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Zinah Abdulhur Jabbar  
Al Qadisiyah General,  
Directorate of Education,  
Ministry of Education, Iraq

## The significance of marriage in Kate Chopin's the story of An Hour, Edith Wharton's The Other Two, and Katherine Ann porter's rope

Zinah Abdulhur Jabbar

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### Abstract

To put it simply, marriage is a commitment that could be for life. It's a bond that is strongly connected with love, respect, tolerance, and support. But this is not always the case, which explains why some marriages finish with a divorce or a separation. For Christians, marriage is a gift from God; it is the right atmosphere to engage in sexual relations and build a family life. From the Islamic point of view, marriage is a religious duty, a moral safeguard, and a social commitment. Sociologists define it as a union involving two or more individuals, depending on the society. In most societies, a marriage is a social and legal contract between two people. It's considered the basis and foundation of family.

Considering the three stories, Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour, Edith Wharton's The Other Two, and Catherine Ann Porter's Rope, it is clear that marriage doesn't have the same significance. In the three of them, marriage has a complex nature. The study aims at exploring the issue of marriage in the three works which were published between the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century where the conditions of life of women and their role in society were limited. It was mainly after World War II with the rise of feminist movements that women were more widely heard. The different couples of the three stories are caught in a dilemma; they all have a failed relationship.

In The Story of an Hour, Mrs. Mallard is suffocating in her marriage, and she finally dies at the end of the story. She found her freedom in death. The Other Two, is about marriage in general, not specifically the Waythorns and their marriage, but the matter is the same, it is a perplexing and complicated relationship. And finally, in Ann Porter's Rope, the relationship between a husband and wife is ambivalent and embittered. The wife again is frustrated with her husband. The tone of the story here too is melancholic as the image of the rope itself reveals.

To summarize, this paper demonstrates how the three women writers depict the characters, both males and females, in their failed relationships. Moreover, it explores the stylistic devices used to examine the theme of marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage, commitment, bond, religious duty, contract, complicated, significance

### Introduction

Marriage makes the individual grow and think about others as he has to serve a partner and children. The nature of marriage may vary according to the individuals involved and the society in which they live. It is recognized as one of the most valued of all relationships. Moreover, in the time when the three stories were published, marriage had a strong religious meaning. Kate Chopin's The Story of an Hour, Edith Wharton's The Other Two and Catherine Ann Porter's Rope are three short stories written by female writers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and the three of them deal with the same theme: the relationship within the couple. But in each story, marriage has a particular significance. The characters live failed relationships whose consequences are particularly heavy on women. Mrs. Mallard, Alice and the unidentified by name woman in Porter's story live different marital conflicts which have physical and psychological consequences. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, men were making big fortunes in steel and railroads. The 19<sup>th</sup> century society individual did not believe too much about the significance of love and companion in a marriage. It was just designed to keep money in the bloodiness. There was no regard for the human elements, which resulted in many miserable partnerships.

Thus, marriage, on one hand, provides companionship and security, but with time, the passion of the beginning starts to change and diminish. This is what we are going to examine

**Corresponding Author:**  
Zinah Abdulhur Jabbar  
Al Qadisiyah General,  
Directorate of Education,  
Ministry of Education, Iraq

in the three following short stories, *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, *The Other Two* by Edith Wharton, and *Rope* by Katherine Ann.

### **Presentation and justification of the prospective topic**

This study aims to discuss the topic of the significance of marriage in Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, Edith Wharton's *The Other Two*, and Catherine Ann Porter's *Rope* and to explain the importance of such a concept. The three literary works were written within the same period. So, the treatment of characters, themes, and attitudes related to different points concerning feminism, symbolism, chance, and psychological states is tackled more or less in a similar way. Also, the study will examine the complex relationship between wife and husband especially in the patriarchal society when women were not free even though there is a different perspective in each story. The relationships within the couples are characterized by lack of communication and complicity. The three women protagonists in the short stories devote their life and time to their husbands and others, which affected them both physically and morally. Such women express the conditions of life of males and females at the end of the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th in three different societies. These women feel alone because they were never easily understood by their partner in addition to the heavy pressures put on them by the society. This is what my study attempts to explore through the three authors' works, marriages presented, the characters' reactions and evolution as well as their perception of life.

