

The Story of an Hour

by Kate Chopin

1. (a) With reference to the short story 'The Story of an Hour' ascertain the reasons why Chopin withheld the first name of Mrs Mallard at the beginning of the story.

Answer: Kate Chopin was a writer of the nineteenth century. Her works depict Victorian morals, ideologies as prevalent in society. The Victorian era had stripped women of their lawful rights to own property, cash and land as soon as they were married. The legal rights post-marriage of all the entities were transferred to the man as marriage created man and woman as one entity with man superseding the representative and ownership rights. Thus, the identity of women was restricted to the domestic sphere, bending her will to please her husband always.

Kate Chopin withholds the protagonist's name in the short story "The Story of an Hour" to highlight the identity crisis that a woman suffered post marriage. A woman lost her identity as an individual self, burdened forever under the name of her husband. There is no freedom as the woman is forced to bend her will and desires and mould them around her husband's.

Louise too has been suffering from this claustrophobic marriage, losing out on her freedom of body and soul for years. She had learnt to live under the burden of an unhappy marriage, becoming a shadow to her husband and being recognized in the society as Mrs Mallard. There was no significance attached to her name Louise alone as she was nothing without the surname Mallard. This was her true identity in society and therefore Chopin withholds her name to showcase the true position of women in Victorian society and in the marriage.

Chopin reveals Mrs Mallard's first name is announced after the death of her husband. This shows that Mrs Mallard's identity and individuality could have been retrieved only after her husband was gone. She was set free by his death to follow her own will and live life on her own terms with no burden and bending of will.

(b) Mrs Mallard looks out of the window to discover a new spring of life. Describe the significance of what she sees and hears from out of the window.

Answer: Mrs Mallard is grieved and shocked to hear about the death of her husband. The news leaves her shattered and she "wept at once..." in wild abandonment in her sister's arms. The momentary grief when leaves her, she retires to her room to be left alone for some time, perhaps to think about her situation after her husband's death.

Mrs Mallard in her room hears the sound of the "new spring of life." She notices the trees,

and smells the delicious breath of rain and hears "notes of a distant song sung nearby" and countless sparrows twittering in the eaves." Her husband's death has awakened her in the true sense. She is freely noticing and feeling the prospect of freedom that awaits her. She feels alive by the music of life, free to follow her own will and live her life on her own terms and conditions. Her husband's death has set her "Body and soul free".

Mrs Mallard's initial reaction to her husband's death is grief and as readers we expect her to hear and see things that are dark and sad that represent the loss and gloom in her life after her husband's death. Contrary to our expectations we find Mrs Mallard seeing and hearing things that represent a promise of hope and new life as she finds herself free for the first time in many years to exercise her own will and live truly for herself.

(c) Mrs Mallard died out of the "joy that kills". How?

Answer: Kate Chopin, writing in the Victorian times, explicitly attacked the fundamental laws of the society in her works. In her short story "The Story of an Hour", she narrates the ordeal of a woman who is informed of her husband's death in a train accident. The lady suffers from heart disease, therefore, her friends and family take immediate care to break the news gently to her to avoid any harm on her life.

The lady's response to her husband's death is quite contrary to what the readers of contemporary times would expect. She feels free from the shackles of her marriage and society after the death of her husband. Her response to her newfound freedom is full of hope, she desires to live a life truly for herself. She finds a contradiction in her own response to her husband's death, while she mourns and laments in front of society, her personal response is full of hope and a new life. She is excited with the opportunity that has been thrown before her, joyfully looking forward to a life where she could exercise her own will. This duality of response evokes a sense of conflict within her.

The lady's sense of joy is momentary and fleeting. The story progresses to reveal to the readers that her husband is alive and unhurt. But unfortunately, she does not survive as the doctor proclaims that she died out of the "joy that kills." People around her believe that she was too overjoyed to see her husband alive and unhurt and died out of the shock from joy. However, in reality, Chopin has used dramatic irony to provide the readers with a shock that was definitely unexpected. The lady does not die out of joy on seeing her husband, but she dies out of shock and disbelief to find her hopes of new life shattered. The pure joy that she had found in her freedom evaporated within seconds and gave her a shock that resulted in her untimely death.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Trace the complex thought process of Mrs Mallard as she comes in terms with the tragedy that shakes her very being.

