Feminist Perspectives In A Story Of An Hour Essay, Research Paper

Feminist Perspectives in a Story of an Hour

A Woman Far Ahead of Her Time, by Ann Bail Howard, discusses the nature of the female characters in Kate Chopin’s novel’s and short stories. Howard suggests that the women in Chopin’s stories are longing for independence and feel torn between the feminine duties of a married woman and the freedom associated with self-reliance. Howard’s view is correct to a point, but Chopin’s female characters can be viewed as more radically feminist than Howard realizes. Rather than simply being torn between independent and dependant versions of her personality, “The Story of an Hour’s” Mrs. Mallard actually rejoices in her newfound freedom, and, in the culmination of the story, the position of the woman has actually been elevated above that of the man, suggesting a much more radically feminist reading than Howard cares to persue.

Much of what Howard has to say about Chopin’s protagonists is appropriate. Her criticism operates from the standpoint that “marriage, said Chopin’s world, was the goal of every woman’s life; service to her husband and her children her duties, passionlessness and submission her assumed virtues, selflessness her daily practice, and self sacrifice her pleasure” (1). Mrs. Mallard definitely lives in a world where these gender values abound. Chopin, for example, describes Mrs. Mallard’s face as one “ whose lines bespoke repression” (439). This is obviously a direct reference to the submission Mrs. Mallard has had to yield up to the patriarchy thus far. She has always had a “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” (440). Her husband’s will is described as a burden Mrs. Mallard has had to shoulder and her critique of this burden suggests her own resentment of its existence. When Mrs. Mallard is finally offered the opportunity to throw off the burdens of marriage and accept a new life of independence, 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” (440). This suggest a strong contrast between Mrs. Mallard’s view of the position of the married and non-married woman. In one case she would almost rather die; in the other, she embraces life with zeal. This truly proves that Howard’s characterization of the roles and duties of the nineteenth century married woman are precise and well reflected in the case of Mrs. Mallard.

Howard’s argument falters, however, when she fails to recognize the truly radical feminist scope of Chopin’s characters and the messages that she seeks to impart. For example, at one point Howard asserts that “Chopin makes no suggestion that Mrs. Mallard would not mourn for her husband, a man she loved, a man apparently cut off by a railroad accident in the prime of his life” (1). While it is probably true that Chopin did not wish to alarm readers by directly declaring that Mrs. Mallard did not or would not mourn for her dead husband, something really is amiss when Mrs. Mallard “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” (439). The fact that Mrs. Mallard heard the news differently than other women would have foreshadows her eminent capacity for independence. The wording here is also important: she was not unable to accept its significance. This suggests that she accepted it quickly, which in turn suggests a lack of real mourning. Therefore, Mrs. Mallard’s feminist perspective is more exaggerated than Howard is ready to imply.

Furthermore, it is even possible to take Chopin’s story and it’s symbolism one step further and assert that Chopin seeks to delineate and restructure the patriarchy by toppling the man’s pedestal position and, in turn, elevating woman to a position even higher than that of the man. For example, Chopin’s use of irony at the end of the story exists on two levels. First, there is the irony that Mrs. Mallard died of shock just when she envisioned and planned out a new, prosperous, independent life. Then, there is also an underlying irony with feminist undertones that can be found when the doctors pronounce her “dead of heart disease-of joy that kills” (440). What’s ironic here is that the “experts,” conveniently men (who else would be a doctor in the nineteenth century?), in their ignorance of the true shades of a woman’s thoughts and desires, end up misdiagnosing her reason of death. Interestingly enough, the other two men left in the story are portrayed in an oafish sort of way; her husband is “amazed” and “did not even know there had been” an accident, and Richard is ineffectual in his efforts to screen Mrs. Mallard from her husband. In essence, the men here are portrayed as ignorant and unproductive, while Mrs. Mallard can be seen as the martyr who dies for feminism, ultimately choosing death over marriage. This ending inevitably elevates the woman’s position to the highest status, while the men are made to look silly and unaware.

When Howard asserts that “it is the woman who demands her own direction and chooses her own freedom that interests Chopin most” (1) she is right on target. Howard only fails when she chooses not to expand that vision to include the truly feminist perspectives that differentiate Chopin as a woman far ahead of her time.

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