"Joy That Kills": Female Jouissance in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

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Kate Chopin's best-known short fiction "The Story of an Hour" is a tour de force portraying a woman's tension and anxiety under patriarchal oppression. After hearing the news of her husband's untimely passing, the protagonist, Mrs. Louise Mallard, is grief-stricken at first, but soon other thoughts creep into her mind. The text indicates that Louise's life is extremely restricted because of her domestic confinement and also suggests that she must have been secretly yearning for a life of her own. As the story unfolds, we understand that she wants to liberate her long-repressed female identity more than anything else; thus, readers are unlikely to charge her with being unsympathetic or even perverse in rejoicing at her husband's death. The most interesting part of the story depicts the heroine's experience of ecstasy while contemplating her newfound life of freedom. The climax is reached when she suddenly dies of a heart attack while descending the stairs with her sister. Ironically, this also happens precisely at the moment when, unknown to her, her husband is entering the house. In about 1000 words capturing what happens in barely one hour, Kate Chopin reveals the ecstatic experience of freedom and independence from the domestic oppression of a lifetime, the most intense but short-lived "joy that kills." The ending of this extremely short piece with astounding intensity does shed some light on the female repressed identity and sexuality. To borrow Per Seyersted's words, it gives us the "most startling picture of female self-assertion" (60).

The enigmatic power giving rise to Louise's ecstasy is open to multiple interpretations. The author remains vague through this entire piece about the true nature of such a mysterious force. Naturally, this evasiveness arouses the reader's curiosity and one wonders if it is an elusive supernatural power transcending her mundane existence which takes possession of her. Critics so far generally agree that the spiritual enlightenment which the heroine encounters is similar to a sexual experience. If so, then with whom exactly is she having sex? If it is a sexual union with the divine, then is this immortal being male, female, or neuter? This essay begins with a brief discussion of the divine union as a literary motif. I argue that Louise's epiphany probably involves a peculiar kind of female divine and is akin to what Luce Irigaray
calls women’s “jouissance.” In her psychoanalytic reading of Chopin’s “Two Portraits,” Maria Aline Seabra Ferreira argues that a jouissance creates a feminine space for women: “… the female mystic manages to create a space of her own in the midst of rigid and enduring patriarchal structures of thought, guiltlessly to give vent to her own jouissance, a jouissance usually stifled or dismissed by male thinkers” (50-51). Irigaray’s conception of jouissance which deliberately challenges the phallocentric model concerning female sexuality enables us to interpret “The Story of an Hour” in line with Chopin’s concern for women’s social and domestic autonomy.

Chopin describes Louise’s ecstasy regarding her newfound liberation and independence in the following passages:

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under her breath: “free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body. (353)

The author’s assertion that this mysterious “something” is “too subtle and elusive to name” has left a great deal of room for critical interpretations. In his review of this story, Daniel P. Deneau contends that what the heroine encounters here might well be a sexual union with an unnamed deity who helps the blind see. Focusing on the word “possess” used here, which in certain contexts can denote “to have sexual intercourse with (a woman)” and the sentences which are intensively suggestive of “coitus and postcoital reactions,” Deneau claims that what occurs within the process of Louise’s epiphany is “some type of sexual experience.” Utterly unanticipated, it turns out to be like “a terrifying rape, but one that evolves into something sensually stimulating and relaxing, and, of course, spiritually illuminating.” He concludes that “In short, a rape seems to have an ironic outcome” (212). Moreover, Deneau further proposes that the enigmatic sexual partner is either pagan or Christian.
If it is pagan, then the story is rather similar to William Butler Yeats' famous poem "Leda and the Swan," in which Zeus seduces and "possesses" Leda. Deneau is not satisfied with the first conjecture because Louise's unusual encounter does not involve merely fear and helplessness, but also implies anticipation, pleasure, and ultimately enlightenment. Thereby he is reminded of the "descent of the Christian Holy Spirit," which is often associated with "conception, renewal, empowerment, inspiration, enlightenment, and freedom" (212). In short, Deneau's reading necessitates an external divine power which leads to the heroine's epiphany, or in his own words, "a force as intense as a combination of a rape, a visitation by the Holy Spirit, and a sexual union—or, in short, a *deux ex machina*" (212).

As a literary motif, the divine rape is nothing novel. But in the tradition of allegorical readings, we often downplay the literal meaning of the sexual act and focus more on the spiritual meaning. One noted example can be found in the final couplet of John Donne's poem "Holy Sonnet XIV": "Except you enthrall me, never shall be free / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me" (314). Thomas J. Steele and George Knox regard the explicit mention of sexual activity here as "a secondary meaning," and suggest that we should not read the word "ravish" literally as "the relation between man and God in heterosexual terms" (212). In other words, the divine rape is symbolic or metaphorical in this context, not meant to be taken as a physical union with the divine. In a paradoxical metaphysical conceit, Donne astoundingly declares that true freedom comes only when one is imprisoned by God, and purity of heart comes with God's ravishment. The divine assault is thus not a matter of sexual aggression but suggests a benign spiritual union, which magically turns "the humanly imperfect and even exploitative" into something "divinely perfect and fulfilling" (212).

