

The Story of an Hour **Kate Chopin**

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.
4. 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.
5. 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 in the eaves.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.

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

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. 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. 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.

15. 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!

16. "Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

17. Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, 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."

18. "Go away. I am not making myself ill." No, she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

19. 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.

20. 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. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

21. Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack 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.

22. But Richards was too late.

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

Using Cognitive Reading Strategies with “The Story of an Hour”

Standards Addressed: 11th and 12th Grade

3.0 Literary Response and Analysis

3.2 Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on life, using textual evidence to support the claim.

2.0 Writing Applications (Genres and Their Characteristics)

2.2 Write responses to literature:

- a. Demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the significant ideas in works or passages.
- b. Analyze the use of imagery, language, universal themes, and unique aspects of the text.
- c. Support important ideas and viewpoints through accurate and detailed references to the text and to other works.
- d. Demonstrate an understanding of the author's use of stylistic devices and an appreciation of the effects created.
- e. Identify and assess the impact of perceived ambiguities, nuances, and complexities within the text.

This lesson focuses on Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and guides students through literary response and analysis by using the cognitive reading and writing strategies. The lesson provides additional practice if it is used following Carol Booth Olson's "The War of the Wall."

Take your students through the story using the cognitive reading strategies. Make sure you ask them to cover their papers so that they do not read ahead as this story has a surprise ending. An alternative method that works well is to first read the story from a transparency, showing only the part under discussion. *Please note that whenever italics are used in this lesson, they indicate possible student responses.*

Today we are going to read a story that is rather complicated. That is, it has more than one layer of meaning. The author, Kate Chopin, (1851-1904) wrote "The Story of an Hour" in the late 1890s; she offended many readers both with this story and other literary works because frank discussions of women's emotions with their relationships simply were not accepted during that historical era.

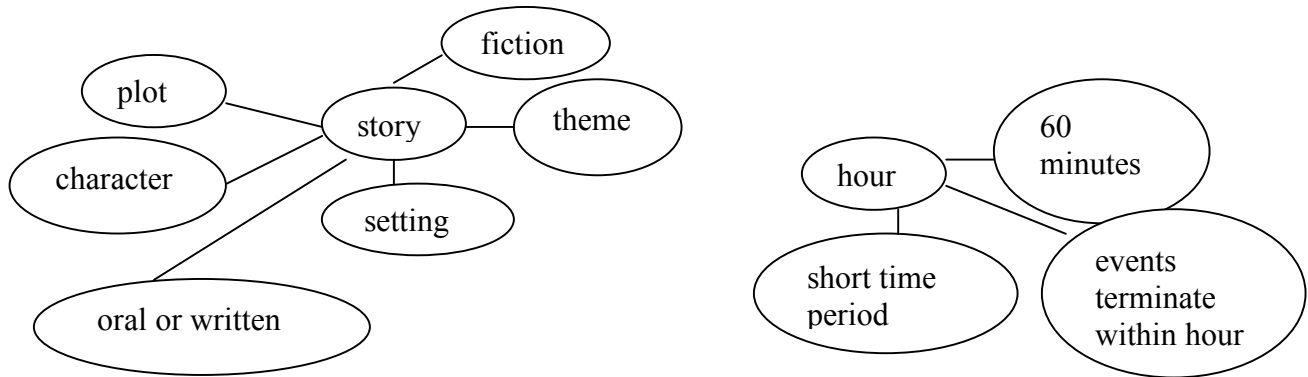
I will not be explaining any part of the story to you, but I will help you by asking questions and by reviewing the cognitive reading strategies. You must then draw upon these strategies to understand all the nuances in the story. Your goal will be to explain the story as well as the strategies that helped you reach complete understanding.

Our goal or plan throughout this lesson is to begin using strategies from our cognitive tool kit so that we continue to use them throughout the year, therefore becoming accomplished readers.

Let's look at the title of this story first, "The Story of an Hour." Does this title give us any clues about what we are going to read? Think about what the words in the title mean. Perhaps a good

strategy to use here is **tapping prior knowledge**. Think about the knowledge you already have stored in file cabinets within your head. You might say, "I already know..." or "This makes me think about..." Discuss the thoughts you have about the title with a partner for a minute or two.

Who would like to volunteer some thoughts you had while discussing the title with your partners? (At this point, teachers might wish to cluster the responses. This will help students see different perspectives as well as allowing them to begin making predictions.)



What predictions can you make based on your discussion of the title?

Okay, you have agreed that a story is fiction and has a plot, characters and setting and a theme or big idea. Most of you have decided the title simply means that the story we are about to read takes place within a specified period of time, an hour.

Let's read on and see if this is so. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that as we read we need to continually monitor ourselves. We need to **construct the gist** as we read to make sure we understand the literal meaning the author wishes to convey.

