

A Caricature of an Ungrateful and Unfaithful Wife

—A New Interpretation of *The Story of an Hour*

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Abstract

The Story of an Hour by American writer Kate Chopin is generally regarded as a masterpiece of feminist literature to express the awakening of women's self-consciousness. The theme of the story is thought to be gender politics by some and to be the contradiction between marriage bondages and celibacy freedom by others. From the perspective of literary interpreter's cultural context, the author suggests a third interpretation of the story's theme: it is a caricature of an ungrateful and unfaithful wife.

Keywords: feminist literature, gender politics, marriage bondage, interpreter's cultural context

1. Introduction

The Story of an Hour is a short story written by an American woman writer Kate Chopin (1850-1904) in 1894. Its first Chinese translation, to my best knowledge, came out in *Short Stories by American Women Writers (Chinese version)* edited by Zhu Hong in 1983. The title was translated into *Yi Xiao Shi De Gu Shi* (一小时的故事) by Ge Lin, the translator of the story, and into *Yi Xiao Shi Zhi Nei Fa Sheng De Shi Qing* (一小时之内发生的事情) by Zhu Hong in his *Preface* to the collection of short stories. In 2001, the author (Li Chongyue, 2001) of the present essay translated the story into Chinese and published the translation in *Teaching Yourself English*, a periodical edited by Shanghai University of International Studies. The title was rendered into *Le Ji Sheng Bei* (乐极生悲), which partly indicates my understanding of the story.

2. Previous Studies: Gender Politics or Marriage Bondage?

Kate Chopin was an important woman writer in 1900s of America. Since the beginning of feminist literary criticism, much attention has been focused on Chopin's literary works, especially *The Awakening* and *The Story of an Hour*. *The Story of an Hour* has a surprise ending, which is characteristic of the short stories by Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry.

The literary critics have thought that, expressing a feminist self-awareness more consciously in her works than her contemporary women writers, Chopin was, no doubt, a pioneer of feminist literature. "*The Story of an Hour* is similar to *The Awakening* in the theme, that is, the sudden awakening of a woman's self-awareness, but the former is more intense and dramatic." (Zhu Hong, 1983: 16). In *Toward a Feminist Narratology*, Susan Sniader Lanser (1991: 232) interpreted *The Story of an Hour* as a typical feminist literary work, and stated that the story has a "single" and "very clear" ideological position, that is, the author is sympathetic and complimentary to Mrs. Mallard under the oppression of androcentrist power. Until quite recently, *The Story of an Hour* was thought to be a masterpiece of feminist literature, a story mainly about the awakening of feminine awareness and the fruitless struggle of women for freedom in a man-centered world.

In 2004, Professor Shen Dan (2004), a well-known literary critic from Peking University of China, put forward a new interpretation of the story from the perspective of narratology and proposed that the story is not concerned about gender politics, rather it is solely about marriage bondages and celibacy freedom. This quite new interpretation caused an argument about the author's intended meaning of the story. In 2006, Tang Weisheng, a professor and Ph.D supervisor of Beijing Language & Culture University and his Ph.D candidate Liu Weijie (Liu

Jiewei, Tang Weisheng, 2006) made a response to Prof. Shen's essay which challenged the previous interpretations of the story. To disprove Prof. Shen's proposition, they conducted a reading survey to find out contemporary Chinese readers' understanding of the story. Their survey suggests that most contemporary Chinese readers (especially those well educated) insist that, although the story is thematically multi-layered, it is mainly an expression of women's desire for freedom in the man's world, and many readers (of either sex) take an ambivalent ethical stance towards this expression of freedom. In the same year and in the same journal, Shen Dan (2006) published "*The Story of an Hour*" and *Some Aspects of Literary Interpretation: A Reply to "Gender Politics or Marriage Bondage"* to defend herself. Apart from defending herself, Shen considered further the relation between Chopin's story and some important aspects of literary interpretation, including (1) how interpretive frameworks predetermine reading; (2) the relation between the themes of a text and those of related texts; and (3) the relation between a literary work and its author as well as cultural context.

The challenge and self-defense between two professors is a reflection of two quite different but influential interpretations of the story. The first or the most popular interpretation is that the author of *The Story of an Hour* is feminist and the text is a manifestation of gender politics. The second proposes that the text is solely about marriage bondages and celibacy freedom.

3. An Ungrateful and Unfaithful Wife

The choice of interpretive framework of literary works is determined by three interactive factors: the foregone evaluation of the author, the theoretical perspective chosen and the cultural context in which the interpreter lives. The above two interpretations of the story is based on the foregone evaluation of the author and / or different theoretical perspectives. The author of this essay attempts to make a third interpretation of the story.

It seems that the interpretation of a literary work always begins with an introduction of its author. I think that a literary work can be interpreted without considering who the author is. Once the work is finished, the author "dies". The more a reader knows about the writer, especially a so-called great writer, the more liable s/he is to exaggerate the value of the writer's literary work which is poorly written. A lack of information about the author and previous studies of his /her works is, in some cases, helpful to a creative understanding of the literary works.

