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作者/Author：王緒鼎(Xu-Ding Wang)

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論凱特·蕭邦在「一小時故事」中之語言迷宮

王緒鼎¹

摘要

本文經過仔細研讀凱特·蕭邦著名短篇小說「一小時的故事」，來解析故事中語言迷宮的重要關卡和暗語。許多讀者被故事內預料之外的轉折、變化及深具諷刺意味的結局，深感意外與不解。在閱讀故事時，讀者常陷入其語言迷宮中，但仔細的讀者會能夠發現其通關暗語及秘密通道，得其故事之精髓。通過運用不尋常的字彙，文法結構及傳統用法，蕭邦巧妙地在故事中，建構了語言迷宮並以精巧的象徵手法，解釋了路易絲、馬拉德的內心世界與外在世界的不可兼容性。此不可兼容性源於路易絲與家人和朋友之間的誤解。蕭邦的語言迷宮同時也建立在深層之反諷中。這中間的誤解，既促成了露易絲女士自我認同之旅，也導致了在父權統治的世界中，她注定無法實現女性自我之理想，追求女性自由解放之美夢。因此蕭邦暗示在嚴厲的父權傳統力的束縛下，沒有任何女性理想主義者，能立足於社會。所以露易絲女性的自我認同之精神，不可避免地是短命的。讀者最終也會恍然大悟，故事迷宮最後的暗語就是露易絲的死亡。這並非事出偶然，而是故事的必然結局，因為死亡也是精神之解脫。

關鍵詞：語言迷宮、字彙、文法結構、精神之旅、女性自我、自由、父權社會、壓迫

¹ 淡江大學英文系助理教授



Kate Chopin's Language Labyrinth in "The Story of an Hour"

Xuding Wang^{*}

Abstract

This essay closely examines Kate Chopin's famous short story "The Story of an Hour" by decoding the puzzles of the language labyrinth set in it. Many readers are greatly surprised by the unexpected changes and sudden turns of the story, and astonishingly puzzled by its ironic ending. Reading this masterly skillful story, one usually feels trapped in a puzzling labyrinth, but a careful reader may be able to find the passwords and secret passes to go through the labyrinth set in intriguing codes of language. By manipulating diction, grammatical structures and conventions, Chopin subtly builds up a language labyrinth that symbolically underscores the incompatibility between the internal world of Louise Mallard and the external world of the patriarchal society, and this incompatibility explicitly results from ironic misunderstandings between Louise Mallard and her family members and friends. Chopin's language labyrinth is also set in the deeper ironies such that the misunderstandings both bring about Louise's spiritual journey to feminine selfhood at first and doom her short-lived feminine self-assertion at last, thus the incompatibility between the internal world of Louise Mallard and the external world of society inevitably results in the impossibility of the fulfillment of Louise's spiritual journey to ideal feminine selfhood and freedom in the domineering patriarchal world. Thus Chopin indicates that under the iron-grip by the invisible forces of the patriarchal conventions, no female idealists will be able to survive; therefore, Louise's spiritual self-assertion is inevitably short-lived and finally doomed. Hence, it will finally dawn on the careful reader: the last beguiling code of the labyrinth is that the death of Louise at the end is not really an unexpected surprise but a tragic inevitability which also suggests a spiritual release.

Key Words: language labyrinth, diction, grammatical structures, spiritual journey, feminine selfhood, freedom, patriarchal society, suppression.

^{*} Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tamkang University.



Kate Chopin's famous short story, "The Story of an Hour," was first published as "The Dream of an Hour" in *Vogue*, December 6, 1894. The present title was obviously changed by the later editors of her works. In this story, Chopin presents us a picture of a complicated and complex development of Louise Mallard's spiritual awakening triggered by the false news of her husband's death in a tragic train accident. The story is so short that only four characters appear in less than two full pages, if not including the doctors mentioned only in the story's last line. Except the Mallard couple, Josephine, Louise Mallard's sister who represents the social institution of family, and Richards, the Mallards' family friend who stands for the established social relationship, are the only other two characters in the short but rather intriguingly complicated and masterly skillful story. Both Josephine and Richards come to break the news of Brent Mallard's "so-called" death in the tragic train accident. After hearing the "tragic" news, Louise Mallard who is "afflicted with a heart trouble" (536)¹ experiences violent emotional changes from sudden grief to an ecstasy of "drinking in a very elixir of life" (537). But surprisingly she dies when she sees her husband coming into the house alive at the end of the story, and the doctors claim that "she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills" (538). Since its publication, the story has won many critical acclaims and stirred up many insightful studies, but there has had not any systematic study focusing on the intriguing language labyrinth system skillfully set in the story by Kate Chopin, yet. Thus, this essay closely examines this famous short story by decoding the puzzles and passwords of the language labyrinth masterfully woven into the story by Kate Chopin.

