



Marriage Bondage and Natural Breathing: An Analysis of *The Story of An Hour* from an Ecofeminism Perspective

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Abstract: *The Story of an Hour* is a highly representative short story by Kate Chopin. Interpreted from the perspective of ecofeminism, the work profoundly reveals the constraints of the patriarchal marriage system on women and the inherent connection between nature and the freedom of female life. Under patriarchy, marriage confines Louise in all aspects of behavior, space and spirit, depriving her of her independent subjectivity and making her feel trapped in a cage, with her body and mind being suppressed for a long time and unable to breathe freely. However, the natural imagery outside the window becomes a force of awakening. Louise steps out of the confined room towards nature through the window, from suffocation to breathing, achieving the awakening of her ecological body and the return of her self-awareness. However, the marriage bondage and the natural breathing are incompatible. The sudden return of her husband makes Louise unable to face the reality of being back in the cage, and the irreconcilability of breathing and bondage ultimately leads to her tragic death.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; *The Story of An Hour*; nature; marriage; patriarchy

Introduction

Kate Chopin (1851-1904) is a prominent American writer in the late 19th century and a pioneer of feminist literary creation. Her works consistently focus on women's inner world, emotional demands, self-awakening and self-liberation, profoundly revealing the survival dilemmas, emotional repression and identity loss of women living under the long-term constraints of patriarchal society, which makes her occupy an important position in the history of American feminist literature.

The Story of an Hour, published in 1894 is one of her most representative and widely studied short stories. Within a one-hour time frame, it depicts the heroine Louise Mallard, who first grieves at her husband's reported "death", then awakens to long-suppressed freedom through contact with nature, only to die suddenly when her husband returns alive. With tight plotting, subtle psychology, and strong symbolic imagery, the story has become a classic text on female consciousness, marital oppression, and individual freedom. Existing research on *The Story of an Hour* mainly focuses on the traditional feminist perspective, Gao (2023) and Zheng (2023) explored the awakening of female consciousness, the constraints of patriarchal marriage, the limitations of the times and the narrative art of the work. Shen (2004) expanded beyond single feminist readings to examine the conflict between marital confinement and individual freedom. Peng (2004), by analyzing the discursive features of the characters, their interrelationships, and the dramatic scene descriptions in *The Story of an Hour*, reveals the tragic theme of the heroine's loss of discursive space, mental space, and ultimately, her entire living space. However, few studies have fully explored its deeper implications from an ecofeminist perspective, especially the fundamental tension between the patriarchal institution of marriage and the life force of nature.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s as an interdisciplinary theory integrating feminism and ecological philosophy. The term was first coined by French scholar Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort*, who clearly pointed out the deep connection between women's liberation and ecological liberation. In China, Ecofeminism, as defined by Wei and Li (2019), is an intersectional critical framework that reveals the shared oppression of women and nature under patriarchal dualism. Women and nature are not inherently connected by essence, but are jointly constructed as the dominated "Other" in a hierarchical system that prioritizes male, reason, and culture over female, emotion, and nature (Wei & Li, 2019). Guided by Plumwood's critique of patriarchal hierarchical dualism, this study interprets the indoor domestic space as the material and ideological manifestation of patriarchal control: a closed, disciplined realm constructed by patriarchal power and cultural norms, which confines Louise's identity, body, and will within the logic of domination. In contrast, the outdoor natural world—including spring, rain, breeze, and sky—is interpreted as the sphere of repressed life force that patriarchal culture excludes and devalues. By analyzing Louise's physical experience from suffocation to free breathing, this paper reveals how her gradual awakening represents a refusal to be defined as the inferior "Other" and a reclamation of her autonomous ecological self. In this way, Plumwood's theory helps this thesis clarify the structural connection between marital oppression and the suppression of nature, distinguish symbolic textual association from biological essentialism, and highlight the unique contribution of ecofeminist interpretation beyond traditional feminist readings. Therefore, this framework ensures that the argument remains text-based, conceptually clear, and deeply rooted



in Plumwood's critique of patriarchy and patriarchal dualistic domination.