### **Research questions**

1. What are the main characteristics of the three female protagonists, Mrs Mallard, Alice and the unnamed woman?
2. How do they differ concerning their status and situation?
3. What are the conflicts faced by the three female characters?
4. What are the different narrative techniques adopted by the writers in the presentation of their characters?

### **Presentation and Justifications of the Approaches to be adopted**

The three selected works for this study are *The Story of an Hour* for Kate Chopin, *The Other Two* by Edith Wharton and *Rope* by Catherine Ann Porter. The first was written at the very end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in 1894, the second was published ten years later in 1904 and the third one in 1927. The three of them examine the significance of marriage depending on special theories based on analysing the personality of the characters and the various themes shared by the three writers. Therefore, this study is descriptive and analytical of the state of the couples and their reactions to life and to their situations.

Also, it examines the narrative techniques and devices used by the writers to broaden the reader's imagination like the interior monologue focusing on the inner thoughts of the characters more than on their actions. Most importantly, the three writers, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, and Catherine Ann Porter made a presentation of marriage in their stories, each one in her own way.

**The literature review:** This part targets the way theorists analyze the institution of marriage and its significance at the time the three stories were written. It presents a descriptive and analytical study of the works and will focus on the dysfunctional relations between husbands and wives. It is built on previous studies from books and journals about the psychoanalysis of Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour*, Edith Wharton's *The Other Two* and Katherine Ann Porter's *Rope*. Then, it will present three types of unsuccessful relations and how the couples cope with their situations. The three female protagonists have a different experience that evolves in a different way.

In *The Story of an Hour* and most of her short stories, Chopin chooses a married woman who has a tragic end. The reasons given to explain her death at the end of the story are not translated in the same way. For Seyersted (1969) in his book *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, there is "evidence of a deeper level of irony in the story which does not regard Louise Mallard as a heroine but as an immature egotist and a victim of her extreme self-assertion." More recent interpretation, however, has largely followed a strong, feminist bent as represented by Emily Toth's characterization of the story in her book *Kate Chopin* (1990) as one of Chopin's "most radical...an attack on marriage, as one person's dominance over another." Similarly, Angelyn Mitchell in her book *Feminine Double Consciousness in Kate Chopin* (1993) attacks the institution of marriage as being the "culprit" of the story.

Another significance of marriage is given in Edith Wharton's *The Other Two*. Wharton has ambivalent views on marriage. Although she knew that a good match didn't necessarily mean being happy for her, she realized it was like 'stabilizing force'. This idea is confirmed in Helen Killoran's book *Edith Wharton, Art and Illusion* (1996). She shows that Wharton valued marriage as a stabilizing social institution, deplored divorces, especially frivolous divorces, and found single women's lives difficult (70). At the same time, she is preoccupied with the problem of a woman's role in a world dominated by men. Margaret B. McDowell (1976) in her book *Edith Wharton* states that Wharton approached the issue of marriage from varying angles and arrived at contradictory conclusions. And finally concerning Katherine Ann Porter's *Rope*, James T.F Tanner (2021) in his book *Stylistic Uses in 'Rope'* shows "the absolute unpredictability of love, especially woman's love" in marriage. He adds that Porter portrays the female character as a "victim "or "silent receiver." It is a marriage that is unfulfilled and bitter.

### **Presentation of the chosen corpus**

Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* is a thousand word-short story that exposes the complicated relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Mallard. Kate Chopin is an American novelist and short story writer, best known for her dealing with the inner lives of sensitive women who struggle to have an identity of their own in the society of the late nineteenth century in the South. Her stories are based in Louisiana. *The Story of an Hour* was published in 1894; it reflects Chopin's negative view of marriage which she perceives as a prison. Through marriage, women lost their identity and freedom. Mrs. Mallard feels free only when her husband has died. To her, marriage is not as she conceived it. This is made

clear by the way she was transformed after she is told about her husband's death. She realizes that now she can live for her-self "free, free, free!" (Paragraph 10). She feels relieved because she is unhappy in this marriage in which she is trapped. Her attitude shows that her marriage seems to deny her the right to express herself. It seems to be an oppressive marriage.