In her essay, "Veiled Hints: An Affective Stylist's Reading of Kate Chopin's 'Story of an Hour,'" Madonne M. Miner approaches the story by analyzing Chopin's manipulation of grammatical structures and conventions. In her so-called "affective stylist's reading" of the story, Miner argues that the theme of feminine self-assertion is vague, ambiguous and dubious:

As we move through this short story, one element in our experience certainly points to self-assertion, encouraging us to hope for it in ourselves and Louise Mallard both. But the text also undermines, with its qualifications and negatives, all possibility for the fulfillment of hope. In contrast to the thematic movement toward self-assertion, affective stylistics reveals a more subtle movement, in the reader, toward doubt. Chopin stimulates a sense that something, a vague something, is askew. Upon close analysis, word-by-word and sentence-by-sentence, a reader finds that Chopin denies her reader information about those figures who instigate or are responsible for action in the story. Further, as she manipulates grammatical structures and conventions, Chopin thwarts the reader's expectations and confidence. (29)

¹ All the page number references of the story refer to the text of Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" in Paul Lauter et al ed., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) 536-8.



Miner is right to point out that Kate Chopin's manipulation of grammatical structures and conventions helps to build up suspense, ambiguity and uncertainty about Louise Mallard's self-assertion in the story, but she does not recognize that by manipulating grammatical structures and conventions, Chopin subtly builds up a language labyrinth system that underscores the incompatibility between the internal world of Louise Mallard and the external world of the patriarchal society. This incompatibility implied in her language labyrinth explicitly results from ironic misunderstandings between Louise Mallard and her family members and friends. Chopin's language labyrinth is also set in the deeper ironies such that the misunderstandings both bring about Louise's spiritual journey to feminine selfhood at first and doom her short-lived feminine self-assertion at last, thus the incompatibility between the internal world of Louise Mallard and the external world of male-dominated society necessarily results in the impossibility of Louise's spiritual journey to any ideal feminine selfhood and freedom in the domineering patriarchal environment.

By manipulating the diction, grammatical structures and conventions in the story, Chopin not only purposely withholds information from the reader to reinforce the suspense as Madonne M. Miner notes,² but also effectively enriches the story in symbolic terms. The ungrammatical structure of the very first sentence of the story effectively indicates that something is wrong from the very beginning. "Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death" (536). Miner argues that the ungrammatical structure of this sentence suggests that Chopin denies the reader information about the agent of "knowing":

The first word of the sentence, *knowing*, introduces a participial phrase. A reader expects, and grammatical usage requires, that a primary position participle modify the subject of our subsequent independent clause. Chopin violates our expectations. As we move through the participial phrase and into the independent clause, we expect to be told who knows that Mrs. Mallard suffers from a heart condition, but Chopin's passive construction – "great care was taken" – denies us this knowledge. The agent remains unidentified. This denial is the first and perhaps the most powerful instance of Chopin's manipulation of sentence structure in order to withhold information about an agent. (29-30)

Miner is not wrong. It is true that Chopin "withhold[s] information about an agent," but it is much more than that in Chopin's language labyrinth system. The first secret code of her language labyrinth is the present participle phrase, "Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble," which is a dangling modifier in the grammatical context of the sentence. The logic subject of the phrase should be an agent that can perform the action of "knowing," and the agent must be the subject of the main clause, but the subject of the main clause in this

² Madonne M. Miner, "Veiled Hints: An Affective Stylist's Reading of Kate Chopin's 'Story of an Hour,'" *The Markham Review* 11 (Winter 1982): 29-32.



sentence is "great care" which obviously can not perform the action of "knowing." Another secret code in the very first sentence is the infinitive phrase "to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death." This infinitive-object phrase is split by a misplaced modifier "to her as gently as possible." The normal grammatical sequence would lead us to expect that the object of the infinitive verb would follow that infinitive verb directly. The normal order of the infinitive phrase should be like this: to break the news of her husband's death to her as gently as possible. Quite certainly, by purposely using the interruptive modifiers, Chopin not only deliberately denies the reader of the information about the logic agent of the action of "knowing," as Miner suggests, but also effectively and vividly illustrates Josephine's painful deliberation of telling Louise about the news "in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing" (536). Meanwhile, as the agent of "knowing" is Josephine (as well as Richards) who actually misunderstands Louise's true mind later in the story, her "knowing" will be proven to be an ironic misconception. Further, with such manipulation of a dangling modifier and a misplaced modifier in the first sentence, Chopin not only creates an atmosphere of suspense in the story, but also importantly hints the veiled "dangling" status of the news of Brently Mallard's death. Thus, by building a language labyrinth with veiled codes from the very beginning, Chopin beguilingly foreshadows an inevitable tragic ending to the story with the mysterious uncertainty of the "tragic" news of Brently Mallard's so-called "death."

