The Story of an Hour

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE CHOPIN

Born Catherine O'Flaherty in 1850, Kate Chopin was raised in St. Louis, Missouri by well-off, socially established parents. An Irish immigrant, her father was a prosperous businessman, while her mother came from the well-respected French community of St. Louis. At the age of 20, Chopin married the son of a successful family in the cotton industry. Together they had six children and lived in New Orleans until eventually moving to the French town of Cloutierville, Louisiana in 1879. There, her husband owned and ran a general store until he died in 1882, at which point Chopin rather unconventionally took over the shop's operation, thereby becoming a self-sufficient widow. This move went against what was considered normal and acceptable for women at the time, and Chopin was widely judged by her surrounding community. Eventually, in 1884, she moved back to St. Louis to live with her mother and began writing short stories for popular American magazines. Her writing often championed the kind of female independence she had become notorious for in Cloutierville; her first novel, *At Fault*, for instance, controversially examined the idea of divorce and paved the way for the fearless independence of her later works such as *The Awakening*, which was critiqued and banned by libraries and bookstores alike. Chopin died suddenly of a brain hemorrhage in 1904, leaving behind three novels, two collections of short stories, and one play. Although her work was relatively unpopular at the time of her death, her legacy as both an important American novelist in her own right, and one of the first female authors to address gender inequality, has only grown.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Story of an Hour" was published in 1894, one year after the first U.S. state granted women the right to vote. Though it would be almost another thirty years before the country passed the 19th amendment, which won women the federal right to vote, the tides of social change had started to turn. Early strains of feminist thought—though it was not yet called this—had started to take hold of certain corners of public discourse. This was in part the result of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, where women's rights advocates gathered to discuss gender equality. The suffragists (as they were called) sought to address unfair limitations placed on women by society and the law, ultimately fighting toward winning the right to vote. "The Story of an Hour" showcases many of the suffragist's common concerns by placing at its center a woman who suddenly finds herself no longer financially or socially dependent on a man.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like many of Chopin's stories and novels, "The Story of an Hour" is interested in examining female independence. Her controversial novel, *The Awakening*, explores a similar idea by following the progression of its female protagonist's extramarital affair and subsequent life of freedom from her husband (as well as her eventual death by suicide). Much like "The Story of an Hour," *The Awakening* tracks moments of personal revelation, especially those that lead to a recognition of freedom and independence. Whereas Chopin's earlier work—like "The Story of an Hour," as well as other short stories contained in her collection A *Night in Acadie*—placed unconventional women at the center of their narratives without necessarily endorsing a break from society's expected gender roles, *The Awakening* did not shy away from endorsing female independence in a provocative and unprecedented manner.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Story of an Hour
- **When Written:** April 19, 1894
- **When Published:** 1894
- **Literary Period:** American Realism
- **Genre:** Realistic fiction
- **Setting:** The domestic realm of the late 19th century.
- **Climax:** Having accepted and rejoiced in her newfound freedom, Louise exits her bedroom only to find her husband coming through the front door, a sight that fatally shocks her heart with a "joy that kills."
- **Antagonist:** The sexist and inhibiting expectations of women in 19th century society.
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Vogue Magazine. "The Story of an Hour" was originally published as "The Dream of an Hour" in *Vogue* magazine. Back then, *Vogue* was a newspaper published every week and was intended to cater to the upper class of New York. The publication also published another of Chopin's most famous short stories, "Désirée's Baby."

Film Adaptation. In 1984, PBS aired a film adaptation of "The Story of an Hour." The film was called "The Joy that Kills," taken from the story's last line, and was written by Tina Rathborne

and Nancy Dyer.

PLOT SUMMARY

Louise Mallard has a **weak heart** that puts her at risk if she becomes too animated. After hearing from Richards—a friend of the family—that Louise's husband Brently Mallard has died in a train accident, her sister Josephine takes great care to break the news to Louise in a gentle, measured way. Despite Josephine's best efforts, though, Louise is inconsolable with grief. She weeps intensely into her sister's arms before fleeing into her bedroom, shutting and locking the door behind herself.