OR

"The Story of an Hour" traces the psychological complexities faced by a newly widowed woman. The revelations are surprising, shocking, as well as repelling both to the woman and the readers. Comment.

Answer: Mrs Mallard's reaction to her husband's death is not only compelling and fascinating but also repelling to our conventional sensitivities. Her initial outburst of grief itself is different from the 'paralyzed inactivity of accepting the significance shown by most women'.

Considering the storm of grief that she experiences at first, what happens in the room is totally unexpected. As she drops into the roomy chair in her room out of sheer exhaustion, she becomes aware of trees "aquiver with the new spring of life", the delicious breath of rain in the air, countless sparrows twittering and the blue sky showing through clouds. She sits motionless except when an involuntary sob comes to her. There is a dull stare in her eyes that indicates a suspension of intelligent thoughts.

Louise Mallard fearfully waits for something to come to her, too subtle and elusive. She is agitated, striving to beat it back with her will, but she is powerless. Then a word escapes her lips. She says it over and over again, 'Free, Free, Free'. The look of terror gives way to something keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, warmblood courses through her veins, relaxing every inch of her body. She no longer feels that her job is monstrous or sinful.

Louise knows that she will weep again when she sees the inert body of her husband. She remembers his loving eyes, his gentle manners but she also sees the long years ahead that would belong to her absolutely. She opens her arms to welcome them. Now onwards, she would live for herself; there will be no powerful will, bending her. Spring, summer, all will be hers. She drinks the very elixir of life through the open window. With feverish triumph in her eyes, she carries herself like a 'Goddess of Victory' until she sees her husband walking through the door, very much alive and unhurt. Then her heart breaks as the newfound bubble of joy breaks into several pieces. Along with her heart, even her will to live accedes defeat and she dies of shock.

2. How is the theme of 'The Story of an Hour' controversial?

OR

Kate Chopin creates a theme of freedom in her short story. How does she do it? What are the literary devices used to fulfil her objectives?

Answer: "The Story of an Hour" has an unusual theme through which Kate Chopin establishes a woman's strength, potential and awareness of self. The story writer herself is a strong woman who portrays the inner yearning of freedom effectively by entwining dramatic irony and situational irony. Symbolism also plays a crucial role in conveying her paradoxical views.

The writer uses Dramatic Irony to establish her idea of gender equality. The reader, at first, feels concerned about the woman, who has just got the heartbreaking news of her husband's death. Instead of the 'paralyzed inability to accept its significance', as most women go through, Mrs Mallard gives way to a storm of weeping. But, at the next moment, to her utter shock, another strange feeling overwhelms her. "Free, Free, Free", the word echoes in her mind, giving her a sense of liberation from male dominance and expectations of society. Instead of being distraught, the protagonist seems to be happy and the reader comes to know the reason whereas the characters do not. This is dramatic irony at its best.

Another masterstroke of the writer is using situational irony to emphasize the theme. When the widow is composed and calm, and ready to take on the reins of life, comes her supposedly dead husband, totally unaware of the dramatic turn of events. Seeing him, his wife suffers a stroke and dies on the spot. The doctors say excess of joy at seeing her husband alive has killed her, but suspicion arises in our mind that has been privy to her thoughts that utter disappointment is the cause of her death.

The role of Symbolism to bring about the theme of freedom should not be overlooked. She looks out and suddenly, the world seems alive and fresh. The sky peeks out from the rain cloud and the tender leaves of trees symbolize a new spring of life or a new beginning. The window also represents the new sense of freedom and the sound of peddler along with the song of the birds coming in, beckons her to a new world of possibilities.

The thematic line of the story is that, even in a kind and gentle marriage, man, as well as woman, suffer repression, suppression and even depression. The invisible ties of obligations weigh them down. The institution of marriage and all the values attached to it seems to be questioned here, by posing this powerful paradox.

The chair Louise sits is spacious and comfortable to move about, representing her present stature. The sun rises and the warm air fills the room with the delicious breath. Then comes the twist in the tale- the ironic blow that makes her realize that the joy of freedom is no longer within her reach. This brings about her death showing how much important freedom is to her. In fact, without freedom, death seems to be a better option than life.