Will someone volunteer to read the first two paragraphs of the story out loud?

In the first paragraph, we read about Mrs. Mallard's heart trouble and how one must break bad news gently. Think about what you know about heart disease either from something you have read or people you might know. Think about what can happen when you break bad news to someone with heart trouble. Share your thoughts with a partner and then with the class.
A person with heart trouble might get very sick. He or she might even have a heart attack if the news is bad enough and if that person has no warning.

In the second paragraph, I found that I needed to go back and reread in order to construct the gist. This is called **monitoring**. It can help you to understand the story better as well as motivate you to read on to find answers. My problem was with the sentence that said, "veiled hints that revealed in half concealing." What do you think the author meant by that?

Perhaps it meant that Josephine did not tell Mrs. Mallard outright that her husband was dead, but only hinted at it. Her condition was okay if you didn't shock her and allowed her to slowly

come to grips with the situation. (If students suggest this, they will later see how the end of the story becomes more believable. Perhaps the author is setting up the ending with the careful way the news is conveyed to Mrs. Mallard.)

Ask students the following questions: What do you predict will happen next? Do you think Mrs. Mallard will understand the veiled hints? How do you think she will react? Again, discuss with a partner the meaning of the first two paragraphs. Carefully construct the gist. Then some of you may share with the class.

Constructing the gist and Asking Questions: *Josephine was being so careful because her sister had "a heart trouble." Does her heart trouble refer to a heart problem as we understand it, or could it refer to her marriage, her happiness or state of being in her relationship?*

It is important to assure students that asking questions is a form of monitoring that can help them to understand the story better as well as motivate them to read on to find answers.

Read the third paragraph out loud.

Making Connections is another strategy that we use while reading to help us understand what we are reading. Sometimes the text will make you remember experiences in your own life or will remind you of other things you have read. Can you make connections as you read the third paragraph? Do you know anyone who is unable to accept the significance of what a tragedy such as death, or anything else, means when they hear about it suddenly? Or do you know someone who would immediately begin to weep? I've known a couple people who dissolve into tears whenever they encounter unhappiness; others are able to take it all in stride. Talk with a partner about any connections you may make.

Analyzing Author's Craft: I'm sure you remember how to discuss the author's craft. You are looking for words or lines or phrases that stand out and make the writing vivid for you. What do you find in this paragraph that makes the author's style unique?

"Paralyzed inability"

"She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment..."

"When the storm of grief had spent itself..."

Now we have a metaphor of nature as well in the *"storm of grief."*

Visualizing is simply pictures that stand out in your mind. Somehow, you can see what is happening by reading the printed word. What do you visualize as you read the lines listed above?

She was crying as hard as one can cry as she stood there held by her sister.

As you read paragraph 4, you may decide that you need to use your **monitoring** strategy again. What does it mean to be "pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul"? You can reread the paragraph and think about yourself in relation to this, or perhaps simply read on to see if the meaning becomes clear.

Subject/Topic and Theme: What do you think the big idea or theme is at this point in the story?

I think the theme is "death."

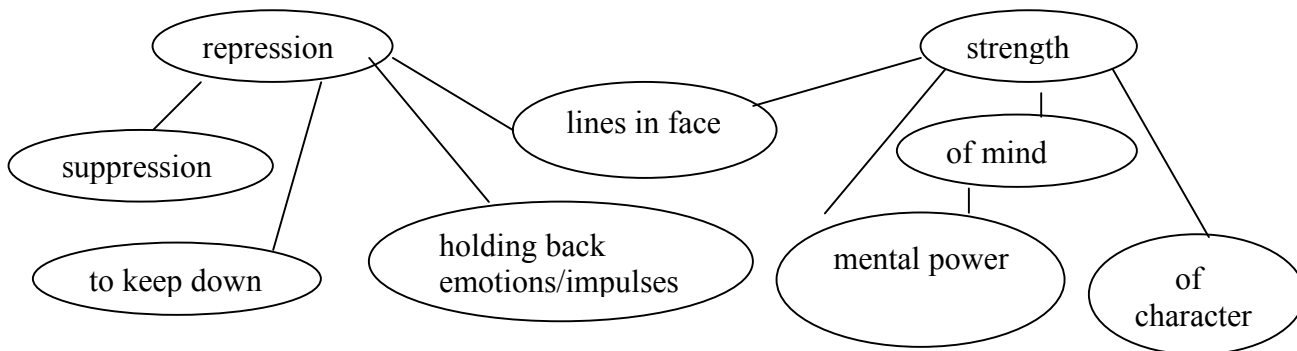
You have named the subject of this story. Remember that the theme is more than this. The theme must be some insight into human life that the author wishes to reveal in the literary piece. Often the theme is not stated directly by the author. The reader must infer what the writer wishes to convey. It will be some statement about the subject of the story. Any other ideas?
How about "sadness as a reaction to death"?

