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Perspectival Strategies in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

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Abstract

The essay focuses on the interplay between the authorial narrative instance and the internally focalized perspective that structures the internal movement of one of Kate Chopin's most famous texts, "The Story of an Hour" (1894). Chopin's perspectival choices offer a key to reflect upon the issue at the center of Chopin's short story, namely, women's freedom in a patriarchal society. The discrepancy between what the characters know and what readers know triggers a potentially ambivalent ethical and affective engagement which mirrors Chopin's own positioning.

Keywords: Focalization, Kate Chopin, Self-assertion, Surprise-ending, "The Story of an Hour"

"When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease – of joy that kills" (Chopin 1991, 79).[1]

This is the rather famous sentence that ends Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour", the very short piece Chopin first published in the magazine *Vogue* (December 6, 1894), which belongs in the list of her most renowned stories. I have begun with the closing sentence, because it well condenses the threads – formal and thematic – on which I will focus in the following pages.[2]

Barbara C. Ewell in her book on Kate Chopin describes the story as "quite remarkable, ranking with *The Awakening* as one of Chopin's most memorable statements of female self-assertion" and "the first of her experimental tales" (1986, 88). Per Seyersted, the author of Kate Chopin's authoritative biography, reads in it the clear signs of the confidence the success of her just published short story collection, *Bayou Folk*, had injected in her, "freeing forces that had lain dormant" (1969, 58).

[1] All page references come from this edition and will be provided without further reference parenthetically, to keep the reading light.

[2] Chopin had a hard time publishing her pieces because of their unpalatable (because transgressive) situations; *Vogue*, a new magazine (the first issue was released in 1892), was headed by Josephine Redding whose independent and eccentric taste allowed some of Chopin's most audacious short stories to see the light, even if *Vogue* too, had initially rejected the short story. As for "The Dream of an Hour" it could be easily argued that the publication was not only due to Redding's eccentricity, but to the very recent success of Chopin's short story collection *Bayou Folk* (1894). It is worth mentioning that the publication (1900) of the short story collection which contained many of her most poignant stories, "The Story of an Hour" included, significantly titled *A Vocation and a Voice*, was canceled.

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To contribute to the very rich conversation on the short story and on its ambivalent ending, I propose to focus on a specific formal choice. I would argue that an analysis of the interplay between the authorial narrative instance and the internally focalized perspective that structures the internal movement of Kate Chopin's very short text may shed light on the ways in which Chopin reflected on the representation of women's experience and more specifically on the complexities of the short story's ending.

I am here employing the classical handling of focalization stemming from Genette's seminal distinction between who speaks and who sees. I use the traditional approach of structuralist narratology – despite the massive debunking it has undergone – for three reasons. The first one is heuristic: the distinction is well known by everyone and manages to operate a readily available distinction. The second one is mimetic: as I will show, the perspectival shift begins precisely with a description of what the protagonist as focalizer can see. The third is thematic: having a voice and speaking as a subject and not having it and being spoken as an object touches the core of the liminality of women's experience Chopin is interested in.

I am not the first one to see in the shifting perspectives – (roughly) from authorial to internally focalized and back to authorial – a key element in the short story. Given the short story's brevity, the shift is rather conspicuous and unlikely to be missed. I nonetheless would argue that this issue is worth deepening. More specifically, my interest here lies in the ways in which Chopin's handling of focalization sets the stage for a specific – ethical and affective – readerly engagement. Furthermore, I would argue that Chopin's perspectival choices constitute another way to reflect upon the issue at the center of Chopin's short story, namely, women's freedom in a patriarchal society. What does it mean to think about women's autonomy in a world that – prescriptively – denies it?

