

Discipline and Normalization in Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour: A Foucauldian Analysis

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Abstract

This study analyzes the workings of patriarchal power in Kate Chopin's short story "The Story of an Hour" through the perspective of Michel Foucault's theory of discipline and normalization. The research aims to identify forms of patriarchal surveillance, examine the internalization of social norms, and explain the temporary disruption of power experienced by Louise Mallard. A qualitative descriptive method is employed, with the short story as the primary data source, while books, journal articles, and previous studies are used as secondary sources. Data are collected through close reading and note-taking techniques, and analyzed using Foucauldian concepts such as discipline, normalization, surveillance, and the submissive body. The findings suggest that marriage in the story functions as a disciplinary institution that shapes women into submissive subjects through psychological and ideological control, rather than physical violence. Louise Mallard is portrayed as a woman who has unconsciously internalized patriarchal expectations and accepted obedience as a social norm. Her brief experience of freedom after learning of her husband's death represents a symbolic resistance to patriarchal power. However, this resistance is ultimately shattered when social reality reasserts control over her autonomy. This study concludes that the story reveals how patriarchal power operates subtly through social norms and demonstrates the difficulty of breaking free from disciplinary structures in marriage and gender relations in the 19th century.

Keyword: Discipline, Normalization, Patriarchy, Marriage, Foucauldian Analysis

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Literature is often understood as a reflection of the social power structures and ideological controls embedded in a society. During the nineteenth century, women were expected to embody the role of obedient wife, fully devoted to domestic responsibilities. It was within this context that patriarchal culture established mechanisms designed to normalize female subservience while simultaneously restricting women's access to both public and private spaces. These societal expectations are clearly evident in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* (1894). The narrative features Louise Mallard, a married woman who experiences a profound sense of emotional freedom after hearing a false report of her husband's death. However, this newfound freedom lasts only an hour before social reality reasserts itself and ultimately destroys her sense of independence.

To analyze how power operates, Michel Foucault's theory of discipline provides a highly effective analytical framework. Foucault explains how power operates not only through overt repression but also through social institutions, surveillance, and subtle processes of normalization. According to (Alvarez & Nery, 2025), modern society controls individuals not only through punishment but also through the application of subtle disciplines that actively shape obedient subjects. These disciplinary mechanisms, he argues, become most effective when individuals internalize social rules to the point that they unconsciously regulate their own behavior. This kind of internalization is clearly demonstrated by the character of Louise Mallard. Although her initial reaction to the news of her husband's death is grief, a deeper and more personal sense

of liberation soon emerges. It is this subversive joy, rather than the expected grief, that reveals the true nature of her marital confinement.

It is important to acknowledge that the specific nature of the Mallard family's marital relationship is never explicitly explained by Chopin. This narrative silence has been interpreted by recent scholarship as a deliberate literary device. According to (Hò and Trần 2024), Chopin deliberately chooses to withhold explicit details regarding the protagonist's marriage, thus prompting the reader to question the underlying reasons behind Louise's momentary joy over her husband's presumed death. Consequently, the silence functions not as a meaningless absence but as a powerful tool to reveal the loss of female individuality within the patriarchal institution of marriage. Therefore, this analysis will examine how the dynamics of discipline and normalization are textually constructed in Chopin's story. By applying Foucault's concepts of surveillance, the internalization of norms, and the production of the docile body, it can be shown that Louise Mallard's brief transformation and subsequent death serve to illustrate the tragic impossibility of escaping patriarchal power.

Several authors have analyzed *The Story of an Hour* using a feminist perspective. Sheheryar (2024) argues that the story critiques patriarchal gender roles and highlights women's oppression within marriage. Regmi (2022) examines sexism and patriarchal language in the story and finds that women are socially conditioned to accept male authority. Khan et al. (2022) emphasize women's oppression and

the illusion of freedom experienced by Louise Mallard.

Previous research has addressed feminism, sexism, and female identity in the story. However, few studies have examined how patriarchal discipline shapes Louise Mallard into a normal and submissive woman through invisible social control. Therefore, this study addresses this by applying Foucault's concepts of discipline and normalization to examine the hidden mechanisms of power within marriage and gender expectations.

This study aims to:

- (1) Identify the forms of patriarchal surveillance and 19th-century social norms that construct Louise Mallard as a submissive subject within the institution of marriage.
- (2) Analyze how Foucault's mechanisms of discipline and normalization are internalized by the main character, thus shaping behavior and emotions that conform to the gender expectations of the time.
- (3) Explain the process of power discontinuity that occurs when Louise Mallard experiences momentary liberation, and how social reality ultimately reasserts control over her autonomy.

