

# The theme of gender roles literature review examples

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The *Necklace* and *The Story of an Hour* have numerous common elements. For example, both are nineteenth century stories and both have unhappily married women as their protagonists. However, the overriding similarity is the central theme of gender roles that emanates from both. Mathilde and Mrs Mallard are both middle-class women of their time and, as a result of this, have very little control over their lives. Rather than providing stability and affection, their husbands are repressing them and hindering their sense of identity.

In both stories, the protagonist is a young married woman. Similar again are the feelings of the two women towards their lives and their husbands. Both *The Necklace* and *The Story of an Hour* explore events that occur within the woman's relationship with her husband, and her reaction to them. In *The Story of an Hour*, Mrs Mallard believes her husband to be dead. However, although she cries on hearing the news, the sadness soon turns to relief and happiness as she envisages the life she has ahead of her without him.

*The Necklace* is so titled because of the diamond necklace that drives the story forwards. However, the pricey jewellery is not the only example of the wealth theme. Mathilde is fanatical about wealth. As Brackett (2012) points out, " she suffers constantly from what she views as a life of poverty." However, it was unfortunate for her since she was not born into a wealthy family who could afford the lifestyle she wants to live and make her dreams come true. Instead, she is rather married to a " little clerk" (De Maupassant, 1884) and they live in a shabby apartment. Furthermore, we see through Mathilde's jealousy towards her wealthy friend just how deep her desire runs.

Of course, the theme is continued to the end when she loses the necklace and learns the true meaning of poverty (Brackett, 2012).

Perhaps one of the most prominent differences between the two stories are that *The Necklace* allows the reader to get to know the protagonist's husband in some depth, whereas *The Story of an Hour* does not.

Furthermore, as *The Necklace* is considerably longer, readers learn a great deal more about the woman character than in *The Story of an Hour*.

In *The Necklace*, Matilde and her husband appear badly matched from the start. He is content with his life whereas she is constantly striving for more. Additionally, he seems to care deeply for her, a feeling that is not reciprocated. Despite her unlikable exterior, however, Mathilde is arguably worthy of the reader's sympathy. She is a middle class woman in the nineteenth century. Her family have married her off to her husband without taking her wishes into account. She does not appear to feel much affection or attraction towards her husband and he holds all the power. Mathilde has nothing to fill her days other than dreaming of a better life for herself.

In *The Story of an Hour*, Mrs Mallard is the only character the readers become familiar with. The narrator describes her, tangibly, as " young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength" (Chopin, 1894). She is young, attractive and placid. However, the narrator also says that the " lines" of her face imply that she is repressed in some ways. Unlike with Malthilde, the reader does not learn a great deal about Mrs Mallard's inner feelings, especially not to begin with. She describes her

husband as being pleasant and loving towards her. However, she is hugely relieved when she believes he is dead, indicating that the protagonist is a woman who will say one thing but mean another. On the other hand, it seems as though Mr Mallard isn't necessarily causing his wife to feel repressed; rather, it seems likely that any husband would have the same result upon her:

“ 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. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination” (Chopin, 1894).

It is worth noticing that while the narrator of this story recounts what is observable in simple prose, the language changes when the protagonist's emotions are described; here, her words become potent and uplifting. This implies that Mrs Mallard's inner life is not associated to the outside world of her husband (Smith, 2011).

There are two central themes to *The Necklace*; wealth and gender. Furthermore, the two themes are closely related throughout the narrative. Mathilde is a woman in a man's world, and she feels that she has very little rule over her existence and lifestyle. She is married to a husband for whom she doesn't care, and living in a house she loathes. Her overriding goal is to become attractive to other men. She is beautiful but she lacks the wealth that she feels she needs. It is interesting all Mathilde thinks about is being

wealthy and desirable. She is unhappy in her marriage and longs to have control of her own destiny.

Interestingly, it is not until the sixteenth paragraph of *The Story of an Hour* that the author reveals the Christian name of the protagonist as Louise. Prior to that, we only know her as Mrs Mallard. It is possible that Chopin chose to do this to show that, before her husband's death, Louise had only been a wife and had no real individuality or individual identity. When her husband died, or so she believed, she was free of the identity of marriage and was liberated to be her own person again. This is displayed through the introduction of her Christian name when her sister shouts, " Louise, open the door!" (Chopin, 1894).

Both authors have used imagery and symbolism as literary techniques in their stories, and have done so very effectively. The central image to De Maupassant's story is, of course, the necklace. This item of jewellery appears to be laden with symbolism, again adding to the theme. It is classy and striking and, therefore, seems to be of high value. However, despite its appearance, it turns out to be a fake. The necklace could be seen as a symbol of wealth, as it is in many ways throughout *The Necklace*. Just like " wealth," the necklace is what drives Mathilde's yearning. It is possible that the disclosure of the necklace's fakeness is supposed to echo the fakeness of Mathilde's vision of wealth.

There seems to be a link between wealth and appearance, in this story, for example when Mathilde seems more beautiful when wearing the necklace

and her new dress. Therefore, taking this into account, perhaps the necklace symbolizes not only wealth, but appearance as well. Of course, in context the word "appearance" does not just refer to a person's physical appearance, but everything which is visible to the rest of the world. Mathilde is miserable because of the appearance of her run down house, and the way that not having money means that she cannot impress others. The necklace is stylish, and it provides her with the chance of fulfilling her dreams, albeit for just one evening at the party. However, despite appearances, the necklace is worthless. In this way, it mirrors Mathilde's position while at the party: she manages to mislead people there but, in fact, she is not actually rich, and she goes home at the end of the party to her life in the shabby house.

That the necklace is fake could contain some ethical symbolism. It could mean that appearances are, essentially, fake. While the setting signifies wealth and appearance, Mathilde's lack of money contrasts with this. Suffering from poverty causes her appearance to deteriorate, but it makes her be a more responsible and conscientious person. Therefore, it could be argued that poverty makes a person appreciate what little they do have, whereas wealth makes people greedy. On the other hand, Maupassant does not overtly hand us this message. It is, essentially, down to the interpretation of the individual reader. Furthermore, a reader's personal financial status may cause them to interpret the story differently to readers of different statuses.

In *The Story of an Hour*, the springtime mentioned in paragraph five represents the different and thrilling life that Mrs Mallard believes to lie

ahead of her. Also, the patches of blue sky mentioned in paragraph six symbolise the arrival of her different, and more desirable, life. In both stories, the various images act as symbols to the thoughts and feelings of the characters. In this way, the author's chosen theme and tone of each story is emphasized further through the use of symbolism.

The point of view in *The Necklace* is an interesting one. It is in third person omniscient and the narrative centres, almost exclusively, around Mathilde. However, unlike many stories, the narrator does not speak from the protagonist's viewpoint. Rather, he speaks about her as if he were an outsider. When he mentions her near the start, he says she is "one of those girls." The narrator is definitely omniscient as he looks into her husband's mind when he chooses to do so. *The Story of an Hour* is also written in third-person narrative and is told by an omniscient narrator.

Both Mathilde and Mrs Mallard are repressed women who have been forced into lives which they never wanted. Neither of these women are content with their husbands and both long for lives without them. Mrs Mallard shows tremendous relief when she believes her husband to be dead but, when she learns that he is not, she herself dies. Mathilde is a stronger character but, nonetheless, strives for a different life, desperate to be free of her husband. Both stories clearly demonstrate themes of gender roles, especially regarding middle-class women in the nineteenth century.

## References

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