Well, this is closer, but it is still stating the subject. As we read on, the theme will begin to evolve more fully. What can you **interpret** about Mrs. Mallard's actions so far?
She definitely needed to be alone with her grief. She did not want anyone, even her sister, with her.
Others wanted to comfort and care for her. This always happens when there is a death.
Everyone is very sad.

The next three paragraphs, 5, 6, and 7, give you a chance to practice the strategy of **visualizing**. Tell the class what you visualize as you read these paragraphs. (Students may wish to discuss this with a partner or in a group first.)
We still see her in her comfortable armchair with her head upon the cushion. We can hear an occasional sob. However, blue sky is showing through the clouds as she looks out her window. The scene is one of hope and new life and spring. Is the window a symbol of freedom or a window to her inner self, her soul?

Why does the author now introduce a contrast to the sadness and death theme?
He wants to show the idea of spring, probably symbolizing a new life for Mrs. Mallard.

Students may have questions as they read paragraph 8. It is crucial that they realize that **asking questions** is an important strategy and definitely helps with **monitoring** their reading. Students will probably ask the following questions here:
How can repression and strength both be shown in one's face. Why did her eyes have a dull stare as they fixed themselves on patches of blue sky? (Students may need to discuss the meaning of repression or perhaps even cluster the two words as they are used in the following sentence. Some may wish to refer to the dictionary. "She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength.")



Somehow the lines in her face show strength. Maybe the strength is because she has learned to hold back her own wishes and thoughts and give in to others.

What can we infer about Mrs. Mallard at this point?
She probably isn't very happy if she has been repressed.

Who do you suppose repressed her?
I predict it was her husband.

Finally, since her glance was not one of reflection, but instead simply one of no intelligent thought, what can one compare this to that is familiar? Students may suggest,
She was, perhaps, simply day dreaming.

In paragraph 9, we learn that she is indeed doing a form of dreaming.
She felt something penetrating her consciousness, but she did not know what it was.

Can you predict what it might be? Don't forget to **analyze the author's craft** as you make your **predictions**. This elusive something was "creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air."
Was it evil (creeping, reaching toward her) or was it good (sounds, scents, colors in air)?

Paragraph 10 makes us again use the strategy of **asking questions** as we decide to read on to try and get the answers. Turn to a partner and pose at least two questions about what is happening here. Then, make a prediction.

*Why is she trying to ignore the thing that threatens to overtake her will?
What was it, and why didn't she want to admit it? The story says "she was striving to beat it back with her will." The author uses her craft here as well when she compares her "will" to something as powerless as her "two white slender hands."
It is obviously something in herself she does not want to face, yet she has to.*

In paragraph 11 we get an answer. What do we learn?
She says "free." Her eyes become "keen and bright." "Free" may mean she thinks her husband has found freedom in death, but I really think that her excitement is because she feels she is now free of him.

Ask students to read the next three paragraphs, 12-14. Ask someone to **summarize** these three paragraphs? What is happening here? What is the key information we receive from them?
Mrs. Mallard is very excited. She will now be totally free to live the way she wishes. She even "opens her arms and spreads them in welcome" for the coming years. Her husband had imposed his will upon her, and she will not have to put up with that anymore.

Paragraph 12 refers to Mrs. Mallard's feelings as a "monstrous joy that held her." What do you think the term monstrous joy means?
I think it's an oxymoron. How can joy be monstrous? I guess it can be true only if she feels that the fact that she feels joy is monstrous. But then she dismisses that in the next sentence.

Use another strategy from your cognitive tool kits, **adopting an alignment**. Discuss with partners your thoughts on Mrs. Mallard as she rejoices over the fact that she can now "live for herself." Discuss the fact that human beings, according to the story, sometimes impose their will

upon their fellow creatures. How do you feel about Mrs. Mallard now, about her husband? Which character can you most identify with? Or can you align with the plot, the events in the story and the way in which they unfold?

Mrs. Mallard is extremely selfish and she does not deserve a husband who "had never looked save with love upon her." I feel sorry for her husband.

Any human being that impresses his will upon another does not deserve to be loved. I can understand how Mrs. Mallard wants only to be free. I would feel the same.

I can relate to the author and the events in the story because I really feel that human nature being what it is, there are bound to be some thoughts of an exciting or at least a different future.

Could you **clarify** for me what "impressing his will" means? This is not entirely clear to me.

Her husband is always the dominant figure in their marriage. Whatever he wants is what happens. Mrs. Mallard does not have a say in anything. At least I think that is what it means in this story.

What about the theme of this story? Have you revised any of your ideas? Are you **forming** any new **interpretations**?