For Kate Chopin, marriage has a negative significance. Louise Mallard thinks that she will live for herself after the death of her husband "live for herself" (65). This gives the reader an idea about the relationship as well as the many sacrifices she made in her married life. The writer portrays the story as an extreme example of the theme of self-assertion. (Seyersted, 45). Many other recent explanations have largely followed an extremely feminist bent. So, this story is characterized as one of Chopin's "most radical... attack on marriage, on one person's dominance over another." In addition, there was a critical and virtual agreement on what the story tells: its heroine dies, tragically and ironically because Louise is now free and she achieves self-assertion as an essential component of her being, which is incompatible with the conception of marriage as a relationship based upon mutual commitment and shared goals.

Chopin presents Louise's self-centeredness relatively when she tells the readers more about herself than about her husband. Most of the actions take place in Louise's mind, how she feels and what she plans as well. Even married people who truly love each other may not feel much love for each other at special times and they have occasional disagreements. She indicates after she married a man that "she had loved sometimes" but "often she had not" (70), and he had never looked save with love upon her" (61). Thus, Louise and her husband Brently Mallard have not a feeling of love toward each other. This story presents Louise's suffering and inner problems in addition to social problems. In addition, the text does not inform us about the truth of her life, but only her perceptions and this cannot be totally reliable but rather misleading, as clarified by other evidence in the text. Chopin presents a distorted view of marriage, unhealthy one by using words like "crime" (69), and "bending" (66). For Louise, marriage limited her freedom. Furthermore, "there was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory" (84). The word "Feverish" reveals Louise's pathological condition. In fact, she has a double delusion because she has achieved no victory and she was a goddess.

We can understand from the events of this story that Kate Chopin was not romantic because she did not use any romantic expression between Louise and her husband. In some cases, she regards marriage as a state of unbroken and pure bliss while at other times, she is convinced that it is impossible and unhealthy for any woman to live as Louise was living. She believes that marriage is not an ideal and she shows that self-assertion is a manifestation of extreme self-love. She struggles for selfhood against the boundaries of her society and marriage which lead her to live not for herself but for others (Ewell, 160).

Another significance of marriage is reflected in Edith Wharton's story 'The Other Two'. Edith Wharton was born in 1862 in New York. She married Edward Robbins Wharton of the Boston aristocracy in 1885 and she divorced in 1913. She is the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in Literature. She wrote a lot on the subject of marriage in her

short stories which are set in the high society world of the Gilded Age in America. Edith Wharton was a special observer of the society in which she was born, and she realized how complicated marriage could be; she recognized that many women had to make a great marriage to survive, and that didn't mean a happy union. As Helen Kiloran expresses in Edith Wharton, *Art and Illusion*, Wharton appreciated marriage as a stabilizing social institution, deplored divorce, exclusively frivolous divorce, and found single women's lives difficult (70). In her short story "The Other Two", she portrays characters as victims of their marriages because most of them did not get married for love. It was published in 1904, and it portrays the marriage of a middle-aged couple, Mr. Waythorn and Mrs. Alice Waythorn who was married twice before to Mr. Haskett and Mr. Varick. In *The Other Two*, Wharton's views on marriage are ambivalent. She saw marriage as a stabilizing force because there was no other option for women. Wharton reveals a situation in which there are multiple marriages. She features the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Waythorn, a New York society couple. It is set just after their honeymoon. But for Alice Haskett Varick Waythorn, it is not her first marriage. She married twice before and did not seem to be happy, but she was not sad either. It is a mediocre marriage, so she throws herself from one marriage into another.

Accordingly, Mr. Waythorn discovers that he has not gotten the consequences of Alice's divorces. Both of them are forced to live events requiring her two husband's lives for example, when they returned from their honeymoon because of the illness of her daughter, Lily, Haskett's daughter. Moreover, Haskett moved to a new city to be near his daughter so he can visit her regularly. Waythorn understands that it is honorable for Haskett to do various things for his daughter, 'all he had learned of Haskett was favorable'. Hence, Alice tries to help her daughter and she plays the role of victim while Waythorn renders himself the hero. So, their marriage reflects an imbalanced power dynamic rather than care and love.

