

It's a Man's World

Re-examination of the Female Perspective in Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" and "The Story of an Hour"

Adisa Ahmetspahić

University of Zenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Damir Kahrić

University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the portrayal of the female perspective in a largely male-dominated society of the Old South in Kate Chopin's short stories: "Désirée's Baby" and "The Story of an Hour". The paper relies on the new historicist approach for the analysis of race and gender in Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" and marriage as a burden in "The Story of an Hour". The paper concludes that the aforementioned issues did not only cause the re-inscription and interrogation of the female perspective but a major proliferation in the works of Kate Chopin as one of the predecessors to feminist writing.

Keywords: Chopin, gender, new historicism, "Désirée's Baby", "The Story of an Hour"

Introduction

The world of the Old South within the territories of the United States of America portrays a large number of stories worth telling. However, not many of these tales perpetuate a happy ending, and moreover, many entwine aspects of racial and/or gender inequality on various levels. This phenomenon can be observed in a number of works which are considered a part of the American literary canon. In many of these pieces, a character's gender or skin-hue will dictate their development or even the eventual fate within the boundaries of the narrative framework. Gender, especially, plays a prominent role for certain characters. Writings of Kate Chopin exemplify some of the aforementioned elements of race and gender, and her narrative works pose a number of questions which reflect the nineteenth-century socio-cultural background of the American society. Chopin's writing skills allowed her to use her tales as an artistic canvas on which she would draw the perfect lines which grant the readership a more prominent insight into the cultural backdrop of her own age. The authoress was able to successfully present different perspectives when the female psyche is concerned, allowing the readers to experience the issues of race and gender in different ways – for one is never enough. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to elaborate on the position of the female gender within the, primarily, male-dominated world exemplified by Chopin's selected narratives. Gender, especially female, played an important role within a single community, due to the fact that: "Gender tends to denote the social and cultural role of each sex within a given society" (Newman, "Sex and gender: What is the difference?").

This analysis of Chopin's writing relies on new historicism, a rather contemporary literary theory that recognizes socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts as determining factors in literary writing. In other words, new historicism propounds the embeddedness of history in literature, as outlined in Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher's book *Practicing New Historicism*:

We are intensely interested in tracking the social energies that circulate very broadly through a culture, flowing back and forth between margins and center, passing from zones designated as art to zones apparently indifferent or hostile to art, pressing up from below to transform exalted spheres and down from on high to colonize the low. (13)

As mentioned above, Kate Chopin's works have garnered attention in terms of the socio-cultural and socio-historical occurrences and their relatedness to the contemporary world. Most of Kate Chopin's literary oeuvre is nowadays categorized as regionalist writing or local color fiction. Critics and scholars put a strong emphasis on the difference between regionalism and local color, as explained by Ferris and Wilson in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Literature-Recreation*:

Although the terms *regionalism* and *local color* are sometimes used interchangeably, regionalism generally has broader connotations. Whereas local color is often applied to a specific literary mode that flourished in the late 19th century, regionalism implies a recognition from the colonial period to the present of differences among specific areas of the country. Additionally, regionalism refers to an intellectual movement encompassing regional consciousness beginning in the 1930s. (867)

Broadly speaking, the aim of the local color technique is to portray all features of a particular region such as dialect, landscape, ((post-) colonial) customs or common behavioral patterns. One of the most lauded examples of local color writing is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884, 1885). The thematic concerns in local color fiction specifically those of female writers, such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Kate Chopin, extend to the interrogation of the position of women in the society. The aforementioned ideas have been influential on the modern world's perception of race and gender and the overall comprehension of human relationships.

In Chopin's "Désirée's Baby", it becomes apparent that the subjugation of women is based on their gender and race. Furthermore, the authoress presents a notion of gender-tension between the two sides, and how the protagonist had to face a rather cruel fate at the whim of her racist husband, simply because a veil of secrets had not been lifted until it was too late. Désirée became an outcast, forced out of her marital home because her husband Armand initially believed her to be 'racially impure' due to her mysterious heritage. On the other hand, the character of Madame Valmondé can be perceived as a woman ahead her own time. In a world full of subjugation and stereotyping on the basis of one's gender, Madame Valmondé stands as a highly discerning character who on occasions can be examined as a pure contrast to her adoptive daughter Désirée. Madame Valmondé is a female character never fully immersed into the world of male domination; hence she is someone who is not subdued by the societal norms which dictated the female position. In addition, "Désirée's Baby" observes

miscegenation as a consequence of sexual exploitation of female slaves that was a common practice.