Another veiled code in the beginning of Chopin's language labyrinth is the passive voice used also in the very first sentence: "Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble" (536). Anyone can tell that the passive voice used here is rather awkward in describing Mrs. Mallard's heart trouble, but not anyone can recognize the veiled fact that, as a professional writer, Chopin uses the structure with the special purpose of inlaying symbolic meanings in her language labyrinth. As the passive voice emphasizes the passive status of the receiver of an action but often veils the active status of the action-giver in a contextual sense, Chopin's deliberate use of the passive voice seems to suggest that Louise's heart trouble is caused more by invisible external factors than inner ones, as if it has been "afflicted" upon her by latent conditions which Chopin deliberately refuses to reveal openly at the beginning of the story. But who or what "afflicts" Louise's heart trouble? Careful readers will find the answer by decoding the puzzles in Chopin's language labyrinth in the later development of the story, and these puzzles point to oppression and suppression by the invisible forces of social conventions.

Chopin's story implies that in the patriarchal society of the 19th century, any feminist ideas of selfhood could be easily labeled as mental problems or "heart trouble." Moreover, in her language labyrinth, Chopin's use of the indefinite article "a" to modify "heart trouble" is also an interesting and complex code. As Miner notes:

As a result, we may question yet another small deviation from common usage



within the first sentence: why does Chopin choose to modify Mrs. Mallard's heart trouble with the indefinite article *a*? The more usual construction would be simple, "Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with heart trouble." The indefinite article implies that Mrs. Mallard suffers from a particular kind of heart trouble, and yet, because we are not told which kind, our desire for more knowledge is frustrated at the same time that we learn that this information does exist. The prose style thus withholds information and undermines our confidence as readers, and so we enter Chopin's story with some hesitation, some trepidation. (30)

Indeed, Louise's heart trouble, modified by the indefinite article "a," means "a particular kind of heart trouble" "afflicted" upon her by a mysterious factor that "we are not told" directly. But in symbolic terms, the invisible factor is coded to conceal the influence of powerful patriarchal conventions. In other words, we must ask: is it "a particular kind of heart trouble" forced upon her by invisible suppressive forces of the conventional societal environment embodied in the institutions of marriage (her husband), family (her sister) and friends (Richards)? If the answer is "Yes," then from the very beginning of the story, Chopin starts building a language labyrinth system for the reader, but the reader needs to read the story very carefully before he/she can decode the symbolic meanings of her manipulation of language in coded language.

Here is another brilliant example of such intriguing codes in her language labyrinth:

Her husband's friend Richards was there, too, near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of "killed" (536).

The fact that this sentence is such a brilliant and ingenious example in Chopin's language labyrinth can be proven by unveiling the following intriguing codes. First, the main verb of the subordinate "when" clause is again in the passive voice; therefore, the agent who has sent the news is neither clear nor available. Thus, the sentence subtly implies that the news may not be authentic and trustworthy. Moreover, the prepositional phrase "with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of 'killed'" is again a telling modifier that modifies the subject phrase "intelligence of the railroad disaster" in the adverbial "when" clause. Obviously Chopin uses the misplaced modifier to indicate that Brently Mallard's name is actually mis-placed on "the list of 'killed.'" Further, the word "killed" is in quotation marks which often suggest the deliberated "so-called" meaning especially in an ironic sense, instead of the true meaning of the words quoted. Thus, Chopin's deliberate use of quotation marks clearly implies that the news that Brently Mallard was killed is in fact ironically questionable and untrustworthy rather than just lacking a "sense of agent," as Madonne E. Miner notes:

Three other aspects of this sentence also diminish or deny our sense of agent. First, through the passive verb in the adverbial clause "when intelligence of the railroad

disaster was received," Chopin refuses to provide any information about who sent the news. Second, she tells us that Brently Mallard's name leads the list of killed. Although it is not unusual to relay information of a man's death by stating that his "name" (only a part of the man) leads a list, this synecdoche distances the reader, if ever so slightly, from the death of the whole man. Finally, Chopin encloses killed in quotation marks; again, this may be idiomatic, but within the context of the first three sentences of this story, even idioms become suspect. (30)

But, Louise is completely misled by such untrustworthy news without any attempt to withhold it with caution, and so is the incautious reader. On the one hand, her gullibility proves her innocence, inexperience and simplicity, as she never suspects that the news may be false, or that it may mislead her into troubled waters and result in serious consequences. On the other hand, her attitude and reaction to the news also suggest deeper layers of meaning. The fact that she does not receive the tragic news "as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance" not only suggests that she is not a normal woman like others, but also foreshadows that she is an innocent and inexperienced woman with uniquely untraditional feminist idealistic ideas as shown in the later development of the story. As Angelyn Mitchell points out: "Most striking is Mrs. Mallard's initial and atypical response to the tragic news. Chopin foreshadows Mrs. Mallard's awakening in her resistance to traditional modes of behavior" (61).

