

SHORT STORIES IN THE CLASSROOM: KATE CHOPIN'S *THE STORY OF AN HOUR*

Abstract: The following workshop offers both a theoretical (Part One) and didactic (Part Two) approach to Kate Chopin's much-revered and anthologized *The Story of an Hour* in the ESL classroom. Introducing university students in advanced-level courses to short stories has numerous benefits, particularly when coupled with discussion around important themes such as gender equality, stereotyping, marriage, and women's emancipation. Moreover, students will appreciate exposure to an authentic text replete with various literary devices.

Keywords: Kate Chopin, short stories, feminist literature, advanced level

OPOWIADANIA W KLASIE: *RADOŚĆ, KTÓRA ZABIJA* KATE CHOPIN

Streszczenie: Poniższe warsztaty oferują zarówno teoretyczne (część pierwsza), jak i dydaktyczne (część druga) opracowanie do znanego i wielokrotnie umieszczonego w antologiach opowiadania autorstwa Kate Chopin zatytułowanego *Radość, która zabija*. Zapoznanie studentów na poziomie zaawansowanym z opowiadaniem ma wiele zalet, zwłaszcza w połączeniu z dyskusją na ważne tematy, takie jak równouprawnienie płci, stereotypy, małżeństwo i emancypacja kobiet. Ponadto studenci docenią styczność z tekstem autentycznym zawierającym różne środki literackie.

Słowa kluczowe: Kate Chopin, opowiadania, literatura feministyczna, poziom zaawansowany

PART ONE

Introduction

Short stories afford an undeniably invaluable resource for language educators in the classroom, insofar as learners are provided the opportunity to read and appreciate authentic texts, by immersing themselves in the target language and cultural context therein, without the potentially daunting length of a novel or lesson time constraints which may hinder a meaningful discussion. Short stories have

regrettably been neglected in academic settings in favor of the “heavyweight” novel as a more prestigious form of literature destined for classroom use. Despite the genre’s resurgent popularity over the past few decades among the wider public, ESL educators often discount or overlook the novel’s “poor relation” altogether. Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater (1991: 196) confirm the following advantages of figuring short stories into the curricula:

- Time restrictions: short stories can usually be read and discussed during one or a few class periods or parsed into smaller sections in the case of longer texts.
- Learner satisfaction: learners have a less-demanding reading load and are able to reread texts with greater facility in class or at home. They also attain a feeling of achievement for having finished a whole work in less time.
- Flexibility: short stories are particularly recommended for summer or extramural courses, evening and adult classes, where class shifting may occur.

Since their popularization in the nineteenth century press, short stories have offered the public candid snapshots of the world, as platforms for protest, observation, and entertainment. Authors compressed vast experiences and acute, societal observations, characterized by vivid imagery and great thematic diversity in brief prose narratives. It is widely held that Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) composed the first short stories as a new literary genre – e.g. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1842), *The Raven* (1845), *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846), notwithstanding earlier examples of didactic or dramatic narratives such as those found in the Bible, medieval fabliaux, chivalric romances, Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* or Boccaccio’s *Decameron* as well as in numerous exempla. The term “short story” was only coined in the late 1800’s by eminent literary critic Brander Matthews before which time the name “short prose narrative” was common usage. In an essay entitled *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe (1907) distinguishes the genre in temporal terms and via a “simple effect” technique:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed.

In general, short stories can roughly be defined by several characteristics such as length, ranging from around 500 (so-called “short short stories”) to 15,000 words. The narrative structure and number of characters is likewise kept at a minimum, frequently, with only a primary and few secondary ones included. The latter counts as a distinctive advantage of the short story which *reveals* character as opposed to the novel which traces character development over the course of time. Additionally, authors have precious little room to include detailed expository information, descriptions of the setting, thereby foregoing extraneous elements and instead focusing on a single episode, around a precise climax, culminating in

a rapid dénouement. Owing to these characteristics, short stories may also exhibit the quality of unity, i.e. *oneness*, whether it be of effect, theme, tone, or mood.

And yet, for precisely these specificities of genre, short stories may pose somewhat of a hurdle as learners are very quickly plunged into a different, often-times, anachronistic universe. This fact, in turn, requires educators to adequately prepare before presenting any short story, addressing not only the "surface meaning," replete with new vocabulary, but also the historical, cultural, and sociological backgrounds which will necessarily enrich the learner's perspective. Lastly, learners must also be engaged with the text on an emotive level, that is to say, be drawn into the text by "inhabiting" it, thus facilitating a transparency of language (Collie, Slater, 1991: 5–6). Bearing the above factors in mind, the lesson plan found in Part Two proposes several activities, grids, and creative projects which may accompany learners during the various stages of reading and analysis of the text. It is primarily intended for more advanced levels (C1/C2).