Traditional feminist criticism adequately explains why Louise resists marital control, yet it cannot fully interpret why her awakening must happen through nature, open windows, rain, spring breeze, and breathing. These natural elements are not mere literary settings but essential to her spiritual and physical liberation. Ecofeminism clarifies this point: women and nature are jointly constructed as the "Other" within patriarchy (d'Eaubonne, 1974; Plumwood, 1991). Therefore, Louise's escape from domestic confinement cannot be completed without aligning with nature. Her "free breathing" symbolizes the reunion of the female body and natural vitality, which represents a breakthrough beyond individual gender resistance to a broader critique of patriarchy's dual oppression.

I. Marriage Bondage—The Cage of Social Systems

In *The Story of an Hour*, marriage operates as a comprehensive patriarchal cage that physically, spatially, and psychologically imprisons Louise Mallard, rather than providing emotional shelter. Ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature share the same ideological origin: patriarchal dualism, which establishes a hierarchical order that prioritizes men, reason, and culture, while treating women and nature as passive, inferior, and subordinate "others" (d'Eaubonne, 1974; Plumwood, 1991). This structural oppression unfolds layer by layer in the text, fully demonstrating how the patriarchal marriage system deprives women of their freedom and natural vitality. At the behavioral level, Louise's initial response to her husband's reported death reveals her long-term internalization of patriarchal marital norms. Upon hearing the news of Brently Mallard's death, she bursts into tears "with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms." This grief is authentic, yet it also conforms to the social expectation that a loyal wife must express public sorrow for her husband's passing (Shen, 2004). As a woman disciplined by the patriarchal marriage system, Louise has long been trained to perform the role of a devoted spouse. However, when "the storm of grief had spent itself," she chooses to retreat to her room alone and refuses anyone's company. This deliberate isolation is not merely an emotional escape, but a silent resistance against the performative identity imposed by marriage. By rejecting external interference, she begins to break free from the emotional constraints of wifely duty and prepares to confront her true self beneath the social role.

Spatially, the domestic interior functions as a tangible symbol of marital bondage. The home represents the closed, artificial sphere of patriarchal culture, which is sharply divided from the open, vibrant natural world outside. Louise is confined indoors, cut off from the dynamic energy of nature, with only a small window serving as her faint connection to freedom. This spatial separation is a concrete manifestation of the dualism between culture and nature constructed by patriarchy (Warren, 2000). The static, stuffy room not only restricts her physical movement but also alienates her from the essential life force that sustains all living beings. Just as patriarchy dominates and conquers nature, it uses domestic space to imprison women, depriving them of the right to pursue independent life and self-development.

At the psychological and ideological level, marriage completely erases Louise's independent subjectivity. Set in the mid-nineteenth-century American South, the story is deeply rooted in the specific social and legal milieu of Louisiana, where local marital regulations were largely influenced by the Napoleonic Code and firmly entrenched patriarchal norms. Restricted to white middle-class married women in this region at that time, the prevailing coverture doctrine deprived them of independent legal subjectivity. Under such rules, their personal will, private property and legal personality were legally incorporated into those of their spouses (Salmon, 1908; Welter, 1966). In this sense, Louise Mallard's social identity as "Mrs. Mallard" vividly manifests how mainstream marital laws in this specific historical setting systematically eliminated individual female selfhood. Throughout the text, Louise is only referred to as "Mrs. Mallard," her own identity completely subsumed by her husband's status. Even her husband's well-meaning kindness carries invisible domination: "his will bent with an unconscious persistence upon imposing its rule upon her." Furthermore, Louise's "heart trouble" and "slight congestion" are not merely physical ailments but symbolic symptoms of spiritual suffocation under long-term oppression. Patriarchal discourse labels the female body as weak and in need of control, just as it frames nature as chaotic and requiring conquest (Merchant, 1980). In this oppressive marital environment, Louise's natural vitality is gradually smothered; she cannot breathe freely or live for herself, reduced to a tool for fulfilling marital obligations.

In summary, marriage in the novel is a three-dimensional patriarchal cage that binds women's bodies, restricts their living space, and erodes their spiritual freedom. Louise's shift from outward grief to inner suffocation exposes the multi-dimensional harm of marital bondage, laying a solid foundation for her subsequent awakening through connection with nature. This part of the narrative fully confirms the ecofeminist view that patriarchal institutions are the root cause of the dual oppression of women and nature.