Meanwhile it also indicates that the family members and friends judge her and expect her to react to the news according to long-established social and moral conventions. In other words, Chopin's puzzle in her language labyrinth system suggests that the patriarchal society expects "ladies" to react in such a situation according to accepted conventional and moral standards. This point can be proven even by the next veiled code that Chopin uses via different verb tenses in the following sentence, "She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance" (536). Telling Louise's story, here Chopin uses the past tense: "She did ...," but in the subordinate "as" clause, she uses the present perfect tense: "many women have heard the same." We know that the present perfect tense suggests having something to do with the present time, as Sandra Elbaum states: "We use the present perfect tense when the action of the sentence is during a period of time that began in the past and includes the present" (19). Also as Martin Hewings states, "The present perfect suggests a connection between something that happened in the past and the present time" (16). The traditional grammatical rule requires that the verb tense of the subordinate clause should correspond with the verb tense of the main clause. In other words, if the main clause uses the simple past tense, the subordinate clause should also use related past tenses unless a natural truth, or a social truth or a universal situation is stated. Thus, by using the past tense in the main clause and the present perfect tense in the subordinate "as" clause, Chopin adds another puzzle in her language maze to imply that in a



patriarchal society, there is a social reality in which all women are expected to behave according to the established universal codes of conduct, and almost all the women have done that as a “normal” and common practice because the patriarchal society would absolutely be sure to suppress any rebellious feminine self-assertion or desires for freedom. This is exactly what Angelyn Mitchell points out: “Patriarchy’s social conditioning creates codes of social behavior to ensure the suppression of feminine desires” (60).

Thus Chopin explicitly points out the firm control of women in a patriarchal society and subtly hints at the blind persistence of indoctrinating women into that patriarchal society not only by men but also by most of the women themselves in that unjust traditional system. This also indicates that with such iron-grip by the invisible force of the patriarchal conventions, no female idealists will be able to survive; therefore, Louise’s spiritual self-assertion is inevitably short-lived and finally doomed. Thus the death of Louise at the end is not really an unexpected surprise but a tragic inevitability which also suggests a spiritual release.

Another similar code in the story can further prove that Chopin indeed manipulates verb tenses in her language labyrinth to reveal the firmly established indoctrination of women in a conventional society dominated by males. Any careful readers can discover that throughout the entire story, Chopin uses related past tenses. The only two sentences in which she does not use past related tenses are the one discussed in the previous paragraph and the following one: “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.” In this sentence, the verb in the main clause “would be” is in the past future tense, but the verbs in both the subordinate “which” clause and the object clause of “believe” are in the simple present tenses. The symbolic effect of the mixed tenses in this sentence is exactly the same as that of the sentence discussed in the previous paragraph.

Thus, by using the past future tense in the main clause and the present tenses in both the subordinate “which” clause and the object clause, Chopin simply implies that it is a firmly established social reality that the powerful patriarchal public bends the female or male (for that matter) individual’s will in a “blind persistence.” One may argue that in the sentence, the “blind persistence” used to impose “a private will upon” another is not only exercised by men but also by women. In social and historical terms, the nineteenth century was still a patriarchal century, and women without a strong rebellious attitude were traditionally conformed to that patriarchal world. Thus, the suppression of Louise’s will is carried out by both men and women, and this is due to the patriarchal conventions, values, principles and philosophies, as Barbara C. Ewell indicates of the nineteenth century, “In the United States as in most nations and cultures, patriarchal custom explicitly defined women as self-less” (158).³ In such a social environment as indicated and suggested in the story, all women are expected to behave according to the established universal codes of conduct in society, as all

³ For a full development of this point, see also my essay, “Feminine Self-Assertion in ‘The Story of an Hour,’” *The Journal of Arts* 5 (2007): 115.

women have done as a "normal" and common practice in and by their "blind persistence," so Chopin's various intriguing codes of unnatural grammatical structures, unique verb tenses and conventions in the story suggest the social, traditional and moral pros and cons of living in a patriarchal society.

But Louise does not respond to the news like other women, as others have expected. "She wept at once, with a sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms" (536). This sentence subtly indicates that between the lines, vaguely veiled in Chopin's language codes, there exists something beyond her grief, something the others could not easily figure out. It is coded with three things about the state of Louise's mind. First, it implies that she believes in the news without any reservations and suspicion, and this again proves her innocence, inexperience, simplicity and lack of any worldly caution. Because of this, there is no indication at all to show that she wishes that the news could not be true, as all traditional women usually do. Second, it reveals that her grief is genuine, as "She wept at once, with a sudden, wild abandonment" upon hearing the news. But the word "abandonment" subtly suggests something beyond her grief in Chopin's intriguing labyrinth. According to *The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus*, part of the first definition of the word "abandon" is "to give up with the intent of never again claiming a right or interest in" while the fourth definition is "to give (oneself) over unrestrainedly." Thus third, while Louise gives herself over unrestrainedly to grief for her husband's "death," she is also unconsciously giving up conventional responsibilities or rather societal restrictions on a traditional wife. It further indicates that Louise finally unconsciously releases herself from the conventional confinement to a wife, a kind of tight control by the patriarchal society which has forcefully been imbuing her with conventional values for her entire life. In other words, she is in touch with her emotions, an important consideration of unrestricted freedom when she comes to face, in her room, a much deeper and wider expansion of consciousness. This can be further proven by the fifth definition of the word "abandon": "to cease from maintaining, practicing, or using; to cease intending or attempting to perform." Indeed, Louise will "cease from maintaining, practicing" and "cease intending or attempting to perform" the duties, responsibilities, obligations of a traditional wife forced onto her by the patriarchal society.