Goodbye – because I love you: Kate Chopin

Kate O'Flaherty was born on February 8, 1850 in Saint Louis, Missouri a decade before the outbreak of the American Civil War, to an Irish immigrant father and a mother of Creole descent. From an early age, she felt a greater affinity for the realism of French-language authors than for their English counterparts, most notably, Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant. Raised in the strict traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, she married Oscar Chopin in 1870 at the age of twenty. Their union produced six children and by all accounts, was considered a happy one, until his untimely death having succumbed to swamp fever. Left a young widow at the age of thirty-two, Chopin finally put pen to paper as a means to cope with her depressive state after the loss of her husband and later, of his heavily debt-laden business. She painted vibrant narrative portraits of the local Cajun and Creole cultures in Louisiana where the Chopins had resided. The 1890s were Chopin's most prolific decade during which she published two novels and wrote a third along with over one hundred short stories in magazines such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Vogue*. These were subsequently collected in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897).

Chopin's first novel, *At Fault* (1890), recounts the story of Thérèse Lafirme who falls for a divorced businessman. Though she is herself widowed (undoubtedly modeled after the author), Thérèse cannot break the rigid moral code and false idealism surrounding notions of chastity and the ethics of divorce. At Thérèse's instigation, he returns to his alcoholic ex-wife who conveniently perishes during a storm which allows both to finally tie the knot. *The Awakening* (1899), however, would be Chopin's magnum opus, heralded by later generations as *the* protofeminist novel. It daringly pushes the boundaries further than any of her previous short stories as the heroine, Edna Pontellier, strives for self-assertion against the backdrop of conventionally-understood marriage. Libido dictates nothing in Chopin's

novel inasmuch as Edna experiences a nameless sense of oppression brought on not by a loveless marriage, but the pressing need for emancipation of which her infatuation with the younger Robert Lebrun is only a symptom. Nevertheless, she is the mother of two sons, both of whom she dearly loves. Even after a brief liaison with Alcée Arobin, Edna finds no existential solace and it is for this reason that many contemporary readers were disconcerted if not appalled by such behavior. In abandoning marital, social, and maternal obligations, Edna has neither gained satisfaction nor fulfillment. Like several of Chopin's female protagonists, Edna commits suicide by drowning herself in the sea, as tragic and Anticlean an ending as Désirée Aubigny's trek with her infant son into the bayou.

Kate Chopin did not court the suffragette movement or the feminist sentiments of fellow *fin-de-siècle* authors, but instead she smoked, walked the streets of Saint Louis unaccompanied, read and translated French literature. As Sandra M. Gilbert (1986: 14) observes,

For women, however, the nineties also meant the comparatively new idea of 'free love' as well as the even newer persona of the 'New Woman,' a woman who chose to be politically, professionally, and emotionally autonomous. In addition, to be a woman of the nineties meant to have come of age in a new kind of literary age, an era whose spirit was, if not dominated by literary women, at least shared and shaped by significant female imaginations.

Perhaps the main contribution of Chopin's stories is the psychological discovery of women. She succeeds in masterfully examining each facet – suppressed thoughts, feelings, and anxieties – in intimate detail under a critical lens, while also addressing the dominant male prerogative of discretion. To pigeonhole Chopin as simply a local-color writer, one of the many "regionalists" (although many were in fact women) in the post-bellum United States would be an injustice. Instead, in the spirit of literary realism, Chopin sought to depict the "common life" or the quotidian of women locked in the struggle of spiritual liberation and the desire of freedom within a world of endless constraints. As a consequence of the public's misinterpretation of the themes in *The Awakening* and the subsequent vitriolic backlash in the press, Chopin's literary career came to a grinding halt as the St. Louis public libraries banned her books and few magazines would publish her work thereafter. Chopin wrote only sporadically until her death in 1904, immensely discouraged by the negative reaction and shunned by a number of personal acquaintances. Rediscovered by Edmund Wilson more than half a century later, the two-volume *Complete Works of Kate Chopin* was finally released in 1969 which immediately sparked scholarly interest (see also: Seyersted, 1969; Toth, 1990).