Kate Chopin likewise addressed the negative connotations of marriage, and one of her short stories also revolves around the inner, most intimate elements of the female psyche, exemplified through the personality of Louise, the protagonist of “The Story of an Hour”. The authoresses tackled the idea of how burdensome matrimony may be for both parties, regardless of the gender. Although this narrative does not explicitly explain how Brently might have mistreated his wife Louise (if at all), both Désirée and Louise in the end endure tragic fates, yet they somehow still appear to be liberated from the hegemony imposed by the male sex. Even though the period of the nineteenth century has long passed, it is still of paramount importance to understand the importance of giving voice to the female cause, whereas Chopin’s works contribute greatly to such a task, and allow more depth for the understanding of the female perspective.

“Désirée’s Baby”: The Crossroad of Gender and Race

The mid-nineteenth century was marked by a number of demands for the enfranchisement of women reaching its apotheosis in the Seneca Falls Convention organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. The Convention raised a number of issues pertaining to the educational as well as the economic and familial prospects and responsibilities of women (“Seneca Falls Convention”). One of the driving forces of the women’s rights movement was the abolitionist movement that argued for the end of slavery. The two movements bonded along the lines of freedom. In her works Kate Chopin interweaves both race and the position of women. The matter is further complicated if the point at issue concerns women of color, as is the case with Chopin’s “Désirée’s Baby”.

“Désirée’s Baby” is reported to have been written on 24 November in 1882. It was first published in *Vogue* on 14 January in 1893. A year after, “Désirée’s Baby” was included and published in the collection of short stories by Chopin titled *Bayou Folk*. *Vogue* praised Chopin as:

A beautiful woman, whose portrait fails to convey a tithe of the charm of her expressively lovely face, has been an honored contributor to *Vogue* almost from its first number. ... Mrs. Chopin is daring in her choice of themes, but exquisitely refined in the treatment of them, and her literary style is a model of terse and finished diction. (“Kate Chopin and *Vogue*”)

Situated in Louisiana before the Civil War, “Désirée’s Baby” deals with the plight of the title character, Désirée, after she was found as a baby in front of the Valmondé mansion. Désirée’s unknown origins do not prevent the Valmondés to accept her as their own child. Similarly, Armand Aubigny, a wealthy planter and owner of L’Abri, does not mind Désirée’s obscure origins and marries her in the antebellum period when race and social order played an important role. The reversal of the story occurs when Désirée gives birth to a baby boy who starts displaying dark skin features. Armand interprets the color of the boy’s skin as a sign of Désirée’s racial impurity. Désirée leaves with the baby and goes to bayou. The resolution of the story does not reveal whether Désirée committed suicide or

not. However, the ending unveils that it is Armand who is partly black by his mother.

The marriage of Désirée and Armand traces back to “when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her.” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 182). The formulation of the quotation above reveals that it was Armand who fell in love and the one to choose which concurs well with the nineteenth century precepts of male-female relationships. When he was reminded of Désirée’s unknown parentage by Désirée’s adoptive father, Armand took on the patron-like behavior, as visible from the following quote:

Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? He ordered the corbeille from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 182)

Armand is the one to give his surname, assuming that it would make her more worthy in the eyes of others. In addition, possessing “one of the oldest and proudest” surnames makes Armand’s decision of marrying Désirée beyond doubt. Furthermore, Désirée’s wishes are not mentioned in the passage that describes the period before their marriage. She is rather presented as an object traded between Armand and Monsieur Valmondé who “wanted things well considered: that is, the girl’s obscure origin” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 182). It seems that Monsieur Valmondé does not want to jeopardize his own position in the community if Désirée’s origins were to dishonor Armand’s name. Hence, the emphasis is on the mutual respect and what they perceive to be solidarity between men. Descriptions of Désirée further reinforce the image of a perfect daughter who is “beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere - the idol of Valmondé” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 182).