I would like to begin by stating what might sound obvious because the obvious often constitutes the foundation of the interpretive moves readers (automatically) make when they begin reading. If, on the one hand, a narrating instance and the world it shapes are mutually interdependent, on the other, a narrating instance is the child of the social and economic (and literary) conditions of a given time and place. I think it is safe to assume that the author-figure that provides the blueprint of the authorial narrator's privileges is specifically gender and color coded (at least) in the two centuries that witnessed the establishment and the ever-increasing success of the novel (mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth century): the discursive authority is, by default, modeled on "white, educated men, of hegemonic ideology".[3]

I am not arguing that narratives that showcase an authorial narrating instance are *per se* (oppressively) patriarchal – I am absolutely convinced with Brian Richardson that "no form has any inherent essence or tendency" (2006, 73). I am, nonetheless, pragmatically acknowledging the *feel* of authoritativeness and confidence authorial voices tend to convey. I am, furthermore, convinced that once readers consider the socio-cultural context Chopin's text belongs to, their most likely interpretive move is to consider the voice showcased in Kate Chopin's short story as embodying the normative default reading of women's identities as liminal, passive, dependent and consequently not free. I will return in due time to this premise and address an associated issue that may potentially counteract what I have just said, namely, the implicit correlation between the actual author and the authorial instance (via the implied author).

Let us start at the beginning.

Kate Chopin's short story was originally published as "The Dream of an Hour". Barbara C. Ewell suggests that the short story "was editorially titled" (1986, 88) in this way for the publication in *Vogue* on April 19, 1894. In all subsequent publications, both in collected works and anthologies, the short story appears, however, as "The Story of an Hour". Whatever the reason for this change, it is unarguable that the two titles change the prospective emotional experience of the reader dramatically.[4] Once we have read the piece, we could easily agree on this (or a similar) summary: the story is the realistic chronicle of a short-lived dream of freedom (one hour long) in the life of the protagonist, Mrs. Louise Mallard. And yet, the change in the title implies that Chopin wanted the juxtaposition of story and dream to be the interpretative destination of a journey in understanding, and not the ready-made indication of how to read the hour in the protagonist's life the short story deals with. The established title renders the time-frame the most notable item that attracts the reader's attention as there is not much to ponder in the generically neutral term "story"; the original title, in contrast, somewhat doubles the stakes as both the word dream and the reference to the very tight time-frame are, at least potentially, highly charged. The indeterminate "*an* hour" somewhat downplays its importance and, once again potentially, points

[3] This wording comes from Susan Sniader Lanser's introduction to her foundational book, *Fictions of Authority* (1992, 6). I will return to her perceptive take in the following pages.

[4] I am not aware of any well-documented reason for the title change.

to its ordinariness. It should, furthermore, be stressed that the original title mines, or, at least weakens, the effect of the surprise ending, which may be deemed untouched by the title Chopin settled for. The title is one of the reasons why the very final sentence we started off with produces such a jolt in the reader. On this issue too, I will return; here, suffice it to say that the title is a deliberate mimetic strategy that is closely associated with the dynamic interplay of voice and focalization around which Chopin's piece revolves.

Let me add a final thought on the title: such a generic term as story may attract our attention to itself, that is to say, to the act of telling. This implies that we are explicitly invited to pay attention to that hour as the characters lived it and as it is accounted for. This is obviously *always* the case, but I will demonstrate that here the pair happening/telling acquires a weighty thematic relevance: the lingering aftertaste the short story produces depends crucially on the difference between the characters' (diegetic) knowledge and the readers' (extradiegetic) one. This misalignment is likewise a key element of the perspectival strategies I intend to illuminate.

For the sake of the argument, I will proceed by close-reading the three sections of the short story with a specific focus on perspectival choices. The three sections do not exist – graphically – in the actual text, which is undivided; they emerge clearly once we concentrate on the perspectival shift.