Well, we really talked more about the subject, but we decided the theme had to do with sadness and death. Now it looks like the author is bringing in the idea of freedom through death of a partner.

Perhaps the theme will have to do with happiness as a result of death.

Paragraphs 15 and 16 serve to emphasize the idea of freedom, the fact that this rather repressed housewife will finally be able to assert herself. What could possibly happen in the remainder of the story? **Make predictions**.

Mrs. Mallard's husband will somehow reach out from the grave to continue to control her.

Perhaps he appointed an executor who will control her assets and her life.

He may even turn up alive.

Hey, maybe she has some man waiting, maybe even Richards.

The only dialogue in the story takes place in the next two paragraphs, 17 -18. Can you **make connections**? Think about a time you were really worried about someone. (Some students may want to share something from their own lives.)

Read paragraph 19 and talk about Mrs. Mallard's feelings. What does this paragraph infer?

She goes from shuddering that life might be long the day before to praying that life might be long now that she is free. She was really unhappy in her marriage.

In Paragraph 20, Louise Mallard finally emerges from the room she has closed herself into. She had been drinking in the "very elixir of life" in the previous paragraphs. Now she emerges like "a goddess of victory." What can you infer from these words?

She is full of happiness and looking forward to life. She will do everything she wants to with no one to stop her. She feels victorious and walks like she owns the world.

Read paragraph 21 out loud. Make predictions about what will happen after Brently Mallard walks in the door, and Richards is too late to hide the view of him from his wife.

I think she will keel over in a dead faint.

She will cry from the disappointment of seeing him alive.

Read the final two one-sentence paragraphs of the story. Then, do a quickwrite on how you have had to revise meaning and the new **interpretations** you have formed as the story unfolded.

Perhaps you will want to interpret the final words, "a joy that kills." Your idea of the theme or big idea has undoubtedly changed.

(Some thoughts students included in their quickwrites follow:)

All students brought in the surprise ending and how this changed their interpretations. Richards hastened to tell Louise Mallard the news of her husband's death but ironically was too late to shield Mrs. Mallard from the sight of her husband and so could not prevent the tragedy.

It was not joy that killed her, but it was the thought of continuing under her husband's thumb.

Could it be that if she hadn't been so joyful at the prospect of her husband's death, she wouldn't have been as shocked when he arrived home? Surely, most women wouldn't be accepting of the fact that their spouse had died and would be in denial about it for a while, thus lessening the shock of seeing him.

You have suggested an example of situational irony here. None of us expected what really happened. Remember that generally we can define irony as a discrepancy between appearance, what we expect to happen, and reality, what really happens.

Let's finish this lesson by **reflecting and relating**. Were you able to relate anything in this story to your own life? Is there a particular lesson you may have learned which you can state as a theme, an insight into human life? Will you think or do something differently as a result of reading this story?

One should not make plans until one is sure of the facts, or, don't count your chickens before they're hatched.

Don't rush to spread bad news.

Be careful whom you marry.

Things are not always what they seem.

Note: The answers are varied as students reflect and relate to the story. Some feel that life has changed a great deal in the hundred years since the story was written and that because of divorce and women's roles today, this is not a believable story.

Many, however, do take a lesson from the story and state various themes as stated above.

Finally, let's **evaluate** the story. Is this story still relevant today? Discuss this in your groups and see if you can agree on the relevancy of this story written in the 1890s. Outline your points so that you can share them with those who may disagree with your group's evaluation. (Answers are usually built around the following two main points:)

The themes are universal. Human nature is the same today as it was a century ago.

Although there is some relevancy, the story is not very believable as women have come a long way since the 1890s.

You may wish students to write a formal interpretive essay on this story as well as respond to the metacognitive log on the following page.

Writing Situation

"The Story of an Hour" reveals a lot about human nature. The story centers around Louise Mallard who goes through a gamut of emotions following the news of her husband's death. We also find out about Brently Mallard's character through Louise's feelings and inner thoughts as she faces the idea of life without him.

Writing Directions

Write an essay in which you describe your impression of Louise Mallard at the beginning of the story and how this impression changes as the story progresses. Use specific details from the story to clarify the reasons why your understanding of Louise changes, thereby causing you to revise meaning. Finally, discuss how her character contributes to the message or theme the author wishes to leave with us.

Extension Activity

The following metacognitive questions will provide closure to your students' study of "The Story of an Hour":

"The Story of an Hour"

1. Think about the strategy or strategies that were most helpful to you as you read "The Story of an Hour." Describe the strategy and the specific place(s) in the story that using the strategy facilitated your understanding.
2. Brently Mallard is now left alone. What advice would you offer him on how to keep a relationship happy if he should marry again?
3. Is there anything that you see differently, think differently about, or will do differently as a result of reading this story?