The image of Désirée as feeble and gentle is more elaborately developed in her marriage with Armand: “When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God.” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 184). All Désirée’s action and mood depends on those of her husband. Her world is crushed after Armand’s behavior to her is changed:

When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Désirée was miserable enough to die. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 184)

The behavior of both of them indicates that Armand is the axis around which their lives revolve. Désirée’s physical appearance, such as “The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch.” or “She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders.” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 183-184), suggest an almost angelic behavior that was expected of women of the time. From 1854 to 1862, Coventry Patmore, an English writer and critic, published a

narrative poem titled “The Angel in the House” in which he described his wife Emily as the paragon of femininity and virtue. The poem was highly popular in the English-speaking world. The term ‘angel in the house’ later became appropriated as a standard up to which all women should strive. In other words, complete dedication and subservience to husband and the household was expected. Any type of trespassing of the boundaries was considered unchaste (“Angel in The House by Coventry Patmore”). The above-mentioned dualistic norms are highly exclusive since they argue for one of two extremes. In the case of women, one either complies with the expectations and earns the title of a good woman or fails to meet the requirements thus earning the status of an outcast. The same logic was applied to races. If not fully white, people were shunned and enslaved. Hence, no wonder that women rights movement representatives were the same who were involved in the abolitionist movements.

In “*Désirée’s Baby*” the above-mentioned standards of women and race become intertwined after the childbirth when *Désirée* is identified as a member of the black race through her child. Madame Valmondé is the first to notice that something is different with the baby:

“This is not the baby!” she exclaimed, in startled tones. ... Madame Valmondé had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 183)

By looking at Zandrine, Madame Valmondé wants either to compare the child to Zandrine or to check if she noticed anything unusual. Madame Valmondé asks *Désirée* about Armand’s attitude to the baby and *Désirée* replies:

Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not - that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn’t true. I know he says that to please me. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 183)

Désirée acknowledges that Armand revels in the fact that the child is a boy. Similarly, Armand assumes that *Désirée* would like to have a girl more than a boy. *Désirée’s* and Armand’s opinions, respectively, perpetuate centuries-long gender convention: women prefer female children whereas men prefer male children more. Moreover, *Désirée* brings up an important aspect of the society of the day and a widely held opinion which is that male children should inherit the family’s possessions whereas girls were expected to marry.

In contrast, Madame Valmondé displays a liberal and accepting attitude in her response to *Désirée’s* letter in which she asks for help: “My own *Désirée*: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child.” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 185). Madame Valmondé invites *Désirée* to come back with a child at a time when divorced and abandoned women were shunned by the society, thus outdistancing the socio-cultural norms. Furthermore, Madame Valmondé makes no mention of *Désirée’s* father. It can be inferred that Madame Valmondé is her own decision maker. Her character is consistent with the previously mentioned fact that women rights movement representatives were also pro-abolitionist.

Another example of Désirée fitting into the role of a frail woman, as mentioned above this was a common gender norm, is when she notices that something about the baby is changed and she asks Armand to clarify the situation to her:

“Armand,” she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. “Armand,” she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. “Armand,” she panted once more, clutching his arm, “look at our child. What does it mean? Tell me.” He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. “Tell me what it means!” she cried despairingly. “It means,” he answered lightly, “that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 184-185)

On the one hand, Armand’s behavior is suggestive of possible gaslighting as he is convincing her that she is not white. He is telling her what she is and what she is not. Elizabeth Cady Stanton et al wrote about this type of domination in *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions-Seneca Falls (1848)*: “He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence [sic] in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.” (4). Désirée loves Armand to the extent that she shows blind obedience as suggested in the following quote:

My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God’s sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 185)

On the other hand, for Armand as a man, it seems to go by default that the Désirée is to blame. For Désirée as an “angel in the house”, it is by default that Armand is not to blame. Regardless of the hints of Armand’s parentage in the form of descriptions of his physiognomy and childhood, there is no instance at which his status is questioned. He blames Désirée for the color of the baby’s skin, considering it an insult:

He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife’s soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.” (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 185)

In addition, Armand’s behavior indicates that his system of values, in which he prefers one race over the other, is greater than his love for Désirée. Unlike his father, Armand is not able to transcend the ideas of race that he associates with superior-inferior relationship. It has been argued that Armand’s cruelty is reflected not only in his termination of marriage with Désirée but also with the clear assertion that he does not want to acknowledge the baby. Nonetheless, the latter is quite plausible taking into consideration that he possibly fathered the quadroon boy who fans the baby. It is the quadroon boy that has a revelatory impact on Désirée:

One of La Blanche’s little quadroon boys - half naked too - stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée’s eyes had been fixed absently

and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 184)