In her bedroom, she collapses into a chair facing a **window** and, exhausted by her own sobbing, stares outside at a collection of newly blossomed trees and various stretches of blue in the sky. Life on the streets below goes along like normal, and as Louise sits motionless in the chair, she begins to sense with fear that something—some feeling—is approaching her. She is unable to define or name the approaching sensation because it is too abstract, too vague. Scared, she tries to keep the feeling at bay, but it's no use because everything—the new spring life outside, the smell of rain, the expansive sky—seems to embody the sensation, and she feels it reaching toward her.

Suddenly she lets her guard down and finds herself mouthing the word "free" over and over again. No longer passive, her **heart** beats fast and her rushing blood enlivens her. Joy floods her and she imagines the life ahead of her with complete excitement and happiness: despite the fact that she and her husband enjoyed a stable, loving marriage, she is flooded with ecstasy by the prospect of no longer being required to live dependent upon her husband, upon anyone. Now the remainder of her life belongs only to her, and she is overjoyed at the idea of this freedom.

Worried that Louise is making herself sick by staying in her room alone, Josephine kneels on the ground and speaks through the door's keyhole, imploring her sister to let her in. After uttering a quick prayer that her new life will be long, Louise rises and confidently strides out of the bedroom. Together with her sister, she starts walking down the steps toward where Richards waits at the bottom.

The sound of keys fiddling in the front door travels into the house, and suddenly the door opens and Brently Mallard nonchalantly enters. Apparently he had been nowhere near the train accident that had supposedly killed him. In an effort to protect Louise from the utter shock of seeing her living husband, Richards quickly tries to obscure Brently, but to no avail, and Louise lets out her final sound: a sharp scream that startles and mystifies her husband. When the doctors inspect Louise's dead body, they decide that she died because her heart was too excited—too overjoyed—to see her husband.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Louise Mallard – A woman troubled by a **heart** condition who is told that her husband, Brently Mallard, has died in a train accident. Due to her heart problem, she is not supposed to become overly excited, but—unlike how other women of the time period might react—she responds to this bad news with intense, wild grief. However, as she is grieving alone in her room for her husband, with whom she had shared a good marriage, Louise soon finds herself overjoyed at the prospect of the independence of widowhood, at the prospect of never again being dependent on a husband or in any way influenced, explicitly or implicitly, to do anything other than exactly what she wants to do. As she savors this newfound freedom she is flooded by joy, a joy that is snuffed out when she dies of a heart attack upon seeing her husband, who had in fact not been in the accident at all, walk through the front door. Her death suggests the actual impossibility of the sort of freedom she had briefly imagined.

Brently Mallard – Louise Mallard's husband, who is incorrectly reported to have died in a train accident. When he returns home that day, he has no idea that anybody thinks he has died. Brently is a kind and loving husband to Louise, but despite that is an impediment to Louise's freedom simply through the institution of marriage.

Josephine – The sister of Louise Mallard. Aware of Louise's **heart** troubles, she breaks the news of Brently's death to Louise using a calm demeanor. She actively worries about her sister's health and tries to protect her from herself. Whereas Louise is a women who, in her moment of grief, sees how society entraps and controls women, Josephine is more traditional and shows no such insight. In fact, her character seems to show how both men *and* women of society control and entrap other women.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Richards – Brently's friend who is in the newspaper office when news comes in that there has been a train crash. After reading Brently's name on the list of the deceased, he tells Josephine the mistaken information.

Doctors – Medical doctors who examine Louise's dead body.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WOMEN IN 19TH-CENTURY SOCIETY

In the late 19th century, much of American society held to the deep-seated belief that women were inferior to and should remain dependent upon husbands and other male figures. On the whole, women were expected to accommodate their husbands by cooking, cleaning, and generally maintaining the household. Any employment available to them offered wages significantly less than what men earned, and women were expected to conduct their lives according to their husbands' wishes. Most women had little or no financial or other independence, as they (and their finances) were essentially passed from their fathers to their husbands upon marriage. At the same time, the second half of the 19th century saw the rise of the first organized women's rights movements, marked most notably by the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. "The Story of An Hour" was published in 1884, only one year after the first U.S. state granted women the right to vote, but still almost three decades before women would get the federal right to vote through the 19th amendment in 1919.

