



## Speed That Kills: The Role of Technology in Kate Chopin's THE STORY OF AN HOUR

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## **Speed That Kills: The Role of Technology in Kate Chopin’s THE STORY OF AN HOUR**

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Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” has been taught and analyzed almost exclusively from a feminist perspective. As Lawrence Berkove writes, “There has been . . . virtual critical agreement on what the story says: its heroine dies, ironically and tragically, just as she has been freed from a constricting marriage and has realized self-assertion as the deepest element of her being” (1). Louise Mallard’s sense of joy at her husband’s apparent death, and her own death at his return, have become an archetype of feminine self-realization and the patriarchy that is always there to extinguish it (e.g., Harlow 501). Indeed, the feminist images of the story are so powerful that I believe critics have overlooked another theme. “The Story of an Hour” can be read as a protomodernist text. As also seen with later modernist writers, technology and the societal changes caused by technology play important roles in Chopin’s story.

“The Story of an Hour” was first published in *Vogue* in 1894. More than a century later, now in the midst of our own technological revolution, it is difficult to grasp how fundamentally nineteenth-century technologies were altering the world in Chopin’s time. Before the railroad, traveling was extremely difficult and dangerous. In the 1850s, it took an average of 128 days to traverse the Oregon Trail (Unruh 403), with a mortality rate of 4% to 6% (Unruh 408). The transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869, allowed the same journey to be made, safely and much more comfortably, in less than a week (Cooper). Perhaps more importantly, during the 1890s trains started to become part of daily life. In 1889 the first interurban electric

rail lines were laid, and by 1894 hundreds of miles of track were being added every year (Hilton and Due 186–87).

Communications underwent an even more dramatic acceleration. The completion of the first successful transatlantic cable in 1866 meant news that had previously taken a week or more to travel between Europe and the Americas could now be sent nearly instantaneously. Like the railroad, while the initial invention had occurred years earlier, in the 1890s telegrams went from novel to quotidian. In 1870, Western Union relayed 9 million telegrams. By 1893, they were sending more than 66 million telegrams annually (United States Bureau of the Census 788).

Later writers would explore the effects of these and other technologies. In his 1909 “Futurist Manifesto,” Filippo Marinetti gushes, “Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.” Not all writers would be as optimistic as Marinetti. A few decades after “Hour” was published, World War I would provide striking evidence of the destructive power of new technologies, and writers like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot would lament the new world that man had created. In “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,” for example, Pound claims that the world experienced “Fortitude as never before / Frankness as never before, / Disillusions as never told in the old days” (81–83). Pound felt that technology led to a world “as never before” but that these changes led to a “botched civilization” instead of a technological utopia (89).

“The Story of an Hour” can be read as a precursor to these more technophobic works. The story begins with news of Mr. Mallard’s death in a railroad disaster—received by telegram. This may be a commentary on the literal danger of riding trains in the 1890s, but we can also see the railroad’s role in the story as a more subtle warning. While we don’t know for certain why Mr. Mallard would have been riding a train that day, Chopin describes him later as “a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella,” bringing to mind the image of a commuter returning home from a day at the office (Chopin). The railroads, and the urbanization and industrialization that they symbolized and enabled, were changing how and where people worked. In Chopin’s St. Louis, for example, the population had quintupled in her lifetime, as people moved away from their farms and into the cities (Gibson). Railroads meant that where people lived and where they worked could be far apart, giving rise to the commuter lifestyle (and the word *commuter*) (Paumgarten). Time that in previous generations had been spent with family was now spent apart, as family members sped away from one another. These changes certainly affected marital relationships and the

experience of womanhood. Women were spending more and more time by themselves, with time to pursue their own interests. Perhaps it is these hours alone each day that leave Louise wanting more autonomy, dreaming of “no one to live for during those coming years” (Chopin).

In fact, the story gives evidence that Louise’s emotions are affected by the physical absence of her husband. After recognizing the joy she feels upon learning of her husband’s supposed death, Louise reflects on her feelings: “She did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. . . . 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). Confronted with her husband’s body, she knows that she will feel differently. Her joyous reaction is to a distant, faceless death, unimpeded by the reality of an actual corpse—unattached to an actual person. The railroad provides this catalyst for Louise’s self-realization, because it “killed” Mr. Mallard both quickly and distantly. Indeed, the speed and remoteness of Mr. Mallard’s death seem to be primary causes of the speed and intensity of Louise’s emotions. Instead of taking care of an ailing husband and preparing for his death, death is thrust upon her, forcing her to confront her entire reaction to his passing all at once.

While Brently’s death and Louise’s joyful reaction are enabled by the railroad, the story would be equally impossible without the technology of the telegraph. At the beginning of the story, Mr. Mallard’s friend hears of a telegram listing Brently Mallard as deceased. He decides to break the news to Louise, after having “taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram” (Chopin). Before telegrams, information could not travel faster than people. Mr. Mallard would have arrived home, safe and sound, long before the news of his death could have reached his wife. “Slow” communications (i.e., everything before the telegraph) also had to be relayed person to person. Having people as part of the medium helped maintain the veracity and the context of messages. To send a telegram, on the other hand, words are converted into electrical impulses and then reinterpreted at their destination. They travel at the speed of light, without any substance, as disembodied information. “Hour” seems to be warning us that there are dangers in this separation of message from medium: the more information is isolated, the more meaning comes from the recipient’s interpretation. The telegram that Louise receives is an example of this danger. There may very well have been a Brently Mallard killed in the railroad disaster, so the disembodied information was true, but the substance of the information—that it was her husband who had been killed—was false. Even

a second telegram was not enough to verify the truth, because the needed truth was found in the context, not in the information, and telegrams can only relay information.

“Hour” is not only about the danger of communications moving too quickly but also a warning about the overall increase in the speed of life. These technologies that were speeding up how people moved and communicated naturally sped up their lives, including their emotional lives. As the title tells us, this is a story about time; the rate at which things happen is important. Louise Mallard goes from devastation to euphoria to shock, all within an hour. Arguably, her death is more a result of how quickly her emotions occur, rather than the emotions themselves. Living in a time with twenty-four-hour news and ever-scrolling Twitter feeds, we know something of the dangers of not having enough time to process what is happening. The time needed to experience and analyze emotions has been eliminated, and the body (and soul) cannot keep up with that kind of schedule. Louise is forced to confront the great questions of life—death and love and self-actualization—in the space of an afternoon. It is no wonder that there are repercussions.

“The Story of an Hour” has long been heralded as a wonderful feminist text, which it is. The issues of male hegemony and feminine independence are dealt with in an important and powerful way. Chopin helps us realize, however, that other subtle factors are at play. This is a cautionary tale about a world that is speeding up; it is a warning about lives that move too quickly. The tragedy of Louise Mallard’s death occurs not only because she is a woman but because she is a modern woman. This story would have unfolded very differently without the technologies of the railroad and telegraph; by exploring the effects of these technologies within a purposely feminine text, Chopin shows us that even such “timeless” issues as male and female relations can only be fully understood within the time and place in which they occur.

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