speed at which information is received, during a time of technological and social awakening, can have devastating consequences.

Many writers, both predecessors and contemporaries of Chopin's, warned their readers against technological advancements. Published in 1894, "The Story of an Hour" includes two advancements that would have been new to her readers: the railroad and the telegram. By the time this story takes place, railroad travel had become much more convenient, and men were leaving home more often, travelling further distances. It is important to note that Louise is home alone, with the exception of those who arrived to deliver the news, when she learns of her husband's death. Perhaps it is during these times alone that she realizes she is in a marriage that

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stifles her independence and self-worth. Chopin describes her as having a face with “lines [which] bespoke repression and even a certain strength” (11). This indicates that Louise, like most married women at this time, was inhibited in her marriage; however, she had the strength and the intelligence to realize this was unjust and less than desirable for one’s happiness. Jeremy Foote of *The Explicator* indicates that the railroad, which is a fast and distant killer, quickly and painlessly took the oppressor out of Louise’s life. Rather than caring for a fatally ill husband over a long period of time, she lost her husband—and found her independence—with great speed (Foote 87). Chopin seems to be indicating that the technology that takes the men away also allows the women who are left behind the opportunity to imagine life without them.

The delivery of the news of Brently Mallard’s death is also one of speedy technological advancements. Richards, a family friend, got word by telegram that Mr. Mallard’s train had crashed. A second telegram did confirm this news; however, the system that Richards so fully trusted was flawed. The telegram listed Brently Mallard as one of the people who had died in the railroad disaster (Chopin 10-11). This was likely due to the fact Mr. Mallard had simply bought a ticket for that train. It does not account for the fact that he may have missed said train. Richards, having received fast intelligence, did not take the time to consider this possibility. He delivered the news as quickly as possible to the young wife—a young wife who evidently suffers from a weak heart. According to S. Selina Jamil, also of *The Explicator*, Louise experiences a rush of emotion, and “[her] apparent emotional anemia has given way to healthy blood circulation” (218). The previously fragile Louise quickly absorbs shattering news, and, in the same moment, feels a resurgence of identity and hope. Again, Chopin appears to warn readers against the speed at which information is received.

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The impact that these technological advancements has on social conventions is clear. At the same time in history when railroads and telegrams were advancing at lightning speed, women were slowly fighting for independence and equal rights. When Louise Mallard learns of her husband's death, she saw the rest of her life before her. The narrator explains, "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" (Chopin 11). Louise believed she would be free from oppression and altruistic devotion to her husband. In the end, though, she would never experience this freedom. According to Jamil, "it is no surprise that Louise suffers an acutely painful—and ultimately fatal—shock when her husband returns home" (219). Louise sees her entire, uninhibited future appear before her eyes and then disappear just as quickly, causing her to have a heart attack and die. The reader must remember, however, that Chopin was a Realist who uses symbolism to make a courageous statement about technological and social advancements. This is not the supernatural story of a young lady losing her life simply because she lost her chance at freedom. Louise's heart was legitimately weak, and she realistically died because her heart could not withstand the rush of emotions. It is what Louise's death symbolizes that is important: the slow progression of women's rights. They simply, much like Louise's heart, are not keeping up with other advancements of the time.

Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is a clear warning against allowing one societal advancement to take off while another lags behind. By "killing" Brently Mallard off quickly with images of the technological advancements, the railroad and the telegram, Chopin reveals the consequences that may be suffered by the ill-fated widow. It also serves as a reminder, like much of Chopin's work, of the true desires in a woman's heart. She wishes to be free to live her

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life as she sees it, unencumbered by a man's will and dominion. This story may be read as a caveat for women to keep up the pace, to not lose sight of what is most important: the quest for freedom.

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Works Cited

- Chopin, Kate. "The Story of an Hour." *The Bedford Introduction to Literature: Reading, Thinking, Writing*. Ed. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 10-12. Print.
- Foote, Jeremy. "Speed That Kills: The Role of Technology in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour.'" *Explicator* 71.2 (2013): 85-89. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.
- Jamil, S. Selina. "Emotions in 'The Story of an Hour.'" *Explicator* 67.3 (2009): 215-220. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 9 Jan. 2015.