Of course, when she ceases to do all these, conventional people will surely believe that "Louise is sick, emotionally as well as physically" (Berkove 156), that "Louise is not thinking clearly" (157), that she is "an immature egoist," as Lawrence I. Berkove says. In her language labyrinth, Chopin suggests some kind of innocent and unworldly feminine idealism by Louise who is certainly not described as "an immature egoist and a victim of her own extreme self-assertion" (152), as Berkove insists. Chopin's Louise is indeed a victim, but not one of "her own extreme self-assertion," rather a victim of the blind persistence of the patriarchal society. As Emily Toth points out, "Louise's death is an occasion for deep irony directed at patriarchal blindness about women's thoughts" (24).

But Chopin's sympathy with Louise's attitude towards feminine-selfhood and freedom is



coded in her language labyrinth to imply a spiritual birth or rebirth before Louise's tragic death. When Louise goes upstairs into her own room, she begins to experience a spiritual rebirth which is veiled not only with all natural things fully loaded with potential new life, but also with a new-born baby image:

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. (537)

She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams. (537)

I have discussed elsewhere that "the delicious breath of rain" is exactly like the sweet rain described at the very beginning of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which gives "new spring life." More importantly, Chopin's use of the impersonal pronoun "itself" and "its" instead of the personal pronoun "herself" and "her" to describe the baby image of Louise strongly displays the picture of a new-born baby having dreams in the context of the story.⁴

But the most important secret code in Chopin's language labyrinth is perhaps the mysterious "something" with its subsequent indefinite pronoun "it" in paragraph nine and "this thing" in paragraph ten. The "something" is indeed mysterious and intriguing, as it can serve as the password to the right passages of the labyrinth and the key to the true exit from it. As an impersonal pronoun, "something" can stand for anything and can be endowed with any meaning in a broad sense of language. It is so important that several critics have commented on it with different interpretations. Madonne M. Miner recognizes the mysterious power of the "something," but she does not further explore the important meaning of it:

We begin with a vague construction ("there was") and then stumble over a vague "something." What is interesting about this "something" (and about the four subsequent indefinite pronouns that replace it) is its power: it comes, creeps, and reaches. (31)

Daniel P. Deneau calls the mysterious power of the "something" "the indefinite, the unidentified, which, as best we can judge, is some powerful force, something supernatural, something beyond the realm of mundane experience or the rule of logic" (210). Moreover, like Angelyn Mitchell who maintains that the "something" passage is "loaded with sexual imagery" (62), Deneau also claims:

This "something," this "it," which oddly arrives from the sky, exerts a powerful physical influence on Louise and leaves her with a totally new perspective on her self and her place in the scheme of things [...]. In addition, one of the problems

⁴ For a full development of this point, see also my essay, "Feminine Self-Assertion in 'The Story of an Hour'" in *The Journal of Arts* 5 (2007): 109-110.

presented by the passage is the fact that Louise meets the "something" with both fear and anticipation. Clearly what occurs is some type of sexual experience, one that at first seems, except for the anticipation, like a terrifying rape, but one that evolves into something sensually stimulating and relaxing, and, of course, spiritually illuminating. In short, a rape seems to have an ironic outcome. (210-1)

Among all the critics' interpretations of the "something," I find that Deneau's criticism is far-fetched, as there is no textual evidence to prove it in the story. Mary E. Papke's comment is more convincing: "The unnameable is, of course, her self-consciousness that is embraced once she names her experience as emancipation and not destitution" (63). But before "the something" becomes "her self-consciousness," it is really the deep suppressed subconscious longing for feminine self-emancipation and complete freedom. It derives from an idealistic inspiration triggered by the false news of Brently Mallard's tragic death in the train accident. Thus, the mysterious something is indeed the seed of idealistic inspiration giving a spiritual birth or rebirth to Louise.