II. Natural Breathing—The Awakening of the Ecological Body

When Louise is alone facing the open window in her room, a completely new world—an "alliance with nature" in the ecofeminist sense—unfolds before her. The process of awakening is one of deep fusion between natural imagery and female bodily experience. As Wei and Li (2019) indicate, the alliance between women and nature is not essential but structural. Louise's awakening through breathing, spring, rain, and open window illustrates how the female body reconnects with the suppressed life force of nature, forming a quiet resistance against patriarchal dualism. Both are the "other" that is dominated and alienated under patriarchy, both possess vigorous natural vitality, and both yearn to break free from the oppression of patriarchy and return to their true state of existence (Plumwood 1991). In *"The Story of an Hour,"* nature becomes an important force for Louise to break free from the shackles of marriage and awaken her self-awareness.

The natural world outside the window contrasts sharply with the confined space inside, symbolizing the opposition

between freedom and restraint, vitality and discipline. When Louise faces the open window alone, she establishes a deep spiritual connection with nature. The vitality of nature continuously nourishes her body and mind, transforming her from a “social body” disciplined by marriage to an “ecological body” that regains freedom. This transformation process is not only the awakening of Louise’s self-awareness but also a process of mutual resonance and joint resistance against the oppression of patriarchy between her and nature.

2.1 From Room to Nature

The window is the pivotal spatial image that connects two opposing worlds constructed by the patriarchal conceptual framework. Indoors lies the confined, artificial sphere of marriage, discipline, and control; outdoors lies the dynamic, living sphere of nature, freedom, and vitality. Through the window, Louise gazes at “the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life”, “the delicious breath of rain”, “distant songs”, and “patches of blue sky” (Chopin, 1894). These are not merely decorative settings but carry layered textual meanings. From the perspective of close reading, the adverb “aquiver” is particularly significant. It depicts a trembling, restless, uncontrollable vitality—one that cannot be disciplined or confined. This vivid dynamism forms a sharp contrast with Louise’s suppressed, static, and fragile bodily condition described at the beginning of the story. The spring breeze, rain, and open sky outside the window all represent forces that escape patriarchal domination, echoing Warren’s argument that nature and women are jointly constructed as the dominated “Other” within the oppressive conceptual framework (Warren, 2000).

When Louise whispers continuously, “Free, free, free”, her words are not an abrupt outburst of emotion but a gradual awakening carefully shaped and nourished by the natural imagery outside the window. The short, repetitive, rhythmic three-word phrase mirrors her steady, deepening breath and the step-by-step emergence of her self-awareness. Syntactically, these concise, repeated utterances break away from the long, constrained sentences that dominate the early part of the story, reflecting her shift from mental suffocation to spiritual liberation.

Equally important is Chopin’s use of third-person limited narrative perspective, which quietly enters Louise’s inner world without intrusive authorial commentary. This restrained narrative voice allows readers to witness her private transformation subtly and authentically, rather than being told directly what to think. The narrative distance creates a sharp contrast between the public expectation of a grieving widow and Louise’s hidden, quiet rebellion. In this way, the narrative restraint strengthens the credibility of her awakening and underscores the subtle yet powerful resistance against the patriarchal system that defines her as only a wife, not an autonomous self.

In this moment, Louise’s gaze crosses the boundary of the window, and her spirit merges with the natural world. She moves beyond the domestic cage imposed by marriage and enters a free ecological space. This transition is not only psychological but also textual: the story’s tone, imagery, and sentence rhythm all shift from depression and constraint to openness and vitality, visually presenting the collapse of the patriarchal dualistic framework.