The novelty of this research lies in its application of Foucauldian disciplinary theory to reveal how marriage functions as a disciplinary institution that produces submissive female subjects. It also shows that power in the story operates psychologically, not physically.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. The primary data source is Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*. Secondary data was collected from journal articles, books, and previous studies related to Foucault, feminism, and literary criticism. The primary data source for this study is Kate Chopin's 1894 short story "The Story of an Hour." This short story was chosen because it represents the patriarchal values and social discipline experienced by women in 19th century marriages. The data consists of words, phrases, dialogue, narratives, and symbolic expressions related to discipline, normalization, gender roles, and power relations. Secondary data was obtained from books, journal articles, previous studies, and academic references discussing Michel Foucault's theories, feminism, patriarchy, and literary criticism. These sources were used to support interpretations and strengthen the research's theoretical framework.

Data was collected through reading and note-taking techniques. First, the researcher carefully read the short story repeatedly to understand the narrative structure, character development, and social context presented in the text. Quotes relating to patriarchal discipline, normalization, and power relations were then identified and classified based on Foucauldian concepts. Furthermore, supporting data from journals and books were reviewed to provide theoretical explanations and critical perspectives. After the data were collected, they were organized into categories such as social control, obedience, surveillance, and internal discipline. The categorized data were then analyzed descriptively to reveal

how patriarchal power operates in the story.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Discipline and Patriarchal Control

In “The Story of an Hour,” Louise Mallard is portrayed as a woman whose life is governed by patriarchy, which operates through a system of social discipline. According to Michel Foucault, the concept of discipline refers to how power shapes individuals to comply with existing norms without resorting to violence. Power operates through social rules, customs, and societal behaviors that are repeatedly enacted in daily life. In this short story, a married woman is expected to be obedient, emotional, and to prioritize her husband’s interests over her own. When Louise first receives the news of her husband’s death, we see how she fulfills the social role expected of her. She grieves and weeps as a mourning wife should. This is not merely an emotional expression but also a social construct that has shaped the feminine identity of women within marriage. The character of Brently Mallard is portrayed as a non-abusive husband, illustrating that the patriarchal system does not always manifest through physical violence. This is illustrated when Louise realizes that their marriage exists under a “strong will that bends her own.” This quote depicts how Louise’s desires are gradually suppressed by the patriarchal social system. Therefore, marriage in this story is understood as a system that regulates women’s bodies, minds, and freedom.

Normalization and Internalized Obedience

Discipline is not merely a means of punishing mistakes, but a tool of power designed to systematically regulate a person’s behavior, body, and mind. Discipline operates not through direct punishment, but by regulating space, time, bodily movements, and a system of surveillance that induces self-compliance Michel Foucault (1977). Louise accepts that a good woman is one who sacrifices herself for her husband and family. This norm is deeply ingrained and must be accepted by wives without question. Louise repeatedly utters “free, free, free.” This becomes a pivotal moment in the story due to her growing awareness of personal freedom. The freedom she feels emerges after the social system that has long controlled and shackled her life. However, this freedom is only temporary because patriarchal society does not allow women to live independently outside the institution of marriage. The return of Brentley Mallard at the end of the story illustrates the patriarchal power system that had previously crumbled in Louise’s mind. Furthermore, the doctors’ opinion that Louise died of “excitement-induced death” indicates that the patriarchal system operates through knowledge. Foucault argues that power and knowledge are closely intertwined Joranger (2024). The doctors are portrayed as representatives of the dominant social perspective, which is incapable of understanding women’s emotions.

Louise Mallard as a Docile Body

Power acts upon the human body. An obedient body is one that has been perfectly shaped to automatically conform to social norms Foucault (1978).

In this story, Louise Mallard illustrates how women's bodies are shaped by the patriarchal system through the institution of marriage and Victorian society's gender norms. The story also reveals the resistance that exists against disciplinary power. After her husband's death, Louise dreams of a future that is free and independent. For the first time, she sees the hope of a life liberated from the rules and desires of others. This awareness becomes the initial form of symbolic resistance against the patriarchal system that has long shackled her life. However, this resistance is only temporary. At the end of the story, Louise's death is portrayed as a symbol of the patriarchal society's inability to accept women's autonomy. Their freedom is viewed as a threat to social norms. Therefore, through her story, Chopin critiques a social system that restricts women and enforces obedience as the primary standard of femininity.

CONCLUSION

Michel Foucault's theory in the story "The Story of an Hour" illustrates how patriarchal power operates seamlessly through discipline, normalization, and rules of obedience. Marriage is portrayed as a domestic relationship and as a social system that controls women through psychological and ideological means. Louise Mallard is portrayed as a woman who has long lived under the social demands of patriarchy, causing her to lose her freedom. The awareness that emerges after her husband's death reveals a desire to break free from that oppressive system.

However, this freedom is short-lived because patriarchal society does not allow

women the space to live freely. Through this story, Kate Chopin illustrates that power is not always manifested in physical forms but through social norms that are considered normal and accepted by the entire society. Thus, Foucault's approach helps analyze how literature represents the hidden mechanisms of power in daily life, within gender dynamics, and within the institution of marriage.

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