It seems that Désirée did not contemplate the fatherhood of La Blanche's children up to this moment although she does give the impression of being familiar with it earlier in the story. Chopin gives a hint of Désirée's cognizance of the above-mentioned fact at the very beginning of the story: "And the way he cries," went on Désirée, "is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin." (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 183). Attention has often been drawn to the sexual exploitation of slave women, as is the case with La Blanche. Although there is no further detail on Armand's sexual exploitation of La Blanche and probably other slave women in his ownership, such horrors have frequently been described in both fiction and non-fiction. For the sake of illustration, the following excerpt from Tony Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), a slave narrative, is more than relevant:

I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below. (Morrison 142-143)

The children born as a result of colonial miscegenation, mulattos, quadroons, or octoroons, would also be slaves without any recognition by the father, evident in the quadroon boy's position. In 1935, Langston Hughes produced a play titled *Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South* which speaks of identity issues in children fathered by the owner of the plantation. The play also speaks of the treatment of the female slave, Cora, who lives with her owner but is never accepted as neither wife nor mistress due to social constraints though there are signs of affection on the part of her master. In "Désirée's Baby", it cannot pass unnoticed that Armand, among a number of slaves he owns, mentions La Blanche to make a point of Désirée's "dark" skin:

"It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair," seizing his wrist. "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," she laughed hysterically. "As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child. (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 185)

The passage above is denotative of Armand's lineage by his mother, as explained in the letter found at the end of the story:

"But above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery." (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 186)

The letter implies that a love-like relationship did exist between his father and mother who was black, which makes the character of Armand's father antithetical

to that of Armand. While this may be true, the fact that Armand's father had an estranged wife suggests that he did comply with certain social standards. In spite of the frequent interpretation of the last passage in the story as a moment of truth for Armand, it is not certain whether he knew of the letter before or not. Could it be that Armand knew of his bloodline and internalized the inferiority complex to the extent of naming his black slave La Blanche (the slave owners often christened their slaves with renaming)? This hypothesis becomes clearer with the translation of La Blanche's name from French which means "The White Woman" (Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories* 494). In the same vein, his insistence to marry Désirée despite her unknown origins might be suggestive of his knowledge of the fact that his mother is black or racially mixed. However, Armand's actions are never questioned in any way. A significant amount of literature puts forward that even the reader does not question either his actions or physiognomy but tends to suspect Désirée. In her book titled *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (1999), Emily Toth holds that:

Kate Chopin had more than one real-life model for Armand Aubigny. Her own father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was a powerful man who ruled over a large household--including a thoroughly dependent wife whom he had married hastily, and a young woman slave by whom he may have had children. (145)

The analysis of "Désirée's Baby" intimates that, unlike some of her contemporaries, Kate Chopin does not minimize the number of her female characters in comparison to male characters to discuss the woman question. This story has a larger number of women than men. Apart from presenting women who were shaped by the social norms of their time, Chopin introduces that character of Madame Valmondé as a woman ahead of her time in some aspects, as outlined in the discussion. It is more than plausible that Chopin managed to portray different female characters since she herself was raised by a number of women and subsequently raised her six children on her own ("Biography, Kate Chopin"). Therefore, it can be concluded that Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" paves way for a number of interpretations in terms of race and gender which has been a burning issue over the past few centuries.

The Burden of Marriage in Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

Self-determined female characters have been a part of the literary canon written in English throughout many centuries. Both in the British and American literary canon, one is able to explore a number of female characters which held their ground against all those subjugating norms of conduct asserted by the male-dominated population. In other words, a large number of writers have created such fictional personalities which either influenced or completely changed the world largely dominated by men. From William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë in English literature, all the way to the likes of Kate Chopin or Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the American literary canon. Chopin depicted a number of female characters who epitomize the subjugated spouse in their own marital clusters, and such examples can be observed in her works such as *The Awakening* (1899), "Désirée's Baby" (1893) and her very short narrative piece dubbed "The Story of an Hour". Naturally, such narrative works formulate a much

clearer picture of the position of women and the inequality among genders within the territories of the Old South in America. By perceiving the aforementioned narrative stories as the very mouthpiece through which Chopin rendered certain portions of the American society, readers are granted greater insight into the 'world of men'. Moreover, this chapter will focus primarily on "The Story of an Hour" in order to better understand how the forbidden longing for liberty arises within the mind of the main character, but also how matrimony, as a social institution, affects women who appear to live their own lives by the music of the husband's flute.

