

*"The Story of An Hour"*

*Kate Chopin (1894)*

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed." He had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

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 some one 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.

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will--as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been. 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!" The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They

stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial. She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had 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. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years; 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 the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door--you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

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. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

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 the 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.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease--of the joy that kills.

1. What do you notice about Mrs. Mallard in the opening sentence?
2. What do the word “veiled hints in half concealing” mean? What is the purpose of using “veiled hints?”
3. What role does Richards play in the second paragraph?
4. Why is it significant that Mrs. Mallard is facing an open window in paragraph 4?
5. In paragraph 4, the word “haunted” is used. What does this word suggest about her psychological state? Her life? What is the body and soul connection?
6. Describe the sensory detail as she looks out the window in paragraphs 5 and 6. Why is the time of year so important? How does describing the rain as “delicious” contrast with a person who is grieving? What is the tone of this paragraph?
7. How could the “patches of sky” in paragraph 6 reflect or describe her situation, both now and in the past?
8. Why do you think she is referred to as a child who dreams in paragraph 7?
9. What mood is created once she begins her solitary moment at the window in paragraphs 5-7?
10. How does the physical description of Mrs. Mallard in paragraph 8 contrast with her physical description in the first paragraph? Does her age surprise you? Why?
11. At the beginning of the story, Mrs. Mallard seems very grief stricken; however, in paragraphs 9 and 10 a different feeling is described rather than grief. What is it? What words show that? What is the “something” that she is beginning to feel?
12. Throughout the story, Mrs. Mallard is described physically at different stages. What do the words “abandoned” and “escaped” in paragraph 10 tell us about her state of mind? How do these images contrast or compare with her physical description in paragraphs 8 and 3? Why does she repeat the word “free” in this paragraph? How does this repetition connect to the words “abandoned” and “escaped”?
13. In paragraph 11, the words “monstrous joy” are used. These are contrasting images or an oxymoron. How can joy, which is a positive image, be monstrous, which is a negative image? This contrasting image complements a shift in emotions as she stretches her arms outward. What emotion is she referencing after noting her husband’s death?
14. Paragraph 12 gives insight into Mrs. Mallard’s hidden thoughts about choice and freedom. What does she mean when she states, “She would live for herself”? What was the “powerful will bending hers”? Why does she feel some men and women think they have “a right to impose a private will” upon another?
15. What is an elixir? What is the elixir of life” she is referring to in paragraph 13? How does that metaphor complement the imagery of the open window referenced once again in this paragraph?
16. What feelings are contrasted in paragraph 14? Why does she feel a “feverish triumph”? What has she triumphed over?
17. What do you think the author’s intent is in referring to the protagonist as “Mrs. Mallard” at the beginning of the story to “Louise” by paragraph 15?
18. Who does the diagnosis of “heart disease” serve? Looking back at paragraph 1, what other interpretation of heart disease that could be applied to Mrs. Mallard?
19. Another contrasting image or oxymoron is in “the joy that kills” in paragraph 15. Explain why this contrasting image is significant in the overall theme of the story.