"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" (76). The hour the short story promises to cover begins when Mrs. Mallard's sister Josephine tells her in the best way possible that her husband died in a railroad accident. The reason for this extra attention that takes the form of indirection ("veiled hints", *ibidem*) is due to the protagonist's health condition. The very first sentence (and paragraph) of the short story goes a long way in establishing the narrator's privilege in the narratological sense of free and indiscriminate access to information that belongs to other places and times and to the characters' interiorities. The narrator in charge "knows". The second paragraph adds to the knowledge concerning the motivation of the characters' actions, the details concerning the piece of tragic news' travelling from the local newspaper office to the Mallards' house via the intervention and careful handling of the dead husband's friend, Richard. The short story, thus, opens on textual materials that convey the audible presence of an authorial narrating instance. The expositional move providing the relevant temporal and spatial coordinates typical of nineteenth century novels is absent, but its vestiges are recognizable in the form of a preamble, which, its brevity notwithstanding, sets the stage for the characters to act and move in an immediately comprehensible way. In a readerly friendly fashion, the authorial narrator provides the information concerning Mrs. Mallard's condition and her husband's friend's actions technically transgressing the hour's tight frame; the ending too, with the sentence that opens this piece, does the same.

The breaking of the literal precincts of "the hour" constitutes a violation only superficially: for that hour to be meaningful, in fact, it must have a teleological, rather than a merely chronological, import. Thus, the initial specifications concerning Mrs. Mallard's heart trouble and the details concerning Richard's making sure of the truthfulness of Brently's killing, on the one hand, and the time needed for the doctors to arrive and offer an explanation of Mrs. Mallard's death, on the other, provide the necessary frame to allow readers to reflect on the story's meaning. After all, (narrative) temporality finds its most profound *raison d'être* in teleology as Meir Sternberg's "Telling in Time", a classic in narrative theory, masterfully demonstrates.

It is worth noticing the way in which the protagonist is presented: not only is her individuality reduced to the mere fact that she is a married woman, obviously bearing her husband's name, but she is the subject of a passive verb, which is to say, she is not truly a subject. Mrs. Mallard enters the stage of the short story as the passive victim of an affliction.[5] These two initial elements contain synecdoche-like the protagonist's reality: she is a wife and she is ill.[6] The two conditions convey a strong intimation of confinement to the domestic realm: she is, in all respects, a weak subject. The absence of the protagonist's first name and her consequent depersonalization is, furthermore, amplified by the spelling out of the first name of her sister Josephine.[7]

[5] For an interesting stylistic reading of Chopin's short story which gives an important role to passivization and, more broadly, to transitivity, see Sabbagh and Mehri 2014.

[6] As Ewell perceptibly suggests, Mrs. Mallard's heart disease is not only "the loaded gun of melodrama" but an ingredient that progressively develops into "a deeply spiritual problem" (1986, 89).

[7] One could easily argue that *both* women are reduced – if differently – to their familial roles of wife and sister. For a fascinating reflection on names, and naming, in Chopin's short story, see Dolloff. I find particularly interesting his interpretation of the surname Mallard: "the first syllable translates as the familiar French noun for 'illness' (mal), while the second syllable, 'ard', easily suggests the French noun ardeur (English equivalent: 'ardor'), denoting 'fervour' or 'strenuousness'. Thus, packed into Louise's surname, 'Mallard', we may arguably find a lexical diagnostic not only for the initially veiled emotional affliction of her marriage, from which, along with her cardiac problem, she already suffers at the story's start, but also for the fateful ebullience that contributes to her death at the story's end" (Dolloff 2014, 581).

The first sentence (and paragraph) ends with the news of the death of the man who gives the protagonist her identity. The opening of the short story, thus, contains the existential question that Chopin wants to address: what happens to a married woman once the center of the definition of who she is isn't there any longer? Significantly, as we will see, readers do learn about her given name, Louise, after they have gained access to her interiority – that part of her that makes of her a singular individual.

The third paragraph wraps up the first part of the story marked by an authorial narrator which comes to us with the usual array of knowledge and non-focalized considerations. Here too a broad knowledge is displayed both contextual – "she did not hear the story as many women have heard the same" (76) – and specific to the protagonist's interiority – "she would have no one follow her" (77).