When the socio-cultural context of the nineteenth-century American society is taken into account, it should be noted that one document stands out as the beacon of light and the monumental letter of equality for the American citizens. Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence presented the idea of equality for all citizens of the United States of America. By this proclamation, everyone is allowed to retain their right to live, possess liberty and pursue their happiness. In the eighteenth century, or more precisely in 1776, the document stated the following: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" ("Declaration of Independence: A Transcription"). However, even the wording is ambiguous herein. Primarily, this document allows liberty, freedom, equality and it renders the permission to prosper when the people living in the US are concerned. But if one re-reads the same lines, the question arises of whether only all *men* are created equal. Did Jefferson intend only for the male population to be granted liberty and unalienable rights? Did the American society place males on the pedestal since only they had been created equal amongst each other, while women were born unequal and not endowed with the same set of rights as men? Some of these enquiries can be traced in Kate Chopin's literary opus.

In "The Story of an Hour", and in her other works as well, Chopin offers and/or describes those instances which shatter the standardized social norms, as such, but also in turn, these moments give birth to self-desire, self-recognition, and likewise in Chopin's fictive world, create consequent despair and self-alienation. Therefore, "The Story of an Hour", written and published in 1894, exemplifies some of the aforementioned aspects.

[...] Chopin offers concentrated descriptions of moments that shatter social complacency, that quickening of consciousness which gives birth to self-desire, self-recognition, and, in Chopin's fictive world, consequent despair and self-alienation. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour," written 19 April 1894, is undoubtedly her most famous and intense reading in this line. (Papke 51)

Ergo, Kate Chopin's writings can serve as a more concrete and detailed insight when it comes to the outward realm of women in the nineteenth century, but her authorship also presents a more profound depiction of the inner psychological and/or emotional element of her heroines. In this case, the protagonist of "The Story of an Hour" is a woman called Louise Mallard. The short story analyses the stream of ideas, the growing desire for liberation and the contemplation of one woman who, at least in her own mind, moved farther away from the societal norms in order to imagine a better life for herself – however, this newly-formed

existence would not be tied to her spouse, but rather, she would be able to live solely and unequivocally for herself.

The storyline of this narrative is a rather simple one. It revolves around the plot situated in one-hour timeframe, as the very title implies. The story, in essence, captures Louise's complicated reaction once she learns her husband is dead. "The Story of an Hour" opens up with Richards and Josephine who try to find a way in which they would be able to break the news to Louise. This news – Louise's husband Brently perished in a railroad disaster. Josephine is worried that this tragic news would endanger Louise's weak heart condition. However, the wife's mental response is unusual. Instead of grieving for her husband, she retreats upstairs and slowly but surely starts developing thoughts of liberation. Initially, she refuses to allow herself this freedom of thought, but the same message reaches her through the scenery outside of the window frame and from the outside. The nature outside charges Louise with fresh energy, but more importantly, she also starts experiencing hope. She starts realizing that the world itself is sending her such veiled instructions or hints, and the protagonist of the story pieces such hints together. Chopin does not state directly that Louise is overly happy with Brently's death, per se. It is obvious that she is not done weeping for him, but his demise allows Louise freedom to breed her self-determination. She imagines how all the oncoming years would be reserved solely for her; she would take life into her own hands. Louise leaves behind her marriage, and the shackles which held her back during her matrimony. She believes she is finally free. Yet, her happiness does not last forever, because very soon, Brently Mallard returns. He is alive and well and the story behind his demise was nothing else but a misinformation. His mundane appearance is contrasted to Louise's as she walks down the stairs. While she is coming down the stairs triumphantly, Louise is utterly bewildered once she notices her husband. Her strength wanes and her heart stops. However, ironically, the physicians believe that she died from joy – in other words, the doctors conclude that Louise died from overwhelming happiness created by her husband's return. Nonetheless, the readers can observe the ironic twist, since Louise died from the shock of losing her newly-gained freedom. Louise briefly experienced the sense of joy, imagining herself in control of her life, and with the removal of such intense happiness, the protagonist quickly lost her life (Sustana, "Analysis of 'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin").

