

## **The values of society and the individual are explored in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Edith Wharton's "MRS. Manstey's View."**

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### **Abstract**

The present paper analyses the short stories of Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton's "The Story of an Hour" and "Mrs. Manstey's View". The aim of the paper is to analyze how female characters individual needs and desires often conflict with the demands of the society in which they live. It also reveals how society controls and delimits women to achieve their desires in the social world. Both stories feature female characters oppressed by patriarchal power in the form of marriage. Their understanding of gender relationships has undergone substantial changes as they struggle to free themselves from the constraints of marriage.

**Keywords:** freedom, patriarchal society, identity and marriage

Women writers have often expressed despair over their fates at the hands of society. Both Kate Chopin and Edith Wharton had the imprisoned feelings. Similar themes can be found in many of the stories by both the writers. Their female characters have experienced the oppression by the cruel rules of society. Kate Chopin is known for her remarkable and cheeky women characters. But her works were not even completely appreciated until her death. The division of roles according to patriarchy is very clear in these stories which illustrates the social ethics and accepted conventions of the nineteenth century.

Women have struggled very much to make connection with the outside world. There is an enormous conflict between life, death, and freedom among women where they discover that

their emotions matter. The works of Kate Chopin reflects late nineteenth and twentieth century women's struggle and the impediments that they have faced in their daily lives, simply because of their gender. They had exasperation and sadness that many times could not be talked loud. Equal education, employment opportunities and legal rights were denied to them. Many of her writings were a direct reflection of their everyday reality. However, she was able to give women a voice through her art, and help us understand better what it means to be a victim of gender inequality.

Kate Chopin is recognized as a significant writer in the feminist literature. In fact, "The Story of an Hour" focuses on the problem of the protagonist Mrs. Louise Mallard. Mallard is suppressed by the disconnection between society's expectation and her own desire. She not only dies from the shock that her husband has not died, but the path to happiness for her is gone. Her expectation to achieve her desire has not come true and it has left her suppressed and devalued. The importance of this story is shown through the oppression in which men strive to raise their own status and power that has been denied for women. Indeed, there will be "a constant repositioning between dominant and muted, hegemonic and oppositional, central and colonial, so that a woman may be described as no hegemonic or, with equal justice but less drama, as hegemonic if her race and class are dominant" (Duplessis, 1988, p. 482). Chopin has stressed that women should compete with the spiral of injustice to share social roles more equally. Louise, the protagonist is subservient and respects her husband despite his oppressive nature. She has gone through a loveless marriage and is overwhelmed by her husband's will. "The Story of an Hour" is based on Louise's freedom. When she hears the news about her husband's death, she feels a lot for her husband and also discovers her freedom. She thinks that there is no any place for her in the patriarchal society. Kate Chopin thus explains that a woman will strongly claim personal freedom, in which she tries to smash definitions of patriarchy in her mind. However, Louise tries to fight for the individual (herself) against the laws of society. Chopin offers that Mrs. Mallard's short freedom does not support her dream, because woman cannot think of freedom and other personal possession for herself as long as she is committed to the sanctity of marriage in the society.

Like Chopin, Edith Wharton has also portrayed female characters in the ways how they are being oppressed by the patriarchal society. She incessantly says that marriage is the medium by which men have the opportunity to oppress women. In fact, she has written about marriage and related issues more than any other topic. Her short stories deal with patriarchy through marriage from every angle and also focus on how a woman's individual values differ from the social values. R. W. B. Lewis, in his introduction to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, claims that she is perhaps the first American writer to consider marriage as such an important subject and to do so.

