

# Protagonists' responses to social constructs of gender



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The social constructs of gender are manifested through the forced institution of marriage in Kate Chopin's "La Belle Zoraïde" and "The Story of an Hour." The protagonists in each story experience suppressed emotions in response to the social institution of marriage, which limits their female individuality. When either protagonist attempts to challenge these social constructs, they are afflicted with an internal turmoil that manifests itself physically and externally. Male minor characters in each story incite the protagonist to challenge social constructs, whereas female minor characters deter the protagonists' challenges of these social constructs. Chopin employs symbolism to illustrate the constraints of the protagonist and additionally employs imagery to establish an atmosphere that conveys the influence of social constructs. Kate Chopin develops the internal turmoil of the protagonist as a response to social limitations of gender. By challenging the social constructs of gender, the protagonists' attempts to relieve themselves of suppressed emotions are futile. Chopin employs the symbolism of bodily disease to demonstrate the effect of expressing formerly suppressed emotions. To illustrate, Chopin foreshadows physical exhibition of bodily ailment when, in dialogue with Zoraïde, Madame Delarivière states, "You deserve to have the lash laid upon you like any other slave" (36). The physical maltreatment of slaves that Madame alludes to progresses to Zoraïde's dementia at the story's conclusion. This is symbolised by the "senseless bundle of rags . . . [over which] she [draws] the mosquito bar. . . and [beside which] she [sits] contentedly" (39). This mental instability results from Zoraïde's decision to express her emotions and relieve herself of society's oppression by pursuing her love for Mézor. Mézor's physical displacement from Zoraïde encourages her to challenge the social constructs

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of gender. Chopin uses symbolism to contrast the rags, which symbolise Zoraïde's submission to social conformity, with Zoraïde's child, who symbolizes her assertion of her female identity. Zoraïde's rejection of the child at the story's conclusion signifies her dismissal of her female individuality. This is an inconclusiveness of her internal turmoil that is impelled by her attempt to express her formerly suppressed emotions. Chopin introduces Louise Mallard as being physically afflicted "with a heart trouble" (1). This progresses to death at the story's conclusion and is induced when her husband physically triumphs over his alleged death to return healthy and wholesome to the story. Mrs. Mallard's death is impelled by her attempt to express her suppressed emotions by challenging the social institution of marriage. She almost recuperates from this physical affliction when confined in the locked room. The locked room symbolises her assertion of her female individuality as she escapes the social institution of marriage to pursue her female identity. This contrasts with the opened door at the story's denouement, which symbolises Louise's return to society. This signifies the irresolute ending to her internal turmoil as Louis encounters the social constructs from which she had attempted to escape during her confinement in the locked room. The minor characters in each story introduce disturbances that incite the characters' internal conflicts. The physical displacement of Mézor results in Zoraïde's mental harm, whereas Brently's replacement incites Louise's death. The similarity in the role of the minor characters to impel the character's physical ailments is attributed to the protagonists' internal conflicts with suppressed emotions. Chopin's objective is to emphasize that the protagonists are limited to their female bodies and cannot satiate their desires; however, she treats the two minor

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characters in different ways as the protagonists experience different circumstances. Through visual imagery, Chopin establishes the mood of longing and yearning as the protagonists attempt to resolve their internal turmoil. Chopin establishes this mood through visual imagery that conveys Zoraïde's deprivation. To demonstrate, in witnessing Mézor dance the Bamboula in Congo Square, Chopin states, " Poor Zoraïde's heart grew sick in her bosom with love for le beau Mézor from the moment she saw the fierce gleam of his eye, lighted by the inspiring strains of the Bamboula . . ." (35). The epithet that Chopin uses to describe Zoraïde contrasts with the visual imagery of Mézor's dance and conveys the yearning with which Zoraïde responds to the dance. Due to social constructs, she is deprived of pursuing her love for him, but attempts to resolve this internal turmoil by watching him dance the Bamboula in Congo Square. This deprivation is further developed through the physical displacement of Mézor, " who was sold away into Georgia, or the Carolinas, . . . where he would no longer hear his Creole tongue spoken, nor dance Calinda, nor hold la belle Zoraïde in his arms" (37). The mood of longing and yearning is also established when Zoraïde is deprived of her baby. This minor character is introduced to temporarily disturb this atmosphere, as following Mézor's physical displacement, Zoraïde " took comfort . . . in the thought of her baby" (37). The atmosphere returns to one of longing and yearning when the narrator asserts that " there is no agony that a mother will not forget when she holds her first-born to her heart, and presses her lips upon the baby flesh . . ." (37-38). The fluctuating atmosphere signifies the futility of the protagonist's attempt to resolve her internal conflict. Zoraïde's deprivation is a response to the social constructs of gender. Zoraïde experiences mental seclusion

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from society when she attempts to assert her female individuality by pursuing her love for Mézor. The atmosphere of longing and yearning is incited by Madame Delarivière's decision to deprive Zoraïde of her child. Madame Delarivière intends to suppress Zoraïde's emotions and discourage her from expressing those emotions. Evidently, the atmosphere of mental instability that pervades the story's denouement is disturbed by Madame Delarivière when she introduces the child to Zoraïde and states that, "No one will ever take her from you again" (39). This demonstrates the effect of a minor character, who reconciles with social constructs, on the atmosphere in which the female protagonist is situated. Chopin establishes the mood of longing and yearning through visual imagery that invigorates Louise. To exemplify, after hearing of her husband's death, Louise confines herself to a room in order to physically seclude herself from society. Visual imagery is employed to describe the trees outside the window as being "aquiver with the new spring life" (13) and to attribute to the rain in the air "the delicious breath" (14). Both instances of visual imagery metaphorically allude to the invigoration that Louise feels as she attempts to free herself from the institution of marriage. The narrator also asserts that there "were patches of blue sky showing here and there" (17) which signifies the hopefulness that surrounds Louise's invigoration and foreshadows her assertion of female individuality when she accepts her emotions. This invigoration is physically referred to when Louise's "pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood [warms] and [relaxes] . . . her body" (34). These assertions of Louise's physical invigoration result from her submission to her emotions, which she can freely express when in the confines of the room. The atmosphere of longing and yearning relates to the reader the influence of social constructs as they have

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limited Louise's physical invigoration by inciting her physical ailment. The atmosphere of invigoration that Chopin establishes through visual imagery is disturbed by the introduction of Louise's sister, Josephine, when she interjects, ". . . open the door – you will make yourself ill" (51). The locked room invigorates Louise by isolating her from the social constructs of marriage; however, Chopin introduces a minor character who has emerged from the external world to discourage Louise from asserting her emotions. Josephine's assertion that Louise "