The Story of an Hour

Written in April 1894 and published later that year under the title *Dream of an Hour*, Kate Chopin's short story has been anthologized time and time again and precedes her most famous novel *The Awakening*, both of which chronicle a woman's quest for selfhood and self-determination in the face of oppressive patriarchies and blissless marriages. Once again, Chopin underscores spousal blindness to women's thoughts and can be considered an attack on the institution of marriage itself. In the course of sixty minutes and in little over a thousand words, the story traces the evolution of Mrs. Louise Mallard's unanticipated reaction to news of her husband's death in a tragic train disaster. Far from lamenting his passing, Louise instead treats her momentary "widowhood" as a liberation from the imprisonment of her uxorial position and the stifling obligations which housewifery imposes. Ranked as one of Chopin's most popular short stories, it has been enshrined as a classic of the feminist literary canon since the 1970's. The ending masterfully ironizes the fall of Louise Mallard, as she learns that her husband has returned, unscathed...¹ Interestingly, though not entirely uncoincidentally, Chopin penned *The Story of an Hour* after the deaths of her husband and mother. Chopin herself experienced a reinvigoration fueled by feelings of independence and self-fulfillment following the rapid success of one of her anthologies. Mrs. Mallard's case, though an extreme and stunning example of self-assertion of the heroine vis-à-vis an unsatisfactory marriage, offers a clear picture of her state of mind. One famous passage reads:

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. [...]

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 (Chopin, 1986: 214–215).

Before embarking on a discussion of any short story, three critical elements and their functions should be introduced and discussed in further detail:

- A) **Plot and Structure** – also known as the "skeleton" or "story arc" of the work. What is the series of events in the story and its overall shape? It may likewise be beneficial to introduce a simplified version of the Freytag's Pyramid (Figure 1) with the structural elements labeled. The exercises in the Initial Reading Stage will also aid learners in understanding the plot and structure.

¹ Citations from the text taken from Chopin (1986).

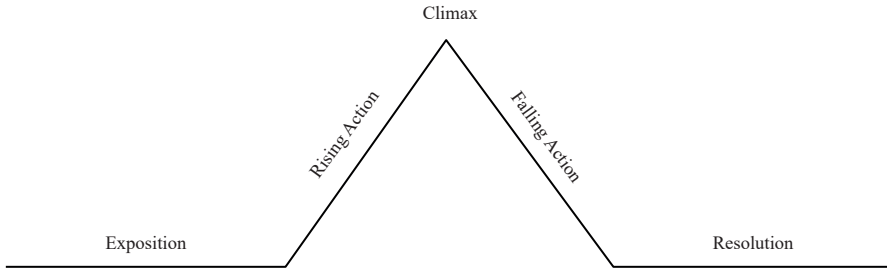


Figure 1. Freytag's Pyramid

Source: own elaboration.

- B) **Narrative Viewpoint** – also called the “eye” or narrative voice of the story. Who is telling the story? The point of view (POV) of *The Story of an Hour* is third-person omniscient. The external narrator closely follows the inner thoughts and feelings of only one character, Louise Mallard, e.g. “She knew that she would weep again [...]” “And yet she had loved him – sometimes” (Chopin, 1986: 214–215). This perspective allows the reader to more profoundly and suspensefully experience each scene while also casting a sympathetic eye on Mrs. Mallard’s situation. It likewise gives the reader access to information unavailable to the protagonist such as the ironic cause of death, “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease – of the joy that kills” (Chopin, 1986: 215).
- C) **Language and Style** – How does the writer tell the story / what techniques does he or she use? Totalling scarcely over 1000 words, *The Story of an Hour* is divided into short paragraphs, each with around two to three sentences. In the realist vein, Chopin deliberately adopts a prosaic, everyday writing style as readers spend the hour with Louise Mallard accompanied by a host of conflicting thoughts, from the melancholic to the ecstatic. Symbolism plays a key role as the open window in her room represents an escape from the confines of married life. The trees “aquiver with the new spring life” together with the “delicious breath of rain,” the “patches of blue sky,” and twittering of the sparrows serve as metaphors of rebirth and renewal (Chopin, 1986: 213). Louise Mallard’s “heart trouble” in the exposition is never specified, but may suggest as much an emotional malady as a physical one. The limited setting – the bedroom, stairs, and foyer – also reveals the restrictive world of the housewife whereas the men come and go as they see fit, e.g. Louise locking the door to the bedroom and Brently Mallard opening the front door with a latch-key. Aside from metaphors, other literary devices also dot the pages of *The Story of an Hour*:

- 1) **Similes** – “[...] 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.” / “There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory” (Chopin, 1986: 214, 215).
- 2) **Personification** – “When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone.” / “But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air” (Chopin, 1986: 213, 214).
- 3) **Situational and Dramatic Irony** – “She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms.” / Josephine, Louise Mallard’s sister, approaches the keyhole and pleads, “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door – you will make yourself ill.” / “When the doctors came they said she had died of heart diseases – of joy that kills” (Chopin 1986: 213, 215).

