

## **Linguocultural interpretation of “The story of an Hour” by Kate Chopin**

### **I. Summary**

“The story of an hour” is written by Kate Chopin, born Katherine O’Flaherty, an American author of short stories and novels.

The main character is Louise Mallard, a young woman of poor health. The significance of this detail is emphasized in the very first lines (*Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble...*) which, as we know, hold syntactically and semantically strong position in any text. The news of her husband’s death in a railroad accident leaves Mrs. Mallard facing conflicting emotions of grief and exultation at the prospects for freedom in the remainder of her life. However, the whole affair as well as her widowhood turns out to be the result of the intelligence mistake, and Mr. Mallard comes back home blissfully unaware of the accident and his wife’s feelings. “The story of an hour” is about a short but very important moment of Mrs. Mallard’s life at the end of which she dies, unable any longer to give her freedom back.

### **II. Problem**

Thus, through this seemingly simple plot, Kate Chopin addresses very complicated problems of the interplay of female independence, love, and marriage. This subject-matter is relevant from the point of view of linguoculturology if we take into account the feminist-oriented style of Kate Chopin as well as women’s status in the USA of her times. This theme is revealed both on the implicit and explicit levels of the story. Speaking about the implicit level, the idea of female independence is put forward through the imagery of the text as well as the situational context – one of the leitmotifs of the story is the image of the blossoming nature. In a very specific way, this image is identified with the idea of liberation and women’s awakening. As for the explicit level, it is mainly the vocabulary that is suggestive of the macro-context of the story (*Free! Body and soul free!*).

### **III. Key concept definition**

The analysis of the semantic structure has revealed that its key concept is FREEDOM. It is a discourse-comprising concept which plays a crucial role in the plot unfolding as well as in the actualization of deep psychological meanings through the context. Though this does not correlate with the title explicitly, their connection can be

observed on the implicit level as the story of an hour is the story of Mrs. Mallard's transient and momentary state of happiness and independence. The irony of the title is tragic in its nature. In Chopin's way of thinking, this is the tragedy of the women of her age.

The choice of the word "*freedom*" as the concept name is not accidental as freedom means complete or total liberty without fear or being threatened. At the same time, it should be stressed that the word "*freedom*", which nominates the key concept, is not used in the story. We only come across the word "*free*" in Mrs. Mallard's exclamations.

In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English the word "*freedom*" is defined as 'the right to do what you want without being controlled or restricted by anyone'. Still, in the story under analysis "*freedom*" is considered not only as physical freedom, but also as spiritual freedom. It is objectified by such word combinations and phrases as "*Free! Body and soul free!*", "*...possession of self-assertion...*", etc.

In the Association Dictionary by Yu.N. Karaulov we come across the following associations of freedom: *freedom of speech, of actions, full freedom, equality, happiness, will* etc. Some of these words coincide with the key vocabulary of the story. We can single out a set of the key words of the story including: *free, joy, life, love, death, triumph, possession, will*, etc. This means that alongside the author's specific

#### **IV. Concept Structure**

The conceptual sphere of FREEDOM includes the nucleus and the periphery.

##### **a) The cognitive-propositional structure**

The nucleus is cognitive-propositional structure that consists of SUBJECT, PREDICATE, CONDITION and RESULT.

The subject of the concept is Mrs. Louise Mallard. The author describes her as a young woman "... *with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength*". Mrs. Mallard suffers from heart trouble, and that is why her relatives feel that they have to break the news to her as gently as possible. The author's manner of describing the character is mainly indirect and is based on the reader's ability to infer the key information from the provided clues. E.g., special attention should be paid to the following detail – *lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength*. This means that Mrs. Mallard had always been possessed by the ideas of freedom and liberation, even

before her husband's death. In such a way the author refers us to the macro-setting of the story, its historical and cultural context. Mrs. Mallard might have been one of the women who gave rise to the suffragette movement.

As for the PREDICATE of the concept FREEDOM, it is represented by the adjective *free* which condenses its contents and represents freedom in the most concise way. The significance of this adjective is accentuated by its reiteration – the word *free* is used three times.

The following verbs are also used by the author in reference to different aspects of FREEDOM: *escape, warm, relax, etc.* They illustrate Louise Mallard's transformation. Speaking about the verbal aspect of the character's acceptance of her new life, special attention should be paid to verbs of physical activity that describe her motions and gestures and convey the degree of her exultation:

*Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously.*

*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.*

The death of Mr. Mallard is the CONDITION of FREEDOM and is described by the author in the first passage. After she is informed that her husband is dead, Louise undergoes a sweeping change from a depressed woman to a lively, happy and free. The expression in her eyes changes from “*vacant and dull stare*” to “*keen and bright eyes*”.

Thus, once again the author refers us to the cultural context of the story as for a married woman her husband's death was the only decent and socially acceptable way of regaining her freedom.

The RESULT of freedom is absolute happiness. The author describes it using such expressions: “*They (eyes) stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body*”, “*There was a feverish triumph in her eyes*”, “*the moment of illumination*”, “*strongest impulse of her being*” etc.

#### **b) Association areas**

The periphery of FREEDOM includes association areas and subjective-modal meanings. The analysis exposed the following associations of freedom in the story:

- freedom vs. love

Special attention should be paid to the word “love” which is opposed to the word *freedom*: “*What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!*” Love is considered as something interfering with freedom, especially with women’s freedom.

- freedom - solitude

In the story, freedom is associated with solitude, to be more exact the opportunity to be alone, to live “*spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own*”. “*There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself*”.

- freedom – life

The key concept is considered in the interrelation ‘freedom – life – death’. In the beginning of the story, Mr. Mallard’s death is the cause of freedom, of a long happy life of his wife. The metaphor – *elixir of life* – is one of the key elements of the story’s imagery. In this respect special attention should be paid to the description of the nature – we can observe clear correlation between its changes and Mrs. Mallard’s state. The author compares “*the open window*” and the awakened nature in spring with the start of new life filled with happiness and freedom. There are such epithets and metaphors in the story as “*new spring life*”, “*delicious breath of rain*”, etc.

Nevertheless, in the end of the story death is the result of her disappointment, the end of her freedom. The author describes it ironically: “*When the doctor came they said she had died of heart disease – of the joy that kills*”.

- freedom – victory

For Mrs. Mallard freedom is a victory, something she has had to wait for. The following metaphor *goddess of Victory* alluding to the Greek mythology as well as the epithet *feverish triumph* bring home this idea to the reader.

To sum up, the story represents one of the masterpieces of the feminist prose in which under the seemingly simple plot one can observe the intricate nature of feminism at its origins.