

# The death of the maiden motif in "where are you going, where have you been?" and ...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Author Joyce Carol Oates of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" and author Kate Chopin of "The Story of an Hour" use the "death of the maiden" motif effectively to support a theme of unwarranted patriarchy throughout their writing. Both authors use this motif effectively by portraying men as death, who render their women victims as helpless and vulnerable. The connection both these authors make to "death of the maiden" motif does not become clear until the end of each story, however.

Oates in "Where..." begins her story off by characterizing Connie as a relatively independent and rebellious young teenager. Connie often sneaks off with her girlfriends and sometimes goes off to meet young boys. Her summer nights were filled with "[running] across, breathless with daring" (Oates 315). During one of this escapades, Connie comes across a rather peculiar man that tells Connie "Gonna get you, baby" (Oates 316). Connie quickly forgets the encounter. Oates most likely introduced Connie in this way to depict her as someone very innocent and free, and Connie's disregard of the odd man is another example of her innocence.

In "The Story of an Hour", the story begins off with Mrs. Mallard discovering that her husband has died. She immediately weeps, yet when alone immediately expresses her magnitude of joy at her newfound freedom. At this point in the story, the reader feels shocked at her reaction of her husband's death, and then understanding when it is revealed why she is truly happy. She soaks in the feelings of her freedom and realizes that "a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely" (Chopin 654). Chopin introduced Mrs. Mallard in this way to make a special

example of the magnitude her husband's oppression held on Mrs. Mallard and the relief she felt when released from it.

Both Connie and Mrs. Mallard are free from the restraints of men in the beginning of these stories. Connie has not yet been oppressed from men and her youthfulness and rebellion exemplify this. Mrs. Mallard, after being fettered in her prison of marriage and oppressed from her husband, is suddenly free at his death. Both authors portray these women as especially free at the beginning of these stories to show that Connie and Mrs. Mallard are at their best when not chained down by men.

In "Where..." the story moves on to Connie in quite a predicament. A man, Arnold Friend, arrives unexpectedly to Connie's home. At first Connie is unsure of the man. Arnold Friend is depicted at the beginning of their conversation as very friendly. His own name suggests friendship along with the writing on his car of a grinning face (Oates 318). However, as Connie and Arnold's conversation goes on and she does not immediately go for a ride with him, he begins to fall apart. Arnold has transformed from a friendly and young man to someone who "stood there so stiffly relaxed, pretending to be relaxed . . . and had no intention of ever moving again" (Oates 320). Once Connie realizes his actions and behavior as odd she finally begins to distrust him. Arnold reacts to Connie's distrust by suddenly demanding Connie "we ain't leaving until you come with us" (Oates 321). Arnold continues to pester and threaten Connie to come with her. Oates reveals Arnold's true self slowly in this way to present Connie as helpless among his lies and threats. Connie continues to repeat useless excuses in response to Arnold saying "I'm your

lover... I'll come inside you where it's all secret" (Oates 322). Connie remains standing, only able to say "Get out of here!" (Oates 322). At the beginning of the story, the reader feels put off by Connie's selfish personality. Yet when Connie begins talking to Arnold and does not know the danger he holds, the reader quickly becomes worried about Connie and her safety. Oates invokes this emotion in the reader to make her argument on the patriarchal society more effective.

In the middle of "The Story of an Hour", Chopin goes into detail of Mrs. Mallard's reaction to her husband's death. She is happy at Brently's death, yet Mrs. Mallard does recall that her husband "had never looked save with love upon her" and that she "would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death" (Chopin 654). Mrs. Mallard is clearly sad at her husband's death, yet her feelings of her life now "[belonging] to her absolutely" was stronger (Chopin 654). Mrs. Mallard would no longer have to experience "[the] powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature" (Chopin 654). Chopin most likely mentioned that Brently was not cruel to his wife to show that kind men can also hold a cast iron prison over women. During this time in society, Mrs. Mallard could not ask for divorce and she could never leave her husband and their marriage except at either one of their deaths. Brently, however, could apply for divorce at any time. Chopin effectively uses Mrs. Mallard's exaggerated happiness at her freedom to portray the outrageousness of which men inflict their powerful will over others and women unable to leave it.

Oates and Chopin portray patriarchy in their writings in very different ways that is most noticeable in the middle of their stories. Oates presents Connie as a young girl untouched from the overwhelming power of men, and then introduced to it in the form of Arnold Friend. Connie is unable to resist his threats, and easily gives in despite her many concerns. Connie is rendered helpless despite what seems every opportunity for her to get away. Chopin portrays the patriarchal society in the story of a woman that has already experienced it. Chopin describes the extent to which the power of men hold over women by describing Mrs. Mallard's exaggerated reaction to becoming free from it. Both Oates and Chopin use perfect and striking examples of oppression on women. In regard to "the death of the maiden" motif, both stories are at the point where both women are defenseless to death, or men. Connie is helpless to Arnold, and Mrs. Mallard was helpless in her marriage before her husband's death.

At the end of "Where..." Connie begins to realize the power men can hold over her. Arnold repeatedly threatens that he can always get to her and that "this place you are now- inside your daddy's house- is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down anytime" (Oates 325). Connie continues to try to find a way out of this situation, but she is unable to. She suddenly realizes that "her pounding heart... for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers... this body that wasn't really hers either" (Oates 325). The reader feels angry that Connie is not trying to do more to get away. She is inside her house safe and with a telephone, yet seems unable to do anything but bend to the will of Arnold. Oates does this to exaggerate and

draw attention to the overall significance of the oppression Connie is experiencing. She is helpless to the will of Arnold. Connie goes out of the house and joins Arnold, and most likely to face her death. The "death of the maiden" motif becomes most clear here. Connie "belongs to a tradition of domesticated Eves; for them Satan's entrance into the garden... is the approach of... Arnold Friend" (Gillis 66). Connie finally succumbs to death and probable rape at the hands of a man.

At the end of "The Story of an Hour," Mrs. Mallard goes downstairs with her sister. Brently Mallard then walks inside and despite Richard attempting to block him from view, Mrs. Mallard dies at the sight of him. (Chopin 654). It is not explicitly said, but Mrs. Mallard most likely died at the sight of her husband because she realized that her life as a free woman was abruptly taken away from her. Mrs. Mallard could not taste freedom and have it snatched away and still live with it. Chopin does this to instill the fact that "... the position of women in the late nineteenth-century American society as so bleak that the attempt to break from the life-denying limitations of patriarchal society is itself self-destructive (Cunningham 51). The reader at this point feels nothing but shock and anger that Mrs. Mallard must end her life because she can no longer withstand the oppression her husband and her marriage held over her.

Both stories parallel the "death of the maiden motif" most clearly at their end. The death of both Connie and Mrs. Mallard has ultimately shown that men will always deliver women to their ultimate sacrifice. Whether that

sacrifice be their freedom, their life, or their strength in themselves, men will always bring them to their weakest point in this patriarchal society.