

The Story of an HOUR

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BACKGROUND This story takes place around 1900, when the status of women was radically different than it is today. Because women could not vote, they had almost no political or legal power; because they could not own property and had few chances to gain education or employment, they had little or no financial independence. Few careers were open to middle- and upper-class women, who were expected to be supported by their husbands. In most American marriages of the time, the husband was the undisputed head of the household.

ANALYZE VISUALS

In the era in which this story is set, women were deemed fragile, sensitive, and submissive. What artistic elements help to convey these attributes in the painting?

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. **A**

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.

A PREDICT

What might this early mention of Mrs. Mallard's illness **foreshadow**? Use this clue to predict how she will react to the news of her husband's death. Record your prediction in your chart.

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a
10 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
someone was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering
20 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.

30 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. **B**

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. **C**

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
40 and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every
inch of her body. **D**

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.

B GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 30–33.

Notice how Chopin uses the **active voice**, with the subjects performing the action in the sentences. Contrast this with her use of the **passive voice** in the first sentence of the story.

C PLOT AND CONFLICT

Reread lines 34–36. With what is Mrs. Mallard struggling? Explain whether her conflict is **internal** or **external**.

D PREDICT

Did Mrs. Mallard respond to the revelation as you predicted she would? What is **ironic** about her reaction?

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would
50 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 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,
60 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 life¹ 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. **E**

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
70 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-sack² and
umbrella. He had been far from the scene of 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.

But Richards was too late.

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

E PLOT AND CONFLICT
Consider the feelings
Mrs. Mallard struggles
to repress when she first
enters her room. How, in
lines 42–67, is this conflict
resolved?

1. **elixir of life:** a medicine that restores vigor or the essence of life.

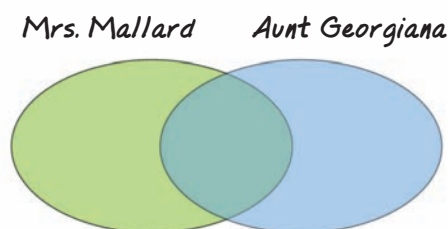
2. **grip-sack:** a small traveling bag or satchel.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What illness afflicts Mrs. Mallard?
2. **Summarize** Describe the news Mrs. Mallard receives at the beginning of the story and explain how she reacts.
3. **Clarify** What happens at the end of the story?

Literary Analysis

4. **Analyze Plot and Conflict** The plot of “The Story of an Hour” is driven by Mrs. Mallard’s **internal conflict**. Describe her conflict; then explain how this secret inner struggle sets up the story’s **surprise ending**.
5. **Examine Predictions** Review the chart you filled in as you read. Were your predictions accurate? Consider how Chopin uses **irony** to play on readers’ expectations and deliver surprise plot twists in each of the following cases. Does this manipulation increase or decrease your enjoyment of the story?
 - Mrs. Mallard’s reaction to the news that her husband is dead (lines 34–58)
 - Mrs. Mallard’s wish that “life might be long” (lines 64–67)
 - the doctor’s explanation of the cause of Mrs. Mallard’s death (lines 78–79)
6. **Interpret Imagery** Reread lines 16–22. How does Chopin’s use of imagery contribute to your understanding of Mrs. Mallard’s character and situation? Did the imagery make you more or less sympathetic toward her? Explain, citing specific lines from the story that influenced your response.
7. **Compare Characters** Both Mrs. Mallard and Aunt Georgiana in “A Wagner Matinee” by Willa Cather (page 692) face **constraints** that confine them to a specific way of life. In a Venn diagram like the one shown, compare and contrast these two characters’ situations. Use your completed diagram to explain what message each author might be trying to convey through her main character.



Literary Criticism

8. **Social Context** Women’s roles have certainly changed since Chopin wrote this story, but has the institution of marriage? Reread lines 49–54 of “The Story of an Hour.” Is the imposition of will by both men and women that Chopin describes still an issue in contemporary marriages? Explain your opinion.