Waythorn has unstable sensibilities caused by his wife's multiple marriages. He must face the fact that her first husband wants to visit Lily in his house. He worries about the visiting of Lily's father, so he leaves his work and is away from home to avoid meeting him, but ironically, while away from home, he met unexpectedly the second one, Varick with whom he will work later. Waythorn is forced to accept the fact that he may be in touch with his wife's two former husbands. He speaks with them politely and respectfully; he is glad, in the end, to appear the most self-possessed. "The three men stood awkwardly before her, till Varick, always the most self-possessed, dashed into an explanatory phrase" (Part 5). This good relationship between Waythorn and Alice's previous husbands refers to a happy society that accepts the idea of divorce to have a better life with other successful marriages. Waythorn believed that her two previous marriages would enable her to be a better wife because the two marriages taught her, in various ways, how to be accommodating to her husband. He feels proud to be the winner of a different social exchange because he held himself more politely and gracefully. Here, the writer appreciates the divorce as an appropriate way to start another successful social relationship. Throughout the story, Edith Wharton portrays Alice as "a miracle of good taste" (Part 5) because she tries to use her adaptability to get

accepted in society and she takes necessary steps to improve her social standing. This is a message that she conveys in her last marriage. She loses her identity and she breaks up her personality with another marriage. In this case, Edith Wharton presents Alice as a woman who sacrifices herself for others like Kate Chopin's protagonist Mrs Mallard. Moreover, the two writers present their female protagonists with no romantic companions anymore, and which means they are unhappy and have a hard life in their marriages.

In a nutshell, Edith Wharton in *The Other Two*, describes marriage as a tool that helps women to enter polite society, and the final result is that the line between the economic and social world of the society becomes indistinct as well as the line between companionship and marriage. Alice selects her husband as a means to have a better and more privileged life but not as a partner with whom we share everything nor as a companions. This enables her to have a series of relationships that destroy her social connections. Alice knows perfectly well how to play the game of marriage and she wins all the time because she acts in a way that can only lead to her success as when she says to her husband "I'll do just as you wish" when they discussed Varick and her speaking to him. She understands that all men are the same, as clarified when she is confused about which of her three husbands likes brandy in his coffee.

According to the Darwinian Theory, she has not survived but she tried to make the best home for herself and her daughter. Brilliantly, the writer shows that Mr. Waythorn unlike ordinary people who neglected his decision to marry Alice, especially after knowing about her two marriages responds to them coldly and locates her as more of a benefit to be attained than a partner to be romanced. This story focuses not only on the significance of marriage that is not based on love but also on the effects of divorce on the characters. For Edith Wharton, marriage is neither good nor bad, it is complicated. First, Wharton thinks his wife to be perfect even though he knows that she was married twice before, but he refused to think about this until he found himself confronted with her. He then becomes irritated with his wife and begins to ask about his marriage. Mrs. Wharton, it is not minded whether she honestly cares for her third husband.

The third short story, *Rope* gives another interpretation of marriage to show the wife's hidden disappointments and the inability of her husband to understand her problems. Catherine Ann Porter, whose real name is Callie Russell Porter was born in 1890 in Texas. She is an American journalist and short story writer who also won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1966 and the U.S. National Book Award for the *Collected Stories of Catherine Ann Porter*. She married at age 16 in 1906 and divorced officially in 1915 and then asked to change her name to Catherine Ann Porter. After 1915 and before 1918, she married twice. In 1930, she married a writer in Europe where she spent several years and divorced again in 1938. Upon returning from Europe, she married once more his 20 years younger graduate student who divorced her in 1942. Her short story *Rope* deals with the themes of insecurity, love, resentment, connection, commitment, struggle and paralysis. It is taken from her flowering *Judas and Other Stories Collection*. It is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator.

The dominating theme is the theme of struggle; the wife is struggling as she attempts to maintain the house. She is stressed all the time and feels insecure about her relationship

with her husband. Thus, she feels unhappy. In most of the story, the wife is resentful towards her husband not necessarily because he has bought the rope. Despite their struggles, he remains committed to her. The rope is symbolic; it can tie things together as it is the case in the story. Husband and wife are tied to each other by marriage whether they like it or not. Porter examines literary devices and narrative techniques to make her thoughts clear. She depends on the images of an event more than on the literal meaning. Rope successfully portrays the hidden frustrations of a couple, frustrations caused by lack of communication; the rope is a symbol of this disorder of communication. The writer in this story conveys her ideas and messages about the significance of marriage by using various symbols to represent human thoughts and imagination. The rope in this story shows that the husband is proud and has an uncooperative, distrustful and impractical attitude at home. It also refers to marriage as an 'expression of complex emotions.