Although Chopin does not present Louise as a woman who is both physically and emotionally sick, in her coded language labyrinth, she does recognize the social reality according to whose conventional standard Louise is easily considered an impractical, unrealistic and naively idealistic woman. The following description can convincingly reveal the coded point:

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long. (537)

Again, careful readers can discover that Chopin's coded language indicates that Louise's self-assertion for absolute freedom has no hope in her patriarchal society. The word "fancy" certainly suggests an innocent and unrestricted imagination rather than any worldly practical thought or pragmatic idea, while the word "riot" has the connotation of a wild, rash and extremely exciting state of mind. These two words not only suggest that Louise is too innocent, inexperienced and simple to be cautious, but also ironically indicate that such behavior will have to meet with severe condemnation and face serious consequences. No wonder Lawrence I. Berkove harshly criticizes her for such behavior:

And for someone afflicted with heart trouble, the anticipation that those future years will be a long procession is also presumptuous. Louise is not thinking clearly. Insofar as her anticipation reflects growing mental confusion and raises unrealistic hopes, it is perilous. (156-6)

But, clearly Berkove misses the coded symbolic meanings of Chopin's language and



sternly and grossly over exaggerates the negative aspects of Louise's behavior by claiming that "her anticipation reflects growing mental confusion," and "she is well on the way to losing control of her mind" (157). If we understand Chopin's coded language properly, we will discover that Chopin does not intend to present Louise's idealistic ideas as "unrealistic hopes," as they do not derive from unclear thinking, "confusion" and "delusion" or emotional sickness for that matter. There is simply no textual evidence in the story to show that "she is well on the way to losing control of her mind." Obviously if we regard Louise as a confused "monstrous" woman who suffers from "feverish delusion" (Berkove 157) and "is on the way to losing control of her mind," the significant artistic values of the story, especially the rich symbolic meanings will be all lost. The following symbolically coded sentence from the story can prove that Chopin rather implies that Louise is not a confused and emotionally sick woman as Berkove suggests: "A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial" (537). The phrase "clear and exalted perception" explicitly shows that Louise is not confused in recognizing the inspiration leading to feminine freedom, neither is she deluded for that matter; rather she is "clear" in understanding "something" important to her selfhood. According to *The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus*, the first two definitions of the word "exalt" are "to raise up (in position or dignity) and to raise highly; to give glory to," so the past participle adjective "exalted" further shows the elevated glorious status of her "perception" which has nothing to do with confusion and emotional sickness, but has everything to do with elevated spiritual reality and feminist idealism. Unfortunately Berkove has failed to see all these coded points, and he continues to misread Louise's behavior in the following passage:

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. (538)

With her symbolically coded language, Chopin offers more intriguing puzzles to readers in the quoted passage. If Louise's going up the stairs symbolizes her elevation to an idealistic spiritual world for self awakening, here her descending down the stairs to the ground floor indicates the ironic situation that while thinking about her bright and free future, she actually comes down to the physical reality of the conventional world consisted of marriage, family and friends. It is at the time of coming down the stairs that Louise once again has to face the reality of the societal environment represented by Brently Mallard, Josephine and Richards. It is exactly at this time of coming down the stairs, Louise sees her "dead" husband coming into the house alive. Textually, we find nothing in the quoted passage to suggest that Louise is an emotionally sick woman. But how can Berkove make such a claim?

Berkove focuses on two words in the above quoted passage in his critical analysis: "feverish" and "unwittingly":

"Feverish" is the key word that diagnoses Louise's pathological condition, and the phrase in which it occurs ironically suggests that the fever has already progressed to the point where it is fatally triumphant over her. The rest of the short sentence rapidly but elegantly elaborates on the situation. "Unwittingly," with its connotation of absence of reason, reinforces the idea that Louise's fever has triumphed, and her assumption of the posture of the "goddess" of Victory" is a double delusion: she is no goddess and she has achieved no victory (157).

Indeed, "feverish" may be "the key word" in Chopin's language labyrinth, but Berkove deliberately refuses to recognize the fact that the adjective "feverish" modifies the noun "triumph" rather than any words describing any part of Louise's physical body. So it is not really true that "'feverish' is the key word that diagnoses Louise's pathological condition." Everyone can tell that Louise is not running a physical fever, and anyone with some basic medical knowledge can also tell that heart trouble does not normally cause fevers as lung trouble does. Rather Chopin's symbolically coded word "feverish" can mean Louise's passion for freedom. That is to say, she is thrillingly inflamed with the spirit of emancipation, rather than anything of physical illness, so Berkove's argument is not really true but farfetched.