Chopin presents the story of a heroine who, at least within the course of one hour, manages to harbor thoughts of a life created in an alternative sphere. That is, Chopin presents Louise's inner bravery to imagine how Louise's life, as a widow, would suit her much better than her current reality as a wife. By being so courageous, although internally, Louise is able to stand against the norms of society, and she even questions the standardized qualities of matrimony, whereas the protagonist simply sees marriage as something which confines her. With her growing imagination and desire, in the process of what would nowadays be dubbed as brainstorming, Louise removes the 'mind-forged manacles'. With her growing determination, the heroine of Chopin's narrative begins 'looking outside the box', and she likewise shatters the self-imposed social and intellectual restrictions. Louise removes the coils of these mental chains, these psychological handcuffs, which one of the most prominent poets of the English Romanticism

called 'mind-forged manacles'. "Self-imposed social and intellectual restrictions deprive humans of experiencing nature and the true human spirit. The "mind-forg'd manacles" represent Blake's perception of self-limitation and the denigration of the human imagination" (Whitney, "The 'Mind-Forg'd Manacles' of Blake's Poetry"). Thus, one is able to draw parallels between Blake's poetry, his socio-political ideas, and Kate Chopin's authorship in the nineteenth-century timeframe.

Louise's sister Josephine informed Louise of Brently's death. Allegedly, he was killed in a railroad accident, and taking into account Louise's condition: "It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing" (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 1). The idea of concealment and hidden truths is evident from the very opening of the short story. Once her grief had withered and her tears subsided, the heroine moved upstairs and sat in her armchair, observing the scenery outside. However, the readers are soon able to easily detect certain discrepancies between her public, outward demeanor, and her inner, intimate opinions. Louise actually creates an enactment of her complete grief. In other words, the emotions which she projected for public, and the medium of her tears used to transmit her sorrow did not in actuality reflect her deepest sensations. Louise Mallard is forced to pretend that she is saddened by this news in front of her sister and her husband's friend, although deep inside, she grows more and more excited with the thought of being liberated from her marriage once and for all.

"The Story of an Hour" focuses on the reaction of the character Mrs. Mallard to the news that she has become a widow. The distinction between public behavior and private emotion extends to inside the home; Louise is forced to pretend, even in front of her sister and friend, to mask her happiness at the years ahead of her. She is happy to gain freedom, even at the price of the death of her husband. As she grieves her husband's death outwardly, she is excited on the inside, which Chopin shows us through her thoughts. (Rajakumar and Rajeswar 180)

It would appear that Louise's gender dictates her rules of conduct; that is, her role as a woman in the nineteenth-century American society, and moreover her position of wife in her own marriage would force her to lament her husband's passing. Nevertheless, the situation is surmised in a totally different manner – she is outwardly mournful, yet inside, Louise is gleaming. Therefore, "The Story of an Hour" evokes discussions relating to social and cultural gender roles, and as Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar and Geetha Rajeswar explain: "In the nineteenth century, American women divorcees and spinsters were viewed negatively" (183). From this notion, it becomes obvious that a woman's gender plays an important part, because a particular woman is viewed negatively if she is not married or if she is divorced from her husband. In any case, a woman is perceived in regard to her man. It is her (non)-marital status that dictates her position in the society, and Chopin represents these facts in a number of her works brilliantly. Thus, the American community of the nineteenth century definitely appears as a gender-divided environment, whereas women experience the highest degree of inequality. That society is predominantly a male dominion, a man's world.

Once Louise returns upstairs and the events transpiring around her begin to sink in, she suddenly feels that something is coming to her. A revelation of some sort, epiphany in other words. She waits for it, fearfully:

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." (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 2)

In this portion of fear and awe which is gradually piercing her, it is obvious that she is removing her mental chains, the restrictions of her gender, as well as her inner, most desperate desires of her heart. Catherine Sustana explains that the entire scenery symbolizes this brief effect of freedom, and Chopin emphasizes this part. Firstly, she was unable to fight her oncoming joy. Her own mind-forged manacles were being destroyed and the authority of her society was slowly dismantled. The spring outside symbolizes the birth of a new life, a life in this sense where Louise could live happily, without any restraints of her matrimony. She starts thinking intelligently, even though social norms might have prevented her from doing so ("Analysis of 'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin"). Louise, in this sense, is going against the grain and Chopin elaborates on this notion by describing:

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. (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 1)

This new arrival of spring symbolizes revitalization; it alludes to rebirth and a new start. Just as Louise starts harboring thoughts of a better existence, so does the season of spring change places with winter and it brings hope of a better tomorrow. When lexemes and phrases are closely analyzed, Chopin inserted such words which demonstrate liberty, both metaphorically and literally. In one passage, the authoress describes: "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!" (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 2). The repetition of the word 'free' stresses this importance of getting out of something, in this case, her marriage. She is now liberated from this institution, and she is capable of living her life in the best possible fashion. Such words escape her lips, just as she now believes she is escaping her own past and her previous life. "'Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering." (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 2). The authoress elaborates on this notion how every part of her existence, every part of the main character as a woman would be freed; her mind is released, her body unclutched. She would now be her own identity, her own mind and body. Henceforth she would construct her own identity, as it would no longer be constructed for her.