Before analyzing the second section and the perspectival shift it stages, I would like to reflect on an important detail that lies beneath the surface of what I presented so far in view of the short story in its entirety. As we have seen, Brently's death is at the center of the opening paragraphs: this hour pivots on the truth of his death which is mentioned explicitly in reference to Richard's extra care – "he had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth" (76). Well, given that Brently is *not* dead, we cannot but conclude that the narrator, despite the display of knowledge, is reticent. It is not a matter of the narrator's limitation – there are no limitations to an authorial narrator's knowledge – but a matter of the careful, authorial (this time Chopin's) handling of his perspective which must play cunningly with the mimetic level privileging the chronological order of discovery. Apparently, Chopin deemed it necessary to have it both ways – knowledgeable and limited. The first limitation she imposes on her narrator is an alignment with the characters' experiencing frame in terms of sequential chronology. The second is more overtly perspectival and concerns the second section of the short story which begins with the protagonist's going "away to her room alone" (77). This shift concerns the main focus of these pages.

> 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 […] the tops of trees. […] In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which someone was singing reached her distantly. (*Ibidem*)

The change in perspective is made unmistakably clear by the positioning of the origo of the description that follows: a roomy chair facing an open window. Windows are the famous metaphor that Henry James employs to describe the house of fiction in the preface to his *Portrait of a Lady* (1881). The well-known quote is worth repeating as it condenses the correlation between the framing of a given window and the perspective that governs the description that follows:

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million […] every one of which has been pierced […] by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures […] have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. (James 2011, 632)

More recently, Mieke Bal reminds us that we should not consider descriptions as textual places in which the plot is suspended and we are given contextual details neutrally: "the 'natural' form of description" Bal maintains, "is focalized on the character's perception" (2002, 195, my translation). Chopin structures this second section precisely along these lines detailing the distinct impression of what the protagonist *could* see and hear given her position. Everything in this and in the following paragraphs is limited both perceptually ("faintly", "distant" "distantly" "off yonder" "patches of blue sky") and cognitively ("someone"). The shift is signaled by another important detail: the deictic indicating the armchair is the proximal "this" which conveys the sliding toward the protagonist's perceptual embodied position. It is worth noticing that the armchair is the item that opens this section – a masterful move that foregrounds Louise as a weak subject.

These elements notwithstanding, the short story's movement is much more subtle: it is not the fluid shift from authorial/all-encompassing to limited/internal and back to authorial. The narrator keeps being audibly present in the room with Mrs. Mallard.

> 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 […]. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought. (77)

This description demonstrates that we are still distant from the high-modernist strictly-focalized text *à la* Hemingway and that the authorial narrator still keeps the protagonist on a short leash. The access to the protagonist's interiority and the opening up of a space in which we are granted the possibility to get in touch with her emotional landscape as it takes shape in the moments that follow the news of her husband's death is heavily framed by the narrator who makes clear that the path that leads to Louise's highly idiosyncratic version of self-assertion is not rooted in reflection but in "a suspension of intelligent thought", that is to say *not* in higher order faculties. The description thus hides beneath the surface of factuality a preemptive idea concerning women, their too emotional way of being in the world. Louise is read into a double-edged stereotype that precedes her: repression and irrationality. But who lies behind these authorial reading moves (of Louise's looks) which cannot but be – given their intrinsic authority – guiding invitations to read what follows along these lines?

To answer this question in view not only of Chopin's short story but of her broader literary project, I cannot but return to Susan Lanser's foundational book and recall her introductory reflections on the enmeshment of (textual) authority and social power. Lanser maintains that

> One major constituent of narrative authority […] is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power. […] I believe, however, that even novelists who challenge this authority are constrained to adopt the authorizing conventions of narrative voice in order, paradoxically, to mount an authoritative critique of the authority that the text therefore also perpetuates. (1992, 6-7)

I would argue that the naming of the two traits Louise's face allegedly manifests refers to the two strains Lanser associates with discursive narrative authority: one conforming to the stereotypical reading of women as irrational, the other subtly challenging the dominant authority by conjuring up the term that condenses the consequences of patriarchal chastising of female desire – repression. According to this possible reading, behind the same authorial voice would lie *both* the hegemonic ideology *and* its potential breach. In naming repression, which is, plot-wise, the term motivating the return of the repressed that follows, Chopin creates a space to interrogate what is discursively dominant. The fact that this is not much of a challenge is, in itself, part and parcel of the situation the short story thematizes. What happens while Louise is alone is presented through her own focalizing perspective, even if dutifully framed.