2.2 From Suffocation to Breathing

“Breathing” serves as the central metaphor running through Louise’s awakening process, symbolizing the recovery of female natural vitality. In the oppressive marital environment, Louise suffers from “a slight congestion,” a physical symptom that embodies the suffocation of her life force under long-term patriarchal control. From Val Plumwood’s ecofeminist perspective, patriarchy constructs rigid hierarchical dualistic oppositions such as culture/nature, reason/emotion and subject/other (Plumwood, 1991). Within this rigid ideological framework, women are categorized into the subordinate emotional and bodily realm, just as nature is reduced to a dominated auxiliary existence. Louise’s heart trouble and constrained breathing are not merely personal physical discomforts, but the tangible bodily embodiment of patriarchal logic of domination. Patriarchal society suppresses female individual will and autonomous consciousness, and meanwhile depreciates and restrains all natural vital forces outside human cultural order—forming a unified oppressive mechanism that disciplines both women and nature through the same dualistic logic. It should be emphasized, however, that this does not mean the story explicitly depicts the “dual oppression of women and nature” as a core plot theme, nor does it imply that nature is directly exploited in the text.

When she faces the open window, however, she “drinks in a very elixir of life through that open window” (Chopin, 1894). The verb “drinks in” is crucial: it suggests an active, whole-body absorption of life, rather than passive breathing. The air she takes in is no longer the stale, oppressive air of the domestic room bounded by patriarchal cultural norms, but fresh, natural air carrying the scent of rain and spring that belongs to the marginalized natural domain devalued by dualistic thought. This shift marks a bodily rebellion: she breaks away from the passive subordinate identity defined by patriarchal hierarchy, and formally reclaims ownership of her own body and her own breath, stepping out of the otherized predicament imposed by male-dominated social order.

In the process of integrating with nature, Louise’s ecological body is fully awakened. She begins to anticipate a future governed by her own will, cherishing the long-lost right to live for herself. Textually, the narrative rhythm changes accordingly. Sentences become longer, more fluid, and more expressive, matching her steady, free breathing. The narrator describes her feeling “something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully”—a vague yet powerful sensation that represents the reawakening of her ecological body. This “something” is not a concrete rational thought admired by patriarchal culture, but the innate vital resonance between her bodily nature and the external natural world, a spiritual connection that has been deliberately suppressed and severed by long-term patriarchal discipline and dualistic value division.

Her fear does not come from grief over her husband’s supposed death, but from the overwhelming joy and unease of regaining independent selfhood—a sense of freedom so intense she can barely bear it. This subtle psychological depiction,

revealed through close reading, demonstrates Chopin's artistic precision: Louise's awakening is not radical or aggressive social confrontation, but quiet, physical, and deeply natural self-redemption against hierarchical oppression. It is precisely this gentle and inherent vital awakening that makes her subsequent tragic ending more poignant and thought-provoking. Guided by Plumwood's core viewpoint, this whole process of breathing transformation profoundly reveals the inherent homologous destiny of women and nature under patriarchal rule. Importantly, this paper adopts a cautious stance: women and nature are not connected by innate feminine essential traits, but are jointly placed in the inferior dominated position by patriarchal hierarchical dualism (Plumwood, 1991). The story does not directly depict the exploitation of nature or frame "dual oppression" as an explicit theme; instead, the ecological dimension of this interpretation—including the symbolic connection between Louise's oppression and the marginalization of natural vitality—is an interpretive extension based on Plumwood's ecofeminist framework and the text's natural imagery, rather than a literal or plot-driven theme. Similarly, Louise's death is a tragic possibility that arises when her newly awakened sense of self collides with the unyielding restoration of patriarchal order, reflecting the harsh limits of female liberation in a society governed by dualistic domination, rather than a predetermined fate.

III . The Incompatibility of Breathing and Bondage

In *The Story of an Hour*, bondage refers to the physical, psychological, and ideological confinement imposed by patriarchal marriage. It is embodied in the closed domestic space that imprisons Louise. It is also reflected in her suppressed identity as "Mrs. Mallard," which reduces her to an appendage of her husband. Moreover, it appears in the persistent control that is unconsciously exerted over her will. Louise lives in a static, artificial room cut off from the outside world, her identity reduced to an appendage of her husband, and her whole life governed by norms that demand obedience and self-denial. Such "bondage" is precisely the cage that leaves her feeling "a slight congestion" and gradually extinguishes her natural vitality.