Kate Chopin also depicts a particular stray in Louise's stream of thoughts. Moreover, it appears at certain moments in the narrative that Louise actually returns in mind to her (allegedly deceased) husband. She evidently contemplates

love, and stresses the notion that there were, indeed, instances when she loved Brently. Certain images of Brently are recalled to Louise's memory, for example: "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" (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 2). The main character realizes that her tears are not yet fully gone – better to say, that some of her emotions are still there, because she would have to mourn for him a bit more. What should be vividly noted in this segment is the fact that Chopin, or Louise in this case, does not openly list or categorize any offences which her husband might have committed.

In some following lines, Louise contemplates the notion that: "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" (Chopin, "The Story of an Hour" 2). One should note the use of phrases – both *men* and *women* – is listed in this particular regard. Chopin plays with the linguistic categories of gender in these words, by juxtaposing them with one another. Sustana elaborates on the idea a powerful will of some sort which would influence or sway other individuals would no longer exist. Furthermore, Sustana adds that since it becomes apparent that Chopin never fully explained whether Brently truly mistreated Louise, it seems that marriage, as such, was an unpleasant and unwanted experience for both men and women. The implication lies herein; matrimony could be nothing else but a tedious, stifling process for both parties involved ("Analysis of 'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin").

The motif of repression is ever-so-prevailing throughout the narrative. It is only through her realization that Louise starts to think, to feel, to rejoice at her new opportunities. She has been given a chance of a better life. Ashley Robinson explains that just like Louise, many women of nineteenth century were, indeed, victims of repression. Just because of their gender, women had a certain set of rules which they ought to follow. The female gender was supposed to be demure, gentle, and passive, which often went against women's personal desires ("The Story of an Hour: Summary and Analysis"). Nevertheless, Louise now felt her own triumph, she would start anew. She would now live all those oncoming years for herself. However, a surprise was on her doorstep, and in this particular regard, the surprise is there literally.

Brently Mallard returned home. He was never at the place of the accident, and was alive and well. Coming down the stairs filled with her personally victory, Louise was utterly shocked when she saw him, and her heart stopped. Her poor heart condition now became prominent, and the shock killed her. However, the doctors said: "... she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills". Sustana emphasizes that Louise was robbed of her short-lived liberty, she was now yet again denied the right to live freely, without her husband. Brently returned, and his wife now perished due to the fact that her happiness was stripped away. She would never live in the manner which she saw fit, she would not be free for as long as Brently is alive. The physicians misdiagnosed her passing, believing her to be dead because of some overwhelming joy, yet this was not the case ("Analysis of 'The Story of an Hour' by Kate Chopin"). Furthermore, Louise's sudden passing could be perceived as a form of her long-desired freedom. Perhaps not in the manner which she imagined, but it seems that her ultimate fate was the only way

to get out of her marital situation. Death would be her door to escape marriage (Rajakumar & Rajeswar 183). Yet, such 'deviances' in female behavior were not uncommon in literary descriptions of the nineteenth century American canon. Another notable example of wrong treatment imposed on the female gender can be observed in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper". Just like the narrator of that work, Louise finally finds her liberation, but in a completely different manner. The woman in Gilman's work has been diagnosed as, somewhat, mentally instable, although she eventually departs from her husband. Those women who were not perceived as docile, thus submissive to men, were observed as taking more masculine power than allowed, and were, therefore, perceived as overly manly. They gained a notorious reputation, and the woman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" might have been confined to the enclosed space because her demeanor and intellectual pursuits were too introspective (Marland, "The Yellow Wallpaper"). Thus, both women can be perceived as characters misdiagnosed by the professional medical workers, which emphasizes the notion of how much the female gender was misunderstood during the course of the nineteenth century.