PART TWO

Warm-up (Pre-Reading):

Learners are asked to study and reflect upon the following images 1 and 2, paying close attention to how marriage / gender roles / families have changed over the past century. This is an excellent opportunity to practice the use of comparatives as well as the Present Perfect, *used to*, and *would* (for example, ‘In the nineteenth century, women used to...’, ‘Back then, men would...’, ‘Marriage has become...’). Then, have pairs discuss the five questions provided in the last section of Table 1. As a possible follow-up activity, have each pair analyze and discuss the quote by nineteenth century abolitionist and suffragist, Lucy Stone. Explain what both of these terms mean and that she dedicated her entire life to the anti-slavery movement as well as to the struggle for gender equality.

Image 1



Image 2



Table 1

	<i>What has changed?</i>	<i>What hasn't changed?</i>
Marriage		
Gender Roles		
Family Life		
<p>Discussion with your partner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Do you know any happily married couples? If so, what's their “secret?” – What does marriage look like in your culture? Is divorce common? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Why are fewer people getting married nowadays? – Should people stay married if they're no longer in love? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Does marriage mean less freedom? Explain. 		

Source: own elaboration.

Follow-Up: Analyze the following quote by Lucy Stone (1818–1893).

A wife should no more take her husband's name than he should hers. My name is my identity and must not be lost.

Step One (Pre-Reading):

Vocabulary Matching. All of the words in Table 2 can be found in the story. Divide the class into three or four groups. Cut the strips out and have learners in each group match the vocabulary with the appropriate definition.

Table 2

A	B
affliction (n.)	a cause of persistent pain or distress
to forestall (v.)	to prevent or hinder an anticipated action
abandonment (n.)	the act of leaving someone or something completely
roomy (adj.)	spacious
peddler (n.)	someone who goes from place to place selling small items
to sob (v.)	to cry or weep uncontrollably
yonder (adv.)	over there / in a distant place
to hasten (v.)	to hurry
to creep out of (v.)	to slowly come out of
tumultuously (adv.)	in a highly agitated manner, by the mind or emotions
to strive (v.)	to try hard
exalted (adj.)	raised or elevated, as in rank or character
elusive (adj.)	difficult to find
trivial (adj.)	of very little importance
illumination (n.)	enlightenment, as with knowledge
self-assertion (n.)	the act of putting forward your own opinions, wishes, etc.
elixir (n.)	a magical or medicinal potion
to run riot (idiom)	to behave or spread uncontrollably

Source: own elaboration.

Step Two (Initial Reading):

Owing to *The Story of an Hour*'s short length, it is highly recommended that the initial reading stage take place as a group, focusing on correctness of pronunciation in the process. The table below will help in understanding the basic plot structure, characters, and overall message of the story.

SWBST. Individually, learners should fill in the table below with examples from the text. At this stage, quoting the text directly is unnecessary and should be

reserved for the detailed reading. However, they will need to scan the text again in order to answer the questions. A chart has been provided with sample answers written by previous classes (Table 3) followed by a general extension question which, time permitting, partners may discuss together. Alternatively, learners can construct a timeline of events (Figure 2).

Table 3

Somebody Who is the main character? Describe.	Wanted What does the main character desire?	But Describe the problem.	So Is there a resolution to the problem?	Then How does the story end?
The main character is Mrs. Mallard. She has a heart affliction and learns that her husband has died in a tragic train disaster. She is young, fair, and has a calm face. Yet she's lived in a hopelessly oppressive marriage.	She wants to be liberated from her marriage to Brently Mallard and live anew, as a free woman. Though her husband did love her, she doesn't feel the same way about him.	Since her marriage, Louise Mallard has wanted to "live for herself," have her voice and opinions heard. She likewise wants to be free, body and soul. Her marriage is typical of the 19th century.	Brently Mallard's death has given her the opportunity for self-assertion. She now has the desire to live – hopefully, a long and happy life, without the burdens of marriage.	Brently Mallard returns home alive. Louise suffers a heart attack and dies on the stairs. Ironically, the doctors said she had died from the shock/joy of seeing him.
Follow-Up: Explain why the ending of <i>The Story of an Hour</i> is ironic.				