Like much of Kate Chopin's work, "The Story of an Hour" revolves around the idea of female independence and its obstacles. The story is especially concerned with examining how a nineteenth-century woman was expected to behave in highly emotional circumstances. Louise Mallard's **heart** condition renders her physically weak, further enforcing the time period's prevailing sentiment that women should remain passive and unexcited. At the same time, one might argue that it is the diagnosis of the heart condition itself that enforces a kind of weakness on Louise based on the assumptions about women inherent in the diagnosis.

More particularly, though, through the sudden death of Louise's husband in an accident, the story portrays a woman on the cusp of true independence in the only way that was truly available to women at the time: through the death of a wealthy husband, leaving the woman with her own fortune and no need to remarry to maintain her station in life. And so, despite her real grief at her husband's unexpected death, Louise feels intense joy at the exceedingly rare prospect being granted to her as a woman: the chance to be "free, free."

And yet, the story also implies the way that society, and perhaps even the world itself, resists any woman having such freedom. It does so most obviously through its literal shock ending, in which Louise's husband turns out not to have been in the accident after all and walks through the front door, a revelation that stops Louise's heart. But the story also makes this implication more subtly, as when Louise's sister worries that Louise is making herself sick by remaining isolated in her room (though in truth Louise is reveling in her freedom). Both men and women of the society around Louise intervene in her life, ultimately proving that her freedom is impossible to hold.

FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE

In "The Story of an Hour," freedom and independence—not love, not friends, not family, not honor or glory or anything else—are held up as what make a life worth living. Though Louise is at first genuinely upset by the news of Brently's death—and though she makes it clear that she will greatly mourn the loss of her husband—over the course of the hour in which she believes him to be dead, she comes to see the incredible gift she has been given in the form of the freedom she will have as an unmarried (and well-off) woman. She delights in the fact that without a husband she will be able to spend the remainder of her days exactly as she pleases. While Louise's delight in her freedom is closely tied to her status as a woman in nineteenth-century American society, it is important to note that the story doesn't limit its idea of the preeminent importance of independence *only* to women. As Louise herself thinks, "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." In Louise's conception, it is both women and men who lack freedom; it is both women and men who, in all their interactions with each other, steal freedom from each other.

Yet, just as the story indicates society and the world's resistance to female empowerment, so does it imply the impossibility of actual human freedom or independence. It is no coincidence that Louise's sense of the possibility of freedom only comes to her when she is locked, entirely alone, within her room. As her own thoughts about how men and women take each other's freedom suggests, any social interaction or connection impinges upon freedom. And so it is further no coincidence that Louise's dream of freedom, along with Louise herself, dies almost as soon as she leaves the solitary ecstasy of her room.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

You might reasonably guess, if you were told that a woman became deliriously excited soon after her husband's sudden death, that the marriage was not a very good one. However, "The Story of an Hour" makes it clear that Louise and Brently's marriage was perfectly loving or, at the very least, normal. After all, Louise's initial reaction to her husband's death is completely authentic and powerful: she goes alone to her room not to plot her path to freedom but because, in her grief, she can't bear to be with anyone else. And even as she begins to recognize the freedom that Brently's death promises, she thinks of his "face that had never looked save with love upon her" and knows that she will weep with sadness when she looks upon his "kind, tender hands folded in death.

The basic goodness of Louise and Brently's marriage is crucial because it means that Louise's joy at her newfound freedom isn't a critique of her marriage to Brently, but rather a critique of the entire institution of marriage. In her "moment of illumination," she describes marriage as centered around "that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature." Louise believes love and marriage restrict freedom and that, as such, they are institutions in which the benefit does not equal the cost.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WINDOW

When Louise Mallard shuts herself in her room, she sits in front of a **window**. The window is open, symbolizing a sense of possibility and a reinvigoration of Louise's senses and, therefore, her feeling of being alive. She smells the fresh scent of rain coming in from outside. She sees trees moving in the wind and portions of blue sky stretching between heavy clouds. She hears a merchant trying to sell his goods in the streets, fragments of a far-off song, and the sound of birds. It is by sitting in front of this open window that Louise begins to realize her own freedom and independence and the prospect that she can lead a life of her own. Experiencing the sights and sounds of the "new spring life" helps her get in touch with her own desire to burst forth into a new kind of life.