This reading touches upon the core of Chopin's story, (almost) unanimously considered a story of female self-assertion, an example of those works by Chopin in which she "offers concentrated descriptions of moments that shatter social complacency, that quickening of consciousness which gives birth to self-desire, self-recognition" (Papke 1990, 60). It is, thus, necessary to dwell on its implications more thoroughly, and respond to the most trenchant debunking of any interpretation which moves from more or less overt feminist underpinnings, Lawrence I. Berkove's:

> in the text of this very short story there is no hard evidence whatsoever of patriarchal blindness or suppression, constant or selfless sacrifice by Louise, or an ongoing struggle for selfhood. These positions are all read into the story from non-textual assumptions. […] [The text] does not supply us with any information about the truth of her life except her perceptions, and these […] are unreliable and, insofar as they are taken as the statements of the story's omniscient narrator, misleading and contradicted by other textual evidence. (2000, 153)

Berkove's reasoning is not conducted in an abstract way, but founded on a tight close-reading of Louise's "unreasoning self-centeredness" and her "distorted view of love" (154). He takes great pain in demonstrating that the objectivity, or to put it in more precise perspectival terms, the absolute restriction to the protagonist's perceptual and cognitive apprehension of the situation, consigns to the reader a woman that dubs "illumination" her "dark and twisted fantasies that reflect a confused and unhealthy mind" (156). Louise's thinking is "arbitrary and whimsical", "extravagant and unrealistic" (155, 154), in short, she "is sick, emotionally as well as physically" (156) and she "is not thinking clearly" (157).

The quote above finds, furthermore, specific fault with the word "repression", the same word I proposed to read as a key term to access the perspectival strategies I am trying to illuminate. Berkove insists that the generally acknowledged theme, nicely summarized by Steven Dolloff as "the unhealthy repression of a woman's natural sense of individual self-worth by conventional sexist expectations of late nineteenth-century matrimony" (2014, 580), is not present in the story but is projected upon it.

To address Berkove's biting critique of the protagonist of "The Story of an Hour", it is important to liberate Chopin from the constriction of labels and the expectations that they entrail. She was never part of the feminist movement as it was developing in her time and she did not use the term feminist to describe

herself. She was however interested in reacting against the idea that women's writings belong in two well-defined genres – sentimental fiction and regionalist fiction. As Mary Papke puts it: Chopin's work together with Edith Wharton's is "the first modern female literary discourse in America, one in which women's experience is given centrality and expression" (1990, 4).

It is important to clarify that Berkove does not dispute Chopin's greatness; I would, nonetheless, claim that Berkove's interpretation dismisses too hastily the perspectival dynamics at work here and its consequences. I suggest viewing this dynamic as Chopin's way of conveying *formally* the stakes of putting women's experience center stage – no one can obviously question the *thematic* centrality of women in Chopin's oeuvre. Chopin chooses not to grant her female protagonist a voice;[8] she chooses to employ her authority as a writer *both* reinforcing *and* problematizing the authority of her authorial narrator to stage formally the fact that there are no easy fixes to undo the hegemonic interpretation of women's lives, that there is no point denying their stereotyping, nor their liminality. Chopin works from within challenging the discursive underpinnings of men's authority over them by exploring fictionally the possible trajectory the very vocabulary that defines women sets in motion.

Chopin knows very well that the road that would allow a transition from self-abnegation to self-assertion is paved with many compromises. Chopin stages here – Berkove's reading is (partially) valid – a woman who experiences such an inebriation at her prospective freedom as to paint it in too radically absolute terms ("a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely", 78). This reaction is itself part and parcel of expressing women's experience as it is, that is to say, (maybe inevitably?) equal, opposite and inversely proportional to the weight of dispossession of one's self they had to endure.