Breathing, by contrast, represents the free, unconstrained life force awakened through connection with nature: it is the fresh air she takes in through the open window, the repeated whisper of "Free, free, free," and the spiritual relief that comes from reuniting with her true self. "Breathing" symbolizes the recovery of autonomous selfhood, while bondage represents the systematic erasure of that self. The two states are inherently opposed, as the life-affirming freedom of breathing cannot coexist with the life-negating control of marital oppression.

This fundamental incompatibility is deeply rooted in the structural conflict between patriarchal power and natural life, and it unfolds clearly in the text. As an institution of patriarchy, marriage sustains itself by confining women to fixed roles, subduing their desires, and separating them from the vitality of nature (Plumwood, 1991; Warren, 2000). Louise's initial grief and her retreat into solitude reveal how deeply this bondage has shaped her. Only when she faces the open window and absorbs the breath of nature does she break free from discipline and regain the ability to breathe freely. Yet this breathing is fragile, because it exists entirely outside the logic of marriage. When Brently Mallard returns unexpectedly, the original patriarchal social order is instantly re-established, and the room that once harbored hope reverts to a restrictive dwelling. Having regained spiritual freedom, Louise can no longer adapt to the repressive life again, and the sharp conflict between confinement and freedom leads to her tragic end. It should be noted that her death is not inevitable, but a tragic consequence brought by the sudden collapse of her inner hope for freedom.

This tragic collision also reveals the historical limits of female liberation in late-nineteenth-century America. Even if her husband had died, Louise would have faced a society lacking legal property rights, economic independence, and social recognition for autonomous women (Salmon, 1908; Welter, 1966). Without a husband, Louise might gain personal freedom in name, but she would still face severe economic pressure, social prejudice, and limited opportunities to live independently. Her spiritual awakening was genuine, yet the social structure offered almost no room for women to pursue full self-realization. In this sense, Louise's sudden death is not only a personal tragedy but also a reflection of the tragic fate of women as a group: even if freed from marital bondage, they could hardly breathe freely in a society rooted in patriarchal control.

Conclusion

Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* condenses the spiritual struggle and tragic fate of women under patriarchal rule into a single hour, making it a classic text for interpreting female liberation and ecological vitality. From the ecofeminist perspective, this paper centers on the binary themes of marriage bondage and natural breathing, revealing that the marital system in the story operates as a multi-dimensional patriarchal cage that restricts Louise's physical behavior, living space, and independent subjectivity, cutting her off from natural vitality and leaving her in long-term physical and mental suffocation. In contrast, the natural world outside the window—with its spring vitality, fresh rain, and open sky—acts as a crucial awakening force. The window serves as a transitional threshold between confinement and freedom, enabling Louise to reconnect with nature, shift from constrained suffocation to free breathing, awaken her ecological body, and reclaim her autonomous self. This transformation is not only a personal awakening of female consciousness but also a symbolic alliance between women and nature against patriarchal dualistic oppression.

The story's artistic brilliance is fully embodied in dramatic irony, limited third-person narration, and syntactic rhythm. The iconic ending "joy that kills" subverts the patriarchal narrative: Louise's death is not caused by happiness at her husband's return, but by the sudden collapse of her newly regained freedom, marking a symbolic destruction of female self-liberation under the restoration of patriarchal order. The restrained narrative perspective gradually unfolds her inner world, contrasting the public's superficial perception with her private spiritual awakening, while the changing sentence

length and rhythm precisely echo her shift from oppression to liberation, integrating textual form and thematic connotation.

This ecofeminist interpretation breaks through the limitations of traditional feminist criticism that focuses solely on gender conflict. It clarifies that women and nature share the same oppressed fate under patriarchal dualism, and Louise's tragedy reflects not only gender inequality but also the fundamental confrontation between patriarchal control and natural life force. The story thus conveys a profound philosophical proposition: women's liberation is inseparable from the recognition of their connection with nature, and the emancipation of women cannot be truly realized without respecting the autonomy of natural vitality. In this way, ecofeminism provides a deeper and more comprehensive analytical framework for understanding *The Story of an Hour*, highlighting the work's enduring value in reflecting gender relations, ecological ethics, and individual freedom.

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