As for the word "unwittingly," it further confirms Chopin's hint in her language labyrinth that Louise is rather more innocent, inexperienced and simple than worldly practical, realistic and "wise" in conventional and patriarchal terms. Without both the prefix "un-" and the suffixes "-ing" and "-ly," the root of the word "unwittingly" is "wit" which has the connotation of intelligence and cleverness, and according to *The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus*, the adjective "unwitting" means "unaware, not knowing." Thus, the adverb "unwittingly" in Chopin's language labyrinth would mean "unawarely" or "unself-consciously." It again proves that Louise is innocent, simple and unworldly, as "she carried herself [...] like a goddess of Victory" without being consciously aware of it, without realizing her own proud manner when she opens the door and descends the stairs with her sister. So it suggests that Louise is not worldly "wise," worldly realistic in searching for an idealistic feminine selfhood and freedom in the eyes of the traditional patriarchal society which would naturally consider her an emotionally sick woman if it knew her thoughts. One might be reminded by the conventional social code of conduct that this has happened just shortly after the "news" of her husband's tragic death. But for the modern unbiased readers, Louise is certainly not an emotionally sick woman; rather she is a feminist idealist searching for selfhood and emancipation in the wrong era. Obviously the word "unwittingly" has nothing to do with any fever; therefore, Berkove's argument is simply groundless.

Moreover, the two words "feverish" and "unwittingly" in the quoted passage also indicate Chopin's acknowledgement that any feminist self-assertion for freedom, identity or emancipation must be considered something seriously wrong, as confusion, delusion,



emotional sickness or even monstrosity by the conventional and patriarchal society. Thus, any feminist self-assertion is bound to face severe criticism, stern condemnation, fierce denial and powerful refutation, and all these demonstrate the incompatibility between Louise's feminist idealism and social patriarchal conventions.

Such incompatibility is also ingeniously shown in Chopin's language labyrinth system with the words "open" and "closed." Outside Louise's "closed door," Josephine eagerly requests: "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door" (537). Josephine's attempt to get into Louise's closed room suggests deep ironic concern for Louise from the external world that is contrasted with Louise's internal world. Josephine's whole misunderstanding of Louise's state of mind obviously implies that the two worlds that are separated by the closed door are completely incommunicable; therefore, they are not compatible, nor can they exist together without any serious conflict. The point is further proven by the fact that Richards, another representative of the external conventional world, attempts to block Louise's view of Brently Mallard. Clearly his attempt further ironically suggests the incompatibility of the two worlds even though, in his case, it is due to a complete misunderstanding. Richards' entire misunderstanding of Louise is exactly like Josephine's, but if Richards knew exactly what happened to Louise's mind, he might never forgive her for such an outrageous behavior. When Richard fails to block Louise's view and when Brently and Louise confront each other face to face, it kills her. Louise's death is the final straw, as it clearly indicates that female longing for ideal freedom and self-assertion cannot survive in a patriarchal society for the time being.

At the end of the story, Louise's husband, Brently Mallard, comes into the house with only two things: "his grip-sack and umbrella" (538). If we try to discover the important secret code of the symbolic meanings of the first thing—"his grip-sack" in Chopin's language labyrinth, we should split the compound word "grip-sack" into "grip" and "sack," and then we will easily find that the word "grip" means "a tight hold, strong grasp, the power to grasp," while the word "sack" means either a large bag for holding grain, flour, potatoes, etc, or "a woman's loose-fitting straight dress," or "a woman's loose gown." As a verb, "sack" also means "to plunder and lay waste" according to *The New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus*. It seems that by using the compound word "grip-sack," Chopin symbolically suggests that Brent Mallard not only firmly grips Louise's life but also tightly controls her fate by plundering and laying waste her freedom and self-identity.⁵ This point can be further proven by the fact that Louise lives as Mrs. Mallard in life and dies also as Brently Mallard's wife, as she is called Mrs. Mallard in the very first sentence of the story and "his wife" (538)

⁵ For a full development of this point, see also my essay, "Feminine Self-Assertion in 'The Story of an Hour'" in *The Journal of Arts* 5 (2007): 117.



at the very end of the story. The only time she wins her own name back is the moment when she has achieved her "self-assertion which she [has] suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being" (537), and this is the only time she has successfully gained her self identity. The rest of the time Louise is referred to as "she" "thirty-three times" and "her" "forty times," as Madonne M. Miner points out:

She is referred to once as "Mrs. Mallard," twice as *Louise* (within three sentences), *thirty-three* times as *she*, and *forty* times (including objectival and genitive forms) as *her*. (31)

Of course, the subject personal pronoun "she" and the object personal pronoun "her" are general. Obviously Chopin's deliberate uses of the proper nouns, Mrs. Mallard at the very beginning, Louise in the middle but "his [Brently Mallard's] wife" at the end are an important part of her language labyrinth which also includes the general subject personal pronoun "she" and the object personal pronoun "her," both of which are general rather than specific, for they can be used for any woman and all females without emphasizing on individual self identity. But in sharp contrast, both the proper names of Brently Mallard and Richards appear both at the beginning and the end of the story. This fact once again suggests that the society in which the story is set is a conventional patriarchal one, which unyieldingly denies feminine self-identity and which will certainly strangle any challenging feminine self-assertion.