In the same vein, Chopin depicts an epiphany seemingly caused by a supernatural power as follows: "She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her" (353, emphasis mine). Here Chopin's use of the word "possess" parallels Donne's use of "ravish." If God builds up as one is torn down and "ravishes" to set one free, then we might treat the word "possess" in the same way as suggestive of some spiritual union or divine enlightenment. While Deneau's interpretation makes sense in general, its implicit phallocentric bias is questionable. He talks of "a visitation by the Holy Spirit." Although the Holy Spirit is often represented as a dove-like figure, its close relation with the two other unmistakably masculine elements of the Holy Trinity cannot be ignored. If the Christian God is essentially
masculine, then the divine rape obviously contradicts a major theme in the story, namely, female liberation and self-assertion. The postulation of a male God enlightening a woman suggests complicity with patriarchy, undermining the subversive potential of "The Story of an Hour" as an important manifesto of female autonomy.

I propose to read Chopin's story in light of Irigaray's discussion of the divine. For Irigaray, it is essential and necessary to establish "an autonomous identity for women." In theology, women should refute the notion of a male-defined God and find a god for themselves (Grosz 151-52), given that "[g]od embodies the possibility of a perfection, an ideal, goal and trajectory for the subject, but only on condition that this God is one's own." Since God is the conventional representation of male ideals, for Irigaray "women need to find or formulate a God of their own, a God in their image … a God who can together occupy a heaven," as Elizabeth Grosz puts it (160). It is indispensable for women as autonomous beings, as Irigaray reminds us, "to be God for us so that we can be divine for the other"; God should not be defined as "an idol, fetish, images already proliferated and determined" (160).

In the story, the epiphany transforms Louise from a woman with a "dull stare in her eyes" to one with "a feverish triumph in her eyes." After the encounter with the divine, she becomes a totally changed person, "drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window." Her sister finds her "[carrying] herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory." Differing from Leda, who is passively raped by Zeus and remains a mortal after the event, Louise seems to have turned into a goddess herself. In the last part of the story, Louise "clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs" (354). Such a descending posture might be taken as an allusion to Louise's newborn "divine" identity. This female divine can be seen as representing woman's own ideals, self-representations and horizons, beyond the confines of patriarchal hegemony and paternal law. Given the evasiveness about the origin of the sudden transformation in Louise, one may venture to argue that she has attained the ideal status of the body and soul united as one, which is exactly what Irigaray passionately envisions in her project as a whole. Being spiritually connected with and illuminated by the supreme power, Louise's own self incarnates the divine.

All along we have been discussing the story in terms of the conventional divine rape motif, which presupposes God as an external agent bringing about changes in the protagonist. Can we go one step further and argue that
the divine, in fact, is not something outside, alien to selfhood, but has its origin deep within the female subject? To explore this topic we have to revisit the part of the story describing what happens before Louise's enlightenment. Before the moment of change and enlightenment, Louise is sitting in her room, facing the open window in her deep solitude "pressed down by a physical exhaustion," and gazing listlessly at "those patches of blue sky." What is inside is described as motionless and lifeless, while the world outside is full of vitality, as suggested by expressions like "aquiver," "new spring life," and sounds like a peddler's calling and the "notes of a distant song." Then suddenly emerges the mysterious unknown power: "something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully." Because of the sharp contrast between the passivity inside the room and the lively scenes outside and the description of her feeling that "something" is "creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air," most readers are led to think that the mysterious "something" must come from the outside world (352-53). What has often been neglected is that the feeling of an external agent approaching her through the air is the protagonist's subjective impression after all. According to the divine rape theory, Louise needs a deity from the sky to "possess" her so that she may attain enlightenment and change into a new person. This conventional reading is based on the traditional understanding of heterosexual relations, which Irigaray has taken pains to oppose.