Source: own elaboration.

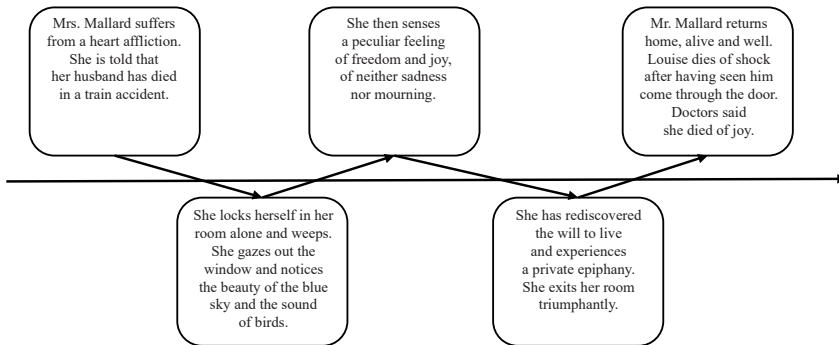


Figure 2

Source: own elaboration.

Step Three (Detailed Reading):

Learners are now tasked with rereading the story, silently. After the silent reading, ask learners to give specific textual examples for the following themes in the story and their own interpretation for each theme as a whole.

Table 4

Themes	Quotes	Interpretation
Love and Marriage	<p>1. <i>She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength.</i> (Chopin, 1986: 214).</p> <p>2. <i>And yet she loved him – sometimes. Often she had not.</i> (Chopin, 1986: 215).</p>	<p>Louise Mallard could be described as young and beautiful, although it's clear that she has visibly suffered as the lines on her face attest to. Women were also perceived to be the "weaker sex," frail and delicate. She lives for her husband and does not have a life of her own. Moreover, she only partially loves her husband, at least, she doesn't love the obligations marriage imposes.</p>
Freedom and Independence	<p>1. <i>She said it over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!"</i> (Chopin, 1986: 214).</p> <p>2. <i>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.</i> (Chopin, 1986: 214).</p>	<p>After her husband's death, Louise is finally set free from the restraints of marriage. Now a widow, she no longer needs to cater to her husband's will. Instead, she has her own identity and regains a name, Louise, instead of just Mrs. Mallard. I think that hers was a marriage of convenience and financial dependency as opposed to one born out of genuine love.</p>

Time	<p>1. <i>There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself.</i> (Chopin, 1986: 215).</p> <p>2. <i>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.</i> (Chopin, 1986: 215).</p>	<p>In the span of a few minutes, Louise's life has changed drastically. It's an emotional roller coaster of sorts, ranging from grief to emancipation to shock. Likewise, it takes only an hour for her to dream about what life will look like now that she's alone. It also takes another few seconds for that dream to be completely crushed upon seeing her husband again.</p>
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Source: own elaboration.

Step Four (Post Reading):

Character Analysis. Learners now proceed to formulate three, pressing questions which they would like to ask both Louise and Brently Mallard (Table 5). In pairs, orally hypothesize about their possible responses. Lastly, three in-class discussion questions have been provided as an extension activity to conclude the post reading stage.

Table 5

Questions for:	Louise Mallard	Brently Mallard
1	e.g. <i>Did you marry Brently for love?</i>	e.g. <i>What went through your head after the death of your wife?</i>
2		
3		
4		
<p>In-class discussion questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What is the significance of the title, <i>The Story of an Hour</i>? – Why do you think the setting of the story is so limited? – Identify and explain a few of the symbols in the story. 		

Source: own elaboration.

Step Five (Production):

Creative Writing: The final task entails writing a continuation of the story. Write "The Story of the Following Hour" on the board. Explain that after the death of Louise, Brently Mallard will now narrate a sequel, offering his perspective of the event.

Follow-Up: There may also be time to show a short film adaptation of the story. Viewing may also be followed by a general discussion of the film version versus the short story.

Toby Nies. (2017, September 12). *The Story of an Hour* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofAiwejmMqoa> [accessed: 17 February 2022].

1. Think about the setting of the short story. Did the setting in the latter version look like what you imagined?
2. How was Mrs. Mallard portrayed in the film version?
3. Was the movie version faithful to the story? If not, what was different?
4. Which did you enjoy more, the film version or the short story? Why?

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