LOUISE'S WEAK HEART

Louise's **heart** trouble symbolizes her emotional delicacy. It presents her with a conundrum: allow herself to experience the full capacity of human feeling and consequently risk her health, or stifle and repress her emotions in order to go on living a compromised life. Her heart condition therefore mirrors the ways in which the institution of marriage encroaches upon Louise's independence, for just as her heart's weakness keeps her from leading the life she would otherwise live, marriage prevents her from exercising her freedom of will.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* published in 1976.

"The Story of an Hour" Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Josephine, Louise Mallard

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Louise has just been told that her husband, Brently Mallard, died in a train accident. The "wild abandonment" she displays challenges her weak heart and defies the limitations and expectations that her body and social context have placedupon her. Indeed, if other nineteenth-century women would respond to similar news with passive denial rather than with the passion Louise shows, then Louise is, perhaps, different from the average woman of her day. She seems to be somebody who, rather than refusing to accept tragedy, is willing to confront difficulty and hardship, even if this means straying from the societal norm and possibly risking her physical wellbeing.

On the other hand, though, this reaction doesn't exactly mark Louise as someone more in touch with her true emotions than others. As the story reveals, Louise's initial wild grief is at odds with her deeper reaction to her husband's death: her joy at her newfound freedom. In this way, Louise's ability to accept the truth of her husband's death faster than "many women" who would have been in denial points to the fact that her reaction is not what it initially appears. While other women might have a numb reaction to the news that precedes grief, Louise has a grief reaction that precedes joy. This suggests a similarity between Louise and other women, in that each of their reactions to tragedy involves initial emotions that do not reflect their deeper feelings.

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.

Related Characters: Louise Mallard

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Having mostly stopped crying, Louise retreats to the isolation of her locked bedroom and sinks into a chair placed by the open window. What she sees beyond the window frame takes on symbolic meaning. The treetops full of "new spring life" represent new beginnings and possibilities. Though she hasn't yet realized it, the spring-like qualities of the outdoors endear themselves to her, as evidenced by the fact that the smell of rain in the air is described as "delicious." Having returned from their winter travels, the birds symbolize a freedom and a resurgence of life, and it is important to note that even something as mundane and ordinary as a "peddler crying his wares" seems to take on an alluring quality alongside the attractive descriptions of springtime. Louise's seduction by the springtime outside her window is a powerful echo of her own growing sense that a new life is waiting for her on the other side of her grief.

> 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.

Related Characters: Louise Mallard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Louise looks out the window, her gaze settles on the sky, and the nature of her looking out the window begins to change. Her "glance" is initially not one of deep thought or introspection, but rather "a suspension of intelligent thought."This "suspension" of thought is a response to a feeling that Louise fears but knows is coming, and her reaction seems to be an attempt to comport herself in the way that society would expect a new widow to behave; if she is to meet nineteenth-century society's expectations, she must repress the joyful feeling of freedom that the symbolism of springtime outside the widow portends. Chopin tacitly condones Louise's eventual break into independence by using the word "intelligent" here, essentially making clear that to continue repressing these feelings would be unwise and unenlightened.The quote's insistence that Louise is "waiting for" the feeling makes clear, too, that the unintelligent gaze is an ineffective defense against the powerful reality of her new feelings.

> There would be no one to live for her 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.

Related Characters: Louise Mallard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

After Louise allows herself to rather unconventionally embrace the freedom of widowhood, she considers the institution of marriage and how she now exists outside of its oppressive dictates. Interestingly enough, she sees marriage as a cruelty enacted not just on wives by their husbands but also on husbands by their wives. This "powerful will" is not specific to men; it is the direct result of the imposition of one person upon another, an occurrence inevitably and unavoidably brought about by the institution of marriage. Through this logic, it can be understood that "The Story of an Hour" champions independence above all else, making clear that humans don't truly have "a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature," regardless of possibly good intentions.

> 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!