In her monumental essay "This Sex Which Is Not One," Irigaray maintains that a man needs an "instrument" to touch the self for sexual pleasure, but a woman, in contrast, touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation: "Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other" (24). Hence lips (which incessantly oscillate between a metaphorical image of "lips" and the referential signification of labia) serve as a cardinal symbol within Irigaray's theoretical formulation of female self-assertion and autonomous sexuality. As opposed to male sexuality, which relies heavily on an external object or body, women's sexuality "is plural ... woman has sex organs more or less everywhere" (28 emphasis original). Thus women are able to acquire pleasure almost everywhere. With Irigaray's radical theory, we are able to reread "The Story of an Hour" without presupposing any external deity at all. We might actually reinterpret the divine rape motif metaphorically, seeing the coming of a divine being to possess her as a meta-
phor for something mysteriously at work deep down in herself, some mental processes which are simply “too subtle and elusive to name.” To put it in another way, the female divine accounting for her transformation represents no more than some mysterious workings within her inner self. In fact, her enlightenment accompanied by the “monstrous joy” is not unanticipated at all, for Chopin informs us that Louise is “waiting for it, fearfully.” As revealed by her spontaneous utterance of “free, free, free,” the ultimate cause has no doubt to do with the awareness that her husband is dead and can control her life no more.

Two important expressions in the text can be very nicely made sense of using Irigaray’s theory. Female sexuality, according to Irigaray, resists signification and definition: it is “an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if ‘she’ says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means” (29, emphasis in original). If indeed female sexuality is plural, floating, and ambiguous, it will be hard to pin down by words, corresponding exactly to Chopin’s description of “something... too subtle and elusive to name.” The key image of lips can be found in the following passage about Louise’s “monstrous joy”:

When she abandoned herself a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips. She said it over and over under the breath: “free, free, free!” The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body. (353)

The “slightly parted lips” which must have somehow touched each other when uttering “free, free, free” reminds us of the following idea of female sexuality in Irigaray: “Woman ‘touches herself’ all the time... for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact” (24). On the one hand, the great joy as represented by her pulses beating fast and her brightening eyes may allude to female jouissance. On the other hand, the lips image interpreted in terms of Irigaray’s theory goes well with the idea of Louise’s sense of freedom defined exactly as the freedom from a patriarchal yoke implied by her husband’s presumed death.

I have discussed the “monstrous joy” accompanying Louise’s enlightenment with reference to female jouissance. A detailed explanation of this psychoanalytical term is in order. The French word jouissance means enjoyment, particularly sexual enjoyment or “orgasm.” Jacques Lacan
distinguishes between *jouissance* and pleasure. If what Sigmund Freud has called the “pleasure principle” functions as a limit to enjoyment, to guard the subject against over-excitation, then the constant attempt to go beyond the pleasure principle is to attain an excessive enjoyment or *jouissance*. According to Lacan, the “prohibition of *jouissance* (the pleasure principle) is inherent in the symbolic structure of language.” This prohibition of something which is already impossible, paradoxically, “sustain[s] the neurotic illusion that enjoyment would be attainable if it were not forbidden.” Inasmuch as the “death drive,” or the constant desire to transgress the pleasure principle and to obtain some excessive *jouissance*, we can see that *jouissance* is the “path toward death.” Interestingly, Chopin in the last sentence of the story describes the cause of Louise’s death as “the joy that kills,” which matches exactly Lacan’s idea of *jouissance* as impossible pleasure verging on death (91-92).

Lacan initially asserts that *jouissance* is essentially phallic. But he later admits that there is a different female *jouissance*, a supplementary *jouissance* which is “beyond the phallus”: “Women content themselves *(s’en tiennent)*, any woman contents herself *(aucune s’en tient)*, being not-whole, with the jouissance in question... There is a jouissance that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it—that much she knows. She knows it, of course, when it comes *(arrive)*” (29, emphasis in original). In Renata Salecl’s elaboration: “woman does not necessarily need a man to experience feminine *jouissance*, since she is in a specific way self-sufficient in it. A woman might experience feminine *jouissance* simply by herself, or in a mystical experience, by relating to God” (71). Irigaray moves beyond the Lacanian model and claims that there are at least two modes of *jouissance* in women’s sexuality. In her words, “[o]ne is programmed in a male libidinal economy in accordance with a certain phallic order. Another is much more in harmony with what they (women) are” (Whitford 45). Irigaray points out that many women are guilty, unhappy, or paralyzed within the norms of a phallocratic economy, but women succeed in living well with their affections and sexuality if they try to attain the feminine *jouissance*, which is more in harmony with their female bodies:

Female *jouissance* would be of the order of the constant and gradual creation of a dimension ranging from the most corporeal to the most spiritual, a dimension which is never complete and never reversible... woman generates through her *jouissance*... a bridge between what is most earthly and perpetual deferment of a *jouissance* which is theirs,...so *jouissance* is produced *inside them*, takes place more in their interior, in their innermost heart, where the complexity of its spatial trajectories. (Whitford 190 emphasis original)
In Louise’s case, we do not need any external divine agent to “possess” her at all. The *jouissance* which comes with her sudden enlightenment concerning her freedom from patriarchal control might well be what is produced deep inside herself. The elusiveness and indirection of Chopin’s description seems to hint at a kind of *jouissance* that goes beyond the phallic order. The enlightenment and ecstasy depicted through the changes of the sounds, the scents, the color, the air, and her orgasmic bodily movements could be read as something like a supernatural experience which blends the most corporeal with the most spiritual. Since the locus of this “monstrous joy” is arguably in the realm of the very inexpressible and unrepresentable, what we may observe in Louise could only be the outer appearance, if not aftereffects, of her female *jouissance*. The oblique depiction of this mysterious, “monstrous joy” in “The Story of an Hour” may be regarded as an “impossible” literary representation of female *jouissance*. That this is the “joy that kills” might be taken as a metaphor for the unsurpassed intensity and transgressiveness of the uniquely female experience, not necessarily implying that female *jouissance* must bring about physical death.

“The Story of an Hour” reaches its climax when the heroine is reported to die of a heart disease, or “the joy that kills.” Peggy Skaggs sees Louise as one of the characters in Chopin’s volume of short stories who “refuses to settle quietly for lives of only partial fulfillment,” for she “discovers that no amount of love and security can compensate for a lack of control over her own existence” (53). If we follow this line of understanding, then Louise’s death may be taken as her refusal to face the reality of her husband’s return, to forsake the immense joy of emancipation that she has experienced only temporarily. In terms of plot construction, we may recall that the heroine’s spiritual awakening accompanied by her physical demise can be found in Chopin’s representative work *The Awakening* as well, where Edna Pontellier apparently commits suicide at the end. However, what is unique in “The Story of an Hour” is not the death of a female character who has learnt to be uncompromising but the real cause of her death, which is open to two radically different kinds of interpretation. In the first paragraph of the story, we are already told that Louise is afflicted “with a heart trouble,” and thus “great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband’s death” (352). For all other characters in the story, including her husband who fails to see her before she passes away, her death is due to the unbearable news about her husband’s supposed death. Even shortly before the coming of the sudden enlightenment, the reader is still reminded of Louise’s deep sorrow as depicted in the following passages:
She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her.

There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul. (352)

To all these ignorant characters, Louise's death simply shows that she is utterly defeated, unable to survive without her husband. This reading, of course, is rather troubling for feminist critics. However, we must remember that Chopin has explicitly described her death as caused by "the joy that kills," the "monstrous joy" which we have interpreted as an extraordinary experience of jouissance. In this light one may contend that the other characters' ignorance implies that female jouissance, inasmuch as it goes beyond the phallic order, lies beyond the confines of the conventional, phallocentric knowledge in the other characters. But as readers we all know that

Louise has in fact been ecstatic when feeling liberated from her husband's domination. With this epiphany, she whispers: "Free! Body and soul free!" Instead of implying defeat, her physical demise may serve as a potent metaphor representing the greatest intensity of female jouissance, a truly transgressive enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle and verging on death. In this regard, "The Story of an Hour" is indeed a powerful piece of feminist literature which attempts to represent the unrepresentable, to signify the unsignifiable, and to articulate the inarticulable of the mysterious core of female sexuality in terms of jouissance, an enigmatic "something" that people like Mr. Mallard could never dream of or understand.

NOTES

1 Luce Irigaray reviews L. Feuerbach's concept of the divine to show her concern for absence of the female in the theological tradition. For Feuerbach, God and the divine are the perfection, extension and projection of the "man": "The Father and the Son thus embody both the totality of 'man'...the third person, not...as a mother, a divine feminine principle, but as the love between the Father and the Son" (Grosz 154; emphasis in original). Irigaray questions that since the Holy Ghost is nothing but the "principle" of the unity of Father and Son, then on what grounds can Feuerbach justify the Catholic belief in the Mother of God? In sum, Irigaray firmly holds the view that it is necessary to include both sexes within any notion of the divine and then to re-evaluate and re-experience the divine in terms different from its traditional representations.
Yet Irigaray does not aim to advocate the creation of “a woman-centered religion” or any kinds of “female self-worship” to compete with or even replace masculine religious ideals, as Grosz summarizes: “This is simply the reversal of received religions, and not a transformation to accommodate two sexes” (152, emphasis in original).

For Irigaray, God provides a metaphor for several cardinal concepts pertaining to women’s autonomous identity. First, it stands for an idealized perfection. Second, it is a mode of situating space and time. Third, it could be regarded as a horizon and context of identity. Fourth, it is a supreme form of the alterity which institutes ethics (Grosz 159-60).

In the third chapter of this book, Salecl makes use of the Siren episode in Odysseus’ adventure to exemplify Lacan’s feminine jouissance.

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