Seven years ago, I read the story in *Short Shorts—An Anthology of the Shortest Stories* edited by Irving Howe and Hanna Wiener Hower. When I translated the story into Chinese, I didn't know that who Kate Chopin was, let alone that she was a feminist writer. I knew, indeed, nothing about her at that time, but I was deeply impressed by its plot and ending. My appreciation of the story is, no doubt, greatly influenced by the cultural context in which I live. The following is how I understand the story.

There are four characters in the story: Mrs. Marllad, her sister Josephine, Mr. Marllard and his friend Richards. The author does not explicitly tell the reader any personal information of Brently Mallard the husband, such as his age, education background, occupation, income, and social status. From bits of information we can infer that Brently Mallard earned much money and was leading a relatively comfortable life, and he was probably a labor contractor working on the railroad or a business who often traveled by train, like some rich Chinese in the 1990s. His house (instead of *flat*) stood by the street, and in the house Mrs. Mallard was able to hear "a peddler" "crying his wares in the street below". The house is, at least, two-storied because Mrs. Mallard "descended the stairs" together with her sister. The armchair(s) in his house were "comfortable" and "roomy", and the armchair stood "facing the open window".

Personal information about Mrs. Mallard is as scanty as that about her husband. We only know that "she was inflicted with a heart trouble", and "she was young, with a fair, calm face". Though Mr. Mallard was "kind" an "tender" to her, and he "never looked save with love upon her", she loved him only "sometimes", and "often she had not loved him". It is easy to see that Mr. Marllard loved his wife, but his wife did not return his love. Why? It is very likely that Mr. Marllard was richer and older than Mrs. Marllard when they got married. Mrs. Marllard married him mainly for the purpose of living an easy and comfortable life with him. Her marriage with Mr. Marllard enabled not only herself but also her kinswoman (sister) to enjoy a comfortable life—her sister Josephine went to live together with her. On the one hand, Josephine could take care of her sister's daily life, on the other hand, she could live an easy life. Such kind of marriage is not rare in present China, especially in some highly economically developed regions.

Her husband often going away on business (of which "his grip-sack and umbrella" is an evidence), she lived a lonely life like "a bird in a cage". Gradually, she got tired of this kind of life, and hoped to have a change. Of what kind of change she has no definite idea: "she didn't know; it was too subtle and elusive to name". Maybe she wanted to break the bondage of marriage by getting rid of her husband or by an extramarital love. This is not my random guess. My assumption is supported by some readers who think that the theme of the story is "an

unsuccessful extramarital affair” between Mrs. Mallard and her husband’s friend Richards (Liu Jiewei, Tang Weisheng, 2006). It is not hard for us to find some details to prove Mrs. Mallard’s desire to get rid of her husband. Hearing the news of her husband’s death in the railroad disaster, Mrs. Marllard “did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance”. When she entered her own room, she sank into the armchair, “pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul”. Her physical and mental exhaustion can not be simply attributed to her hearing the news. Her desire to get rid of her husband and her lack of courage also contributed, I’m afraid, to the exhaustion. When she looked out of the window and gazed at “one of those patches of blue sky”, she was aware that “there was something coming to her and she was *waiting for* it, fearfully.” What’s *the something* that she couldn’t wait to enjoy? She unconsciously told us the answer to the question: freedom—freedom from her husband. When Josephine knelt before the closed door and implored her to open the door and not to make herself ill, Mrs. Marllard replied: “Go away. I am not making myself ill.” This shows that she didn’t feel grieved at all. “She was drinking in the very elixir of life”—her wishful thinking of her future life. At last, she opened the door and went down the stairs with her sister, “carrying herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory”. All these indicate that she was eager to get rid of her husband.

However, why did Mrs. Marllard weep “at once with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms” when hearing the news of her husband’s death? It was because, probably, she had never expected to desert her husband in such a bloody way, or it had never occurred to her that her husband would be killed in a disaster to end their marriage. Such an ending of one’s life was cruel to either his friend or enemy. Though Mrs. Marllard had been secretly longing for the end of their marriage, the unexpected death left Mrs. Marllard at a loss to know how to deal with the accident. Another explanation of her weeping is not unacceptable: hearing the news she became so elated that she burst into tears.

At the end of the story, the doctors said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills. This diagnosis is ambiguous. “heart disease” and “joy that kills” can be understood differently. On the one hand, “heart disease” refers to the “heart trouble” Mrs. Marllard suffered, on the other hand, it implies that she had other shady “secret trouble”, “mental anguish” or “a sore point”, just as the Chinese expression *xin bing* (心病) has different meanings. The “joy that kills” means, on the surface, that when she saw her husband enter the house unannounced, she became so delirious with delight that her “weak” heart couldn’t bear the instant great change of emotion and she died. But after a second thought, we will believe that “the joy that kills” grew not out of Mr. Marllard’s safe return but out of her “bright future” in her mind. The author of the story designed the surprise ending to mirror her attitude to Mrs. Mallard: such an ungrateful, unfaithful woman can’t live on the earth!

4. Conclusion

The writer of the story skillfully draws a caricature of an ungrateful and unfaithful wife. This conclusion is reached after a “masculinist” instead of feminist study of the story. It must be kept in mind that it is not always easy to interpret a literary work. What did Kate Chopin intend to convey with the story written more than 100 years ago has not been pinned down yet, or can never be pinned down.

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