Related Characters: Brently Mallard, Louise Mallard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

On the heels of admitting to herself that she sometimes loved Brently (and sometimes did not), Louise comes to the conclusion that the point is irrelevant. By calling love "the unsolved mystery," Chopin frames marriage as a somewhat abstract concept, in contrast to the more tangible and clear concept of "self-assertion" and independence. Love, it seems, pales in comparison to freedom and self-empowerment, which is readily available if only an individual acknowledges it.

It is noteworthy that Louise recognizes her "possession of self-assertion" as "the strongest impulse of her being," since the word "strongest" contradicts the previously established idea that women—and specifically Louise—are weak, fragile, and passive.This implies that the only reason she was previously weak was because her ability to realize her own "self-assertion" had been hindered by the oppressive qualities of love and marriage.

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.

Related Characters: Josephine, Louise Mallard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Finally acquiescing to her sister's plea that she come out of the locked bedroomso that she won't make herself ill, Louise confidently stands and leaves the room—her victorious demeanor seems to defy the very premise of her needing to leave the room to avoid illness. Thatthe word "importunities" carries with it connotations of annoyance and intrusion underscores the sense that Josephine's assumption of Louise's weakness is at odds with reality;Chopin is revealing her allegiance to Louise and her fondness for the character's newfound feminine confidence. However,Louise is once again portrayed as physically excited to the point of possible agitation, as evidenced by the word "feverish." Hernewfound emotional strength and her confident demeanor are, once again, at odds with her supposedly weak heart, but in this moment it is not clear whether this puts her in danger or if it is proof that she has, until now, been overprotected and sheltered by the meddlesome and intrusive people around her.

It is significant, too, that Louise joins her sister in the hall, as this is the first time since her personal liberation that she has been in the company of others. As she "unwittingly" carries herself like a "goddess of Victory," Louise finds herself able to disregard the expectations and limitations placed upon her by her immediate peers.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

"THE STORY OF AN HOUR"

Louise Mallard has a **weak heart**. Her sister Josephine, who is worried that bad news will overwhelm Louise and worsen her condition, tells her as calmly as possible that her husband, Brently Mallard, has been killed in a train accident. Brently's friend Richards, who learned about the accident while spending time at the newspaper office, asked Josephine to deliver the news of the tragedy to Louise, and now he stands by as Louise hears that her husband has died.

Women were expected to be passive and delicate in the 19th century, and Louise's heart condition reinforces this societal expectation. Her physical weakness further encourages the people around her—like Richards and Josephine—to stifle her emotions and overprotect her.

Unlike other women of her time period, who become paralyzed by denial when confronted by bad news, Louise weeps into Josephine's arms with wild abandon.

Louise's strong reaction to this bad news creates tension because it goes against society's sexist expectations. It also challenges her body's health-related limitations.

After her initial sobs of grief subside, Louise escapes into her bedroom and locks the door. She refuses to let Josephine or Richards follow her. Alone, she falls into a chair placed before an open **window**. Absolutely drained by her own anguish and haunted by exhaustion, she rests in the chair and looks out the window.

Louise's desire to be alone with her grief is the first indication of her inclination toward freedom and independence, especially in regards to the handling of her own emotions. In keeping with the idea that she is weak, though, she is physically exhausted by sobbing.

Outside her **window**, Louise sees trees moving in the new spring wind, smells the scent of rain outside, and hears the sounds of the street below and birdsongs coming from the eaves of nearby buildings. Her face fixes in a blank stare as she looks at several swaths of blue sky stretching out between clusters of heavy clouds. And although she fights it—trying hard to resist—she senses a feeling approaching her. She is unable to articulate the nature of the sensation, which makes her fear it all the more. It seems ever-present, reaching out from the sky and coming to her through the smells that drift around her.

The elements of spring—the resurgent prominence of plant life, the return of birdsong, everything—embody an approaching revelation, and the vague signification of it all slowly overwhelms Louise. By resisting this unnamable feeling, she begins to fear its implications all the more. It is notable that the sensation seems to reach out to her from the sky and air, indicating its vast and all-encompassing strength.

As Louise tries to stave off this vague approaching feeling, she becomes increasingly physically excited and agitated. Slowly, she begins to grasp the feeling that so overtakes her, and she redoubles her efforts to keep it away. Despite her resolve, though, she suddenly gives herself over to the encroaching feeling. In an unguarded moment, her lips part and a word escapes her mouth, and then she repeats it over and over: "free, free, free!"

