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The View of Marriage in Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* and Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*: A  
Comparison  
Introduction

The theme of marital issues has dominated American literature by women especially in the latter parts of the 19th and the 20th centuries. Female writers of this era were concerned about the position of a woman in marriage (Ammons 24). Men were the principal decision makers, while women occupied a subordinate position. This essay will compare and contrast the view of marriage in *Trifles* and the *Story of an Hour*, both written during the same period of time.

Oppressive and repressive nature of marriage

In *Trifles* and the *Story of an Hour*, marriage is viewed as limiting the freedom of women. In *The Story of an Hour*, Louise sees marriage as restricting her independence, and she can only imagine it. Despite the grief that comes from learning that her husband is dead, she is comforted by the fact that she will now determine her own destiny. Chopin portrays marriage as an oppressive union. From the story, we learn that Brently has never mistreated his wife; she even acknowledges that he was a kind and loving man, but she is nonetheless happy about the freedom that she will be able to enjoy in the absence of her husband (Chopin 13). Chopin uses

Louise to express the feeling that a woman experiences when freed from the clutches of marriage.

In *Trifles*, we learn that Minnie was able to sing before she was married to John Wright, but after getting married she was not able to continue singing because her husband could not allow her to do any pleasurable thing. Mrs. Hare and Mrs. Peters regret that they could have visited Minnie more often. This can be taken to mean that Mr. Wright restricted visitors who were interested in seeing Minnie.

Symbolism is widely used in *Trifles* and the *Story of an Hour* to symbolize the repressive nature of marriage. In *Trifles*, a married woman is symbolized by a caged bird. This represents the roles of women in society; they are under the control of men. The dilemma of Minnie is symbolized by Martha as spiritual death, which is symbolized by the strangling of the caged bird. Minnie is represented in the kitchen sewing her things. The weather is freezing, and this symbolizes the state of her home environment, which breaks her spirit (Glaspell 32-33). The coldness can also symbolize the failure of the characters at home to empathize towards each other. In general, the coldness is a symbol of the relationship that existed in the marriage between Minnie and Wright. The bare kitchen represents the emptiness of the lives of previous inhabitants. The marriage between the two was empty, and this shows the view of marriage by female writers in the 20th century as failing to nurture the lives of the female partners as it was only focused on the interests of men (Stein 105).

In the *Story of an Hour*, the heart troubles that afflict Louise symbolize her ambivalence towards her marriage and the inherent lack of freedom in it. Her heart problem is the first thing that the author tells us about her, and this exposes her to risk if she learns of the sad news of her

husband's death, but on learning the news, she experiences feelings of happiness because from then on she will be free from the repressive nature of marriage. The appearance of Brently was more than enough to kill her rather than the news of his death. Louise was oppressed in her marriage, and was not willing to give up on her new found freedom.

The open window symbolizes the freedom that Louise was going to experience after the death of her husband. As she gazes outside, her life is rejuvenated as if the open window is infusing new life. It represents a new future that is devoid of marital demands. When she turns from the window, she forfeits her freedom. The use of the window to symbolize freedom is clear evidence that Chopin had the intention of portraying marriage as suffocating and restrictive (Hicks 70).

While the men in *Trifles* concern themselves in searching evidence to solve the murder of Mr. Wright, the women focus on clues that show the bleakness of Minnie's emotional life. They speculate that it must have been challenging living with a man such as Wright who was cold and oppressive. In her comment regarding the childlessness of Minnie, Mrs. Hale says "not having children makes less work – but makes a quite house" (Glaspell 45-46). The women may seem to use this simple conversation as a way of passing idle time, but to the audience it highlights the psychological profile of a desperate housewife. Glaspell intended to portray marriage as an institution that renders women desperate.

One clear contrast in the play and the story is how men are portrayed. In the *Story of an Hour*, men are not negatively portrayed; in fact Louise admits that her late husband was a caring and a loving man. She further says that she may have even oppressed him as much as he oppressed him in the marriage (Chopin 19). Glaspell deviates from this by portraying men as

mean and self-centered. As the men search for evidence, the sheriff comments that “nothing here but kitchen things”. This brash attitude by men towards the significance of women makes them miss the important evidence, which the two women discover. In the play, the men despise the domestic environment, and at some point they even kick some domestic stuff. In the *Story of an Hour*, Louise does not specify how her husband mistreats her, but in *Trifles*, it is clear that Wright was oppressive and cold to the point that Mrs. Hale could not visit Minnie due to the cold atmosphere of her home.

### Conclusion

In both *Trifles* and the *Story of an Hour*, the authors’ use symbolism to criticize the oppressive nature of marriage. They see it as a limiting institution that supports that patriarchal nature of the society at the expense of women’s freedom. Women characters in both literary works are housewives, showing the position that society relegated women during to during that era. In summary, both authors fail to mention anything positive about marriage; meaning that they view it has an unnecessary institution.

## Work cited

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