It is easy to argue, as Berkove himself does, that this inebriation makes her even more ill. In commenting her descending the stairs after her time alone in her room, Berkove focuses on the term "unwittingly" – "she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (79) – and writes: the adverb, "with its connotation of the absence of reason, reinforces the idea that Louise's fever has triumphed", her fancy, "with its connotation of fantastic and capricious imaginings" (2000, 157) and not her reason has won.

Yes, Louise may be said to somewhat reinforce the stereotypical idea that women handle situations too emotionally. The story of Louise's hour of freedom is indeed a dream, the "untenable representation of a particular individual case" (Papke 1990, 6), but in the folds of Chopin's formal choices, what we may call the how of this representation, lies Chopin's trenchant critique to the social structures that confine women's experience *despite* the fact that Chopin may well disagree with Louise's radicality.

Elissa Marder's words voice the problem Chopin had to face poignantly: "if there is no experience 'outside' of patriarchal structures, and no discrete language 'outside' of patriarchal discourse, in what terms can this experience be spoken?" (quoted in Hayes-Brady 2016). According to the reading I am here proposing, Chopin's answer to Marder's "in what terms?" question is the following: firstly by overtly granting center stage to her perceptions, the merely perceptual ones belonging to the external world (what she could see and hear while sitting in her armchair), then the more specifically emotional ones emerging from within, sick as they may be. This shift, in itself, does not, technically speaking, assign a voice to the protagonist; it constitutes, however, a subjectivizing move as it magnifies the embodied positioning and consequent coloring of what is narrated. Secondly, Chopin answers by letting Louise's emotions take the distorted form they subjectively take while framing them authorially, because this (stereotypical) framing *and* Louise's rebellious reaction are the most precise snapshot of how things are as far as the precarious and still embryonic shape an autonomous woman may take. And, last but not least, by putting the reader in the position to reflect on the final interpretation of Louise's cause of death from the privileged position of knowing which emotions Louise harbored in her heart.

Thus, Berkove's point that "[the text] does not supply us with any information about the truth of her life except her perceptions" fails to acknowledge that this is exactly the point: a partial silencing of the authorial instance alongside the (only apparently paradoxical) maintenance of its demoting vocabulary. There is no unreliability here, nor are there misleading moves: the reader is in the position *not* to take them "as the statements of the story's omniscient narrator" (2000, 153).

The enmeshment of the dominant vocabulary and the still inchoate language to speak outside of patriarchal discourse is evident in the tentative way the consequences of the Victorian ideal of marital self-sacrifice are

[8] As far as I know, none of Kate Chopin's most renowned short stories employed character-narration, or, in other terms, a first-person narrative voice.

addressed. In other words, the tentativeness relates to the "cult of true womanhood, a cultural signifier central to early twentieth-century American literature" (Papke 1990, 3).[9] Here we can see the rather convoluted way in which Louise manages to eventually name "this thing" (77) she feels:

> 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. […] She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will […]. When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. […] 'free, free, free!' 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. (77-78)

The word that articulates the tumultuous feeling and the concept it embodies reaches Louise despite her resistance.[10] The authorial narrator's voice becomes again audible with an intrusion doing what it had done before, namely, reminding the boundaries of the dominant world view. This kind of joy should be repressed (to return to the other key term we have already touched upon) and the very fact that Louise dismisses her own suggestion, which we are invited to connect to the inner resistance she had felt, confirms that Chopin accepts to present a woman who radicalizes the dominance of her emotional side. What enables her to "dismiss the suggestion as trivial" is the clarity of her perception. She feels (the "suspension of intelligent thought" is still in place) with clarity, but this feeling is exalted and thus bypasses the moral question and trespasses into potentially immoral territory.