In *Rope*, neither the wife nor the husband is named. Porter uses the pronouns 'she' and 'he' when she refers to the couple; she also doesn't tell anything about the location of the story either. This lack of precision suggests that the arguments of this couple are ordinary ones that can occur in any place and with everybody. Among the different narrative techniques used is the monologue to show the lack of communication and psychological struggles between the wife and husband. Through this technique, the writer focuses on the characters' thoughts. The narrator portrays the main actions through ideas and the syntax of a third-person narration (Dora Zhang, 2017). Through the use of the word rope, the writer reflects the sufferings of women under the control of men. She makes the characters turn more language materials into a basic form of thoughts and this is what happens in the interior monologue. This technique reveals the hidden contents of the message from one character to another. This is clear when the wife asks herself at the very beginning "Had he brought the coffee?" or later, about the broken eggs instead of asking the husband directly "What had he put on top of them? Hadn't he known eggs mustn't be squeezed? Also, the husband is doing the same too: "Squeezed, who had squeezed them?" (2). Clearly, the readers understand the scene from a distance without being emotionally engaged in the arguments of the couple. The readers can feel the lack of communication between them, each one wondering. She deals with subterfuge for it is difficult to show her dissatisfaction directly and plainly. "The quarrel must reach a certain pitch before she will name her specific complaints, but a close reading of her comments reveals the way her irritation moves rapidly from one detail to the next, baffling her husband" (Shim B.J.,11). They have many arguments which reveal that they have different ways of thinking and personalities. For him, she is just a pathetic wife and a hopeless melancholic who "is making a complete fool of herself". She can be furious about trivial matters just as she lacks flexibility as it appears with the broken eggs which were supposed to be for the breakfast on the following day. "Well, anyhow, she could see one thing plain: no eggs for breakfast. They'd have to scramble them now, for supper. It was too damned bad. She had planned to have steak for supper" she said to herself. Moreover, the financial situation is difficult with only one income, and this is another problem without forgetting that he was unfaithful to her when she was alone in the

countryside while he was working in town. Thus, their relationship is complicated as we can see in the many monologues in the story. In addition, the rope on which she focused added more tension between them, especially since he had forgotten the coffee. The story finishes with a confirmation of what he said previously, "He knew how she was, didn't he? Sure, he knew how she was." It is a kind of surrender and acceptance. It also announces more complications in their relationship with the image of the whippoorwill which is a symbol of death.

### Conclusion

The three stories of this study expose the issue of marriage but with a different perspective and different significance although they were written, the three of them, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. All women at that time faced the same problems and had the same struggles. They were subject to oppression and all suffered to a certain extent. The writers described their circumstances of life and unhappy marriages.

Moreover, the three wives in the three works suffered different psychological troubles with their husbands either because they lost their freedom like Mrs. Mallard or couldn't find the right partner as Alice who went through two divorces and remarried to maintain a certain position in society and protect her reputation or like the unnamed wife in *Rope* who cannot cope with her husband for different reasons, but stays with him despite their difficult financial situation. They all faced many personal and social problems and endured a lot of stress because of the social pressures. Marriage varies from one couple to another and from one country to another in the three stories. Each marriage has its characteristics that result either in a positive and successful union or a failed one. This relationship is dysfunctional in the three stories with heavy psychological consequences mainly on the female characters. Some women accept it as it is till the end while others go through one or more divorces in an attempt to meet the suitable partner that makes them feel happy and secure.

The three writers gave a realistic description of marriage from a woman's point of view at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. They reflected on their feelings, frustrations and the problems they faced as women. The study presented three different relationships, but all of them were more or less failed relationships. It is clear that the institution of marriage had its own significance and it is true also that it has evolved since women have more rights today, but on the whole, it is not always successful. On the contrary, divorces and separations are increasing in all societies now that women are more educated and getting more independent. The question that we may ask ourselves is what is going to be the significance of marriage in the future with the increasing number of couples who are cohabiting in the Western societies? Concerning the language of the three selected stories, it is rather simple and familiar; it translates the feelings and emotions of the characters.

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