Kate Chopin brilliantly exemplified the dismal position of women in America, and how many were more often than not undermined simply because of their gender, never being allowed to conduct their lives freely. Stories as "Desiree's Baby", "The Story of an Hour" or even *The Awakening* allow for the creation of an overview through which readers are able to understand how much the English-speaking world has changed over the course of few centuries. Even though the twentieth century saw the biggest upheavals regarding women's rights, many things have not yet been tackled. Was it a high hope for a low heaven when the female gender is concerned? Emancipation of women, in truth, contributed greatly to female equality since Chopin's own time, but pride and prejudice against women will prevail for as long as a single community is perceived as a male-dominated environment. So, the question remains: is it a man's world after all?

Conclusion

The single most marked observation that emerged from the analysis of Chopin's short stories is that her fiction is a convolution of different issues that burdened nineteenth century America, which is the reason why the new historicist approach was used in the paper. The thematic issues in "Desirée's Baby" extend from gender to race issues. A well-known fact about most nineteenth century societies is that social norms dictated the superiority of male over female gender as well as the superiority of white over the black race. To rebuke the aforementioned perceptions, Chopin created characters who are wholly/partly black and whose manners are the epitomes of desirable and/or expected male-female behavior of the day. The characters of Desirée and Armand with their behavior perfectly fit into such description. Quite the opposite, the character of Madame Valmondé is unconventional to a certain extent as if it were Chopin herself who entered the story. In "The Story of an Hour" Chopin tackles the institution of marriage and its effects on female and male genders. The story also explores the possibilities of freedom from marriage, as exemplified with the character of Louise. The focus of

the story is the gender oppression imposed by marriage which in turn causes the repression of individual desires. Although patronizing, the nineteenth century socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts shaped Chopin's literary output and made her one of the precursors of feminist writing.

References

- “Angel in The House by Coventry Patmore, Summary and Analysis.” *Angel in The House by Coventry Patmore*, victorian-era.org/angel-house-coventry-patmore.html.
- “Biography, Kate Chopin, The Awakening, The Storm, Stories.” *KateChopin.org*, katechopin.org/biography/#childhood.
- “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription.” *National Archives: America's Founding Documents*, 19 November 2019, archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript. Accessed 15 March 2020.
- “Kate Chopin and Vogue.” *KateChopin.org*, katechopin.org/kate-chopin-vogue/.
- “Seneca Falls Convention.” *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 10 Nov. 2017, history.com/topics/womens-rights/seneca-falls-convention.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Stories*. Wordsworth Classics, 2015.
- Chopin, Kate. “The Story of an Hour”, e-book, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, originally written and published in 1894, USA.
- Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions-Seneca Falls, liberalarts.utexas.edu/coretexts/_files/resources/texts/1848DeclarationofSentiments.pdf.
- Ferris, William, and Charles Reagan Wilson, editors. *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Literature-Recreation*. Anchor Books, 1999.
- Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Marland, Hilary. “The Yellow Wallpaper: a 19th-century short story of nervous exhaustion and the perils of women's ‘rest cures.’” *The Conversation*, 28 August, 2019, theconversation.com/the-yellow-wallpaper-a-19th-century-short-story-of-nervous-exhaustion-and-the-perils-of-womens-rest-cures-92302. Accessed 18 March 2020.
- Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.
- Newman, Tim. “Sex and gender: What is the difference?” *Medical News Today*, 7 February 2018, medicalnewstoday.com/articles/232363. Accessed 25 March, 2020.
- Papke, Mary E. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Kate Chopin (Updated Edition)*, edited by Harold Bloom. Blooms Literary Criticism, Infobase Publishing, 2007.
- Rajakumar, Mohanalakshmi and Rajeswar, Geetha. *Kate Chopin in Context: New Approaches*, edited by Ostman, Heather and O'Donoghue, Kate. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Robinson, Ashley. “The Story of an Hour: Summary and Analysis.” *SAT / ACT Prep Online Guides and Tips*, 9 December, 2019, blog.prepscholar.com/kate-chopin-the-story-of-an-hour-summary. Accessed 17 March 2020.
- Sustana, Catherine. “Analysis of ‘The Story of an Hour’ by Kate Chopin.” *ThoughtCo*, 25 May, 2019, thoughtco.com/analysis-story-of-an-hour-2990475. Accessed 15 March 2020.
- Toth, Emily. *Unveiling Kate Chopin*. University Press of Mississippi, 1999.
- Whitney, Elizabeth. “The ‘Mind-Forg'd Manacles’ of Blake's Poetry.” *The “Mind-Forg'd Manacles” of Blake's Poetry*, uh.edu/engines/romanticism/blakeessay2.html. Accessed 16 March 2020.