Once again, we might wonder: where does Chopin stand? I think Chopin is behind the adjective "monstrous" as well. As with the word "repression", she has her protagonist face the most obvious interpretation of feminine self-assertion as the poisonous fruit of unthoughtful exaltation. What Chopin is doing here goes well beyond what may be deemed her opinion as far as Louise's version of female self-assertion. It could actually be argued, as Dan Shen convincingly does, that Chopin's living in loving memory of her husband and "her other narratives affirming the bereaved wife's contented life devoted to the dear, dead husband" (2009, 128) may be the contextual reason for Chopin's ironically ambivalent handling of Louise's story. Here Chopin weaves her broader project exploring the pitfalls of handling a prospective autonomy which tends to be programmatically denied. The movement from silence to voice passes through articulations which may turn out to be (too) daring and audacious. Chopin not only alternates authorial and internally-focalized narration "as a realistic evocation of the subject/object problem" (Peel 2016, 87) so central to feminist discourse, but inhabits herself the authorial hegemonic vocabulary testing its narrative consequences.

We are now ready to confront the final sentence with which I chose to open this reflection on Chopin's short story. Here it is, again: "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease – of joy that kills" (79). The authorial narrator, back in charge to frame the story of Louise's hour would seem to neutrally report the doctors' interpretation of Louise's heart failure, an interpretation which is perfectly in keeping with the stereotypical view of women's identity. Louise is, thus, told (and written) into the only legitimate place she can belong to, that of the devoted wife who cannot but be overjoyed at her husband's return after she believed she had lost him. That joy is too much for Louise's frail heart and kills her. The doctors voice (and the authorial narrator reports) the only reading available to the characters of the short story who have not crossed the threshold of Louise's room. In thus doing, the authorial narrator who has witnessed (almost) in silence and reported (almost) dutifully Louise's emotional exaltation, intruding to exercise his framing role, silences the radical form Louise's mourning has taken.

We are definitely facing a surprise ending, the fruit, according to Richard Fusco, of Chopin's following in the steps of Guy de Maupassant's poetics. Readers are confronted with a sudden and unpredictable change of direction: the news of Brently's death is not true after all and Brently is back home. If we follow Richard Fusco's categories, the ending of "The Story of an Hour" could be said to straddle two typologies – "the ironic coda" and "the surprise-inversion story". Here, in fact, the author *both* "leads [her] readers along what appears to be a linear plot; but […] in the last sentence [s]he unexpectedly introduces a twist" (1994, 21) *and* adds a brief coda, which takes "place after the time frame of the primary story, long enough so that characters can view a significant event more reflectively than emotionally" (17).

[9] For a brief but perceptive presentation of true womanhood ideology, see Papke 1990, 9-19.

[10] Daniel Deneau points interestingly to the underlying web of interrelated concepts of "fear, force and sex […] anticipation, pleasure and ultimately enlightenment" of this passage which marks Louise's transformation, mobilizing "a combination of a rape, a visitation by the Holy Spirit, and a sexual union" (2003, 212).

Many scholars have commented on the irony of this ending: it is definitely there both diegetically (the doctors may be said to be ironic in assuming joy as the cause of Louise's death), and extradiegetically (readers may deem the ending ironic considering that all the characters think that she has died of (unspecified) joy, while she has actually died because she has lost her freedom). Along these lines, readers' next interpretive step could thus be the acknowledgment that a woman who breaks patriarchal identity rules must pay – once again – with her life.

And yet, intermingled with this undisputable truth, there lies the most enduring surprise which concerns the ambivalence of the space Chopin has created – graphically conveyed by the dash. In that space, the word "monstrous" resounds. There are many reasons for its absence: Louise's death has brought down the curtain of her profoundly subjective experience of her husband's alleged death. The authorial narrator wants, so to speak, to turn this unacceptable page reinstating the narrative that confirms the status quo concerning a woman's role and her appropriate feelings. I would argue that the word monstrous is absent not simply because Louise's focalizing perspective isn't available any longer but because it is now the reader's turn to decide what to make of it – how far (or how close) Louise's inebriation approximates the destination of finding an autonomous voice.

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