

Kate Chopin

(1851–1904)

United States

Born Katherine O'Flaherty, Kate Chopin was the daughter of an Irish immigrant father and a French Creole mother. Raised in St. Louis, she lost her father, mother, and brother during her childhood and youth. At the age of twenty she married a French Creole cotton broker, Oscar Chopin, and settled in New Orleans, bearing six children in nine years while also attending to the social obligations required by her role as a successful businessman's wife. When the business failed, the Chopins moved to central Louisiana, where they managed a large plantation until Oscar died of swamp fever in 1882; at the age of 32, Kate Chopin found herself a widow with six children and limited financial resources. She returned with her children to St. Louis and began to write poetry and fiction, publishing her work in journals such as Harper's Bazaar and Century. In a relatively short ten years, she published an astonishing 95 short stories, 2 novels, a play, a number of poems, and several essays of literary criticism.

For years, Chopin's classification as a "regional writer" obscured the power of her best fiction, which exposed with probing insight the conflicting cultural and social values of her milieu, not only between people of different ethnic backgrounds and classes in the Creole South of Louisiana, but also between men and women. A number of her stories, exploring such sensitive and even—for her time—taboo themes as divorce, alcoholism, and female desire, shocked the sensibilities of her contemporaries. In her best-known novel, *The Awakening* (1899), the central character, Edna Pontellier, leaves her husband and children to pursue her independent desires and to claim her own selfhood. Many reviewers found Edna's behavior scandalous and Chopin's unwillingness to offer any moral judgment of her character even more shocking. One contemporary reviewer of the novel flatly stated, "It is not a healthy book."

Chopin's stories and novels often address the conflict between social custom and individual freedom as well as the gap between the inner and the outer life. "The Story of an Hour," despite its brevity, powerfully expresses these concerns.

THE STORY OF AN HOUR

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

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!

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

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."

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

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.

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.

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.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.
[1894]

Questions

1. What is the conflict in the story? What is the story really about?
2. How does Chopin prepare the reader for the story's ending?
3. How does Chopin's style—particularly imagery and repetition—shape the story?
4. What is "the joy that kills"? Of what does Mrs. Mallard die?

Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette

(1873–1954)

France

Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette lived a colorful and occasionally (for her time) even scandalous life that also inspired and fed her fiction. Born and raised in the Burgundy countryside, she experienced a happy childhood, which became the subject and setting for the reminiscences of childhood captured in her early "Claudine" novels. She married young, in a match arranged by her parents as a result of their failing financial solvency. Henry Gauthier-Villars, a music critic and journalist who was significantly older than Colette and rarely faithful to her, prompted her to write about her childhood and not to be shy of adding "spicy details." Her first novel, *Claudine at School*, was published in 1900 under Gauthier-Villars's pen name, "Willy." Gauthier-Villars then virtually compelled Colette to write three more "Claudine" novels, all somewhat titillating and all published under his pen name. Gauthier-Villars's philandering ultimately led the unhappy Colette to leave the marriage, after which she supported herself as a dancer and mime on the music hall stage.

Besides being married three times, Colette also had several lesbian relationships as well as a brief liaison with the son of her second husband. Many of her stories and novels frankly explore through the themes of love and sexuality the experiences she discovered through her own bisexuality. Drawing on what she called "mental androgyny," she expressed the tension between the masculine and feminine qualities that she felt were present in all human beings.

Colette's early fiction, particularly the "Claudine" novels, brought to life delicate renderings of nature and an unerring evocation of childhood. She is also justly admired for her exceptional psychological insight into female experience and relationships, including the conflict for a woman between self-discovery and career (*The Vagabond*, 1911), as well as the spectrum of emotional possibilities encompassed in the idea of love (*Mitsou, ou Comment l'esprit vient aux filles*, translated as *Mitsou, or How Girls Grow Wise*, 1919; *Cheri*, 1920; and *Gigi*, 1944; among others). Also among her fictional subjects are her adored and idealized mother, "the most important person in all my life," whom she fictionalized as "Sido," and her daughter, born when Colette was 40 and fictionalized as "Bel-Gazou." Her characters Mitsou (a music hall artist), Claudine, Cheri, and Gigi are among Colette's other enduring creations, many of whom are drawn directly from the author's own unconventional life. As Elaine Marks phrases it, Colette was her own "greatest fictional character."

The author of more than 50 books, including novels and collections of stories, Colette was much loved and honored by her country. At her death, she was the first French woman writer ever to be honored by a state funeral.