"Mrs. Manstey's View", Edith Wharton's first published short story in 1891, provides an early example of her interest in social and individual values and the tension between them. The protagonist Mrs. Manstey isolates herself from the world after the death of her husband. Mrs. Manstey supports herself by sitting near the window and watching the outside world. Mrs. Black is the another character in the story whose name represents the negative impact of society on individual freedom, a theme that, as Wolff noted, Wharton repeatedly explores in her stories. Mrs. Manstey's daughter lives in California, and her few friends in New York rarely visit. Yet despite her solitude, she remains optimistic and keeps herself occupied by observing the changing seasons of nature and the details of her neighbors' lives as she sits beside her window of her house. Sometimes she sits there knitting or reading, but her main activity is watching the outside world. This is her life. When Mrs. Manstey stumbles upon Mrs. Black's plan that she intends to build an addition to her boardinghouse that will block Mrs. Manstey's view, she begs Mrs. Black not to renew. Even she offers her a thousand dollars from her small savings. But Mrs. Black starts construction work the next morning. That night, Mrs. Manstey sneakily sets fire to Mrs. Black's house, but the fire brigade quickly brings it under control. Unfortunately, Mrs. Manstey contracts pneumonia in the cold of the night and begins to collapse. In her final moments, she is brought to the window, finds her view undisturbed, and dies peacefully. The construction resumes later that day. "Mrs. Manstey's View" provides Wharton's readers an example of the tension between individual and social values. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in her biography *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*, effectively argues, "this story, like many others, is Wharton's attempt to express her own feelings about finding her voice" (60).

In “Mrs. Manstey’s View”, the protagonist feels isolated and struggles to make her voice heard, but she is ignored. She is unable to participate in the outside world. The only real connection she has with life beyond her room is what she observes through the window at her home. Wolff relates Mrs. Manstey to Wharton’s own life: “It is not a difficult leap to move from this portrait of diminished existence to the life of the woman who had begun to write after so long a silence. Almost of necessity Wharton reveals her own situation, using this early story as a primitive representation of self (. . . in clever disguise)” (61). In this, Wolff contradicts R. W. B. Lewis who gives the piece short shrift, calling it “a nice little tale . . . with no obvious bearing on the life she was actually leading . . . an imaginative escape” (*Edith Wharton* 61). Though Lewis sees the story as merely a diversion from Wharton’s preferred way of life, in parallel, Wolff stretches between Mrs. Manstey’s struggle to keep her view and Wharton’s efforts to make her literary voice heard is compelling and relevant, even if the circumstances are different. Wharton herself notes that her life did not change after the story was published, that it “brought me no nearer to other workers in the same field. I continued to live my old life . . . I had as yet no real personality [as a writer] of my own, and was not to acquire one till my first volume of short stories was published—and that was not until 1899” (*A Backward Glance* 112).

Mrs. Manstey’s “view” actually has two meanings. One, of course, refers to the scene outside Mrs. Manstey’s window. In detail, Wharton refers the neighbors’ yards and the different types of trees, the houses and the people who come and go. What Mrs. Manstey sees becomes more real to her than some of the guests she has or the news they tell her about their own lives. In this sense, Mrs. Manstey’s “view” is what she sees when she looks out of her window. The other meaning of “view” in the title refers to the person’s values, convictions, judgments, and perspectives on what is going on outside. Mrs. Manstey dislikes most of the servants she observes but admires the cook who feeds the cats at night. The most important conviction, of course, concerns her need to stop Mrs. Black’s addition. Mrs. Manstey’s individual values have led to her death, but she does not know that she has failed in her desperate attempt to stop the construction. Both meanings of “view” contribute to the reader’s understanding of the story.

The tension between individual values and the freedom to pursue them as well as social values and expectations occur throughout Edith Wharton’s work. Wharton endured these strains

in her own life. The demands of her family, her husband, and the social world in which she lived often conflicted with her aspirations to be a writer and her need for solitude and privacy. Wharton has frequently struggled to find the right balance between participating in all the social activities she has expected and her need to fulfill her personal literary ambitions.

To conclude, Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" and Edith Wharton's "Mrs. Manstey's View" are a declaration of independence for women from the strong clutches of society and its laws. The two women writers have attempted to describe the emotionally repressive society with all its rigid customs often leading to tragic and unfulfilled lives. These two women writers, through their stories have condemned the wrong notion on women and also shown the right way for women to enjoy life to the core.

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