In this moment, Louise once again experiences the kind of physical and emotional excitement that she is supposed to avoid because of her heart condition. Yet again, she disregards the limitations placed upon her by her own body and by society, finally giving herself over to the growing sense of freedom represented by the emergence of spring outside the window.

Now Louise's **heart** pulses faster and her blood rushes through her body, but this only relaxes her and turns her fearful state into one of enlivened vigor. She pays no attention to whether or not the joy she feels about Brently's death is terrible or unkind. Although she knows that she will inevitably experience grief when she sees his dead body and his fixed and gray face that had always looked at her with love, the prospect seems a small price to pay for the life of freedom and independence that now stretches out before her, a life in which she can make her own choices and live for herself for the first time.

Louise's fast heartbeat no longer seems an antagonistic force. Her physical excitement has now been reframed as an indication of her happiness regarding her new independent life. That she will regret seeing her husband's dead body emphasizes the fact that she never disliked Brently as a person. She holds no grudge against him, as he had always been kind and loving to her. Her joy, then, is the result of the life ahead of her that will be full of freedom and independence.

Louise realizes that she will no longer be subjected to the powerful rules and norms of marriage, which cause humans to blindly and stubbornly impose themselves on one another. Although she had sometimes loved Brently (and sometimes had not), she feels relieved to finally be in possession of an intense sense of self-assertion, which she recognizes as "the strongest impulse of her being." Deciding that the value of love and marriage counts for very little when compared to her freedom of will, she ecstatically whispers, "Free! Body and soul free!"

In the 19th century, women were expected to live under the financial and social control of their husbands. In this moment, Louise recognizes the rare opportunity she now has to escape this patriarchal dynamic. The fact that she identifies her freedom of will as strong—"the strongest impulse of her being"—once more challenges the previously established notion that she is weak. Whereas before, under marriage's oppressive control, she was viewed as dependent on others, now her self-assertion renders her both physically and emotionally free, as evidenced by her exclamation, "Body and soul free!"

Meanwhile, worried that Louise will make herself sick by staying alone in her bedroom, Josephine kneels outside the room and begs her sister through the keyhole to open the door. Louise tells Josephine to go away and that she's not making herself ill. She keeps her joy to herself and revels in the idea that her new life—which will be full of freedom—is totally and completely her own. She says a short prayer that her life will be long, and knows that it was just the day before when she wished it would be short.

In keeping with nineteenth-century society's stifling nature, well-intentioned attempts to protect Louise end up further invading her personal freedom and independence. Josephine's overprotective worry risks interfering with Louise's emotional process, ultimately demonstrating to readers that the people around Louise are more concerned about controlling her emotional response than with helping her.

Eventually Louise rises from her chair and opens the door, just as Josephine begs her to. Louise's eyes are alight with triumph, and without realizing it she carries herself like a kind of goddess. She embraces her sister.

Louise's posture and gaze symbolize confidence and power despite her sister's overprotective intrusion and the expectation that she remain passive and weak. By embracing her sister she proves once again that she holds no grudges against those who ultimately oppress her.

Together, the two sisters descend the stairs, where Richards stands waiting at the bottom. As they do so, they hear the sound of a key opening the front door. Without warning, Brently Mallard appears in the doorframe, utterly unaware of any train accident; he had been far from the scene of the tragedy. Calmly standing at the bottom of the stairs, he is shocked by Louise's deafening scream and by Richards's futile attempt to shield him from his wife's view. When doctors later examine Louise's body, they pronounce that she died because of her **weak heart**, "of joy that kills."

Brently is completely oblivious to the process of self-discovery Louise has undergone. Though it is not his fault, his presence gives Louise the message that her freedom could never be a reality. In a way, Louise's death, then, is the only way for her to gain independence, in light of the fact that her husband (and, thus, her marriage) is still alive. Of course, her death ironically reinforces the idea that she is weak, and the doctors' pronouncement that she perished of a "joy that kills" furthers this irony, for they are not entirely wrong. Joy does, in fact, play a role in her death: she dies not because she regains joy, but because she suddenly loses it after having only briefly tasted it.

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