In Chopin's language labyrinth system, the two things that Brently Mallard is carrying with him when he comes into the house, his grip-sack and umbrella are indeed passwords to enter the symbolic maze. If anyone is doubtful about the symbolic meaning of "grip-sack," he/she needs only to examine the other thing: his umbrella to confirm the point. Traditionally an umbrella usually symbolizes some kind of protection, and in the context of "The Story of an Hour," it seems also to symbolize some kind of protection—the protection of marriage, the protection that Brently Mallard provides Louise as a husband to a wife, as a man to a woman in social and conventional terms. But this "so-called" social and conventional protection exactly proves that a woman exists only as a man's wife without her own selfhood and self-identity, just as Barbara C. Ewell puts it:

In the United States as in most nations and cultures, patriarchal custom explicitly defined women as self-less. They were named and described only in terms of their relationship to men—*daughter*, *wife*, *mother*, *sister*, *widow*—or more specifically, in terms of their sexual relationships to men: *virgin*, *whore*, *mistress*, *spinster*. Women were, as Simone de Beauvoir so eloquently explained, simply men's "other," defined as whatever men were not: not rational, not strong, not self. Women were not subjects but objects, of sexuality, of discourse, of art—of men. (158)

Thus, Brently Mallard's protection of Louise suggests the conventional relationship of a



husband to a wife, a man to a woman, and the patriarchal “self” to the female “other” in male-dominated society.

Moreover, if we recall the sentence “The delicious breath of rain was in the air” (536) in the passage about the scene outside of Louise’s window, we can surely recognize another layer of symbolic meaning in the umbrella in Chopin’s language labyrinth system. Literally an umbrella is used to prevent rain from falling on one’s body, but the “rain” in Chopin’s language labyrinth system is the “delicious” source of inspiration, enlightenment and potential new life, exactly as the spring rain in the very beginning of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* suggests. Thus, it becomes clear that the umbrella is really to ward off the source of an inspiration leading to a self-liberated free new life from Louise, the source of a potential enlightenment resulting in a spiritual awakening in Louise’s journey to true selfhood, the sacred integrity of her true spiritual being.

As mentioned earlier, one of the important characteristics of Chopin’s language labyrinth system is marked with the word “open” which appears nine times in different forms in the story. It is a dangerous and tricky word like any glamorous but beguiling and deceiving password that leads to a dead end of any labyrinth. It is dangerous because “the open window” lures Louise into an apparently fascinating world of feminine self-assertion and ideal freedom, which is an actual death trap in patriarchal society. It is tricky because it enchants Louise into a feminist idealistic reverie, which is completely shattered when she is abruptly confronted by the cold and hard reality of her husband’s return. We know that it is through the “open window” that the mysterious “something” is “creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her,” and we also know that later “she [is] drinking in a very elixir of life through that *open* window [emphasis mine]” (537). But Louise is safe only in her own room with the door “closed,” where she has privately “opened and spread her arms out to” welcome “a long possession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely” (537). When she opens the door of her private room which is the symbol of her psyche or consciousness, the potential danger is approaching. Obviously if the “open window” is the passage to her “brief moment of illumination” (538) in which she envisions her selfhood and ideal freedom, the “closed door” defines and protects the secret internal world of her mind, which others can neither enter nor comprehend. But when she opens “the closed door” and comes out, she has to confront the harsh reality of such societal institutions as marriage, family and other conventional relationships dominated by “patriarchs” including her husband who has and controls the “latchkey” to “the front door” leading to the external world. As the internal world of Louise Mallard and the external world of the patriarchal society are incompatible, as the powerful patriarchal society will not allow the physically weak Louise to have any feminist idealistic selfhood and freedom, Louise’s death is the final and only solution to her feminist dream. “Fate, however intercedes. [...] Mrs. Mallard dies of the fated heart condition” (Mitchell 60). Of course, Louise’s “fated heart condition” results from “patriarchal social



conditioning" (60). As Angelyn Mitchell puts it:

In the story's bitterly ironic ending, the reader infers that the complications involved in unifying the feminine double consciousness—a consciousness of societal expectations warring with a consciousness of private desires— are insurmountable. (63-4)

Thus Louise's spiritual journey to a viable feminine selfhood is finally unavoidably doomed, as the incompatibility between the "private desires" of the internal world of Louise Mallard and the "societal expectations" of the external world of the "patriarchs" inevitably results in the impossibility of the fulfillment of Louise's idealistic feminine dream in a domineeringly patriarchal environment. One should remember that the "latchkey" of the labyrinth of the patriarchal society is owned and firmly gripped by the "patriarchs" as represented by Brently Mallard; therefore, there is absolutely no way that Louse can get out of the tight control of such a patriarchal world to enjoy her feminine freedom. The fate of Louise's death is surely symbolically inevitable by the end of the story. Yet, Louise's selfhood, though doomed, has been given spiritual birth by the sympathetic author, Kate Chopin, and it is, therefore, an event that should hardly be regretted.

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