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Assessing Lawrence Berkove’s Counter-Argument in “Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin’s ‘The Story of an Hour”

Kate Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” presents readers with a window into the fictional character Louise Mallard’s response to news of her husband’s death in a train accident. The short story reveals early on that Louise suffers from a heart condition and signals that her sister and her husband’s friend Richards want her to hear the news from tender friends who care deeply for her. After initially breaking down in her sister’s arms, Louise leaves Richards and Josephine to retire to her room alone where she, according to the narrator, fights against the growing sense of freedom that cuts against her grief over the loss of her husband, eventually embracing that freedom and looking forward to more agency over her own life. As it turns out, her husband Brently Mallard comes home later a “little travel-stained,” and completely unaware of the railroad accident. Upon seeing her husband, Louise Mallard dies, which the doctors attribute to “heart disease—[and] the joy that kills” (Chopin). In “Fatal Self-Assertion in Kate Chopin’s ‘The Story of an Hour,” Lawrence Berkove acknowledges “virtual critical agreement on what the story says: its heroine dies, ironically and tragically, just as she had been freed from a constricting marriage” and embraces self-assertion. He then counters the popular opinion to argue that Louise is instead “an immature egotist and a victim of her own extreme self-assertion” (Berkove 152). He defends his position by marking distinctions between the “narrator, author, and unreliable protagonist” (152), insisting that the audience’s perception of Louise’s life stems from “the statements of the story’s omniscient narrator” and are “misleading and contradicted by other textual evidence” (153). I find Berkove’s argument loosely constructed at best, and find his thesis flimsy and unreliable, not only because he assumes that other scholars simply “project [Louise’s attitudes] onto Chopin” (153), which seems tangential to his thesis, but also because he claims that near unanimous critical scholarship relies on readers’ assumptions about Louise and her marriage while he himself resorts to assumptions about Brently in order to substantiate his own opposing position.

Berkove’s argument grounds itself by asserting that other scholars cite unsubstantiated evidence about the state of Louise’s marriage and her powerless position in that marriage in order to validate her desire for freedom from oppression. However, he uses unproveable evidence himself to paint her as selfish, as well as to mark her husband as one wholly invested in his marriage, and deeply and consistently loving toward his wife. In fact, he quotes the narrator and not Louise when he references Brently’s “kind, tender hands” and his face “that had never looked save with love upon her” in order to defend her husband’s value as a loving and trustworthy life mate. Berkove even states, “It is obvious that there is quite a discrepancy between the way Louise and Brently Mallard feel about each other, but all the mystery of the difference is on Louise’s side” (154). Since the only insight readers have into Louise’s and Brently’s inner worlds comes directly from the narrator who claims both that “Louise [strives] to beat [the unexpected sense of freedom] back with her will” and 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,” readers can conjecture that the omniscient narrator Berkove references knows more about both characters than the story directly reveals. What we do have first hand are Louise’s mutterings: “free, free, free!” and “Free! Body and soul free” (Chopin), which Berkove reachingly uses to accuse Louise of “[discounting] love as secondary to self-assertion” and even changes the narrator’s revelation that “she would live for herself” to “she would live *only* for herself (emphasis added)” as evidence to suggest she is so selfish that her self-assertion “does not leave room for anyone else” (154). Before concluding his assessment, Berkove provides a moral primer on marriage and how it naturally “restricts freedom” and even infers from the story that “Brently loves her ‘tenderly,’” making his own assumption that “[Louise’s] attitude about imposition reveals that she is only irritated by a display of affection and equates it with a loss of freedom” (155). In other words, Berkove makes assertions without textual evidence to support his argument that Louise not only has a loving, attentive husband, but that she devalues love and is ready to shun relationships in general.

While Berkove calls attention to the nearly one-sided scholarship about Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour,” he fails to make a plausible counterargument because he bases his negations and claims about Louise as an unreasonably self-assertive egotist on evidence grounded not in the text but in his own assumptions. When considering this flaw in his argument in juxtaposition with his discourse on marriage that ignores the historical context of the story’s setting, Berkove sets himself up for criticism. Although he makes an effort I can get behind—identifying an unpopular reading of an important American text—he misses the mark through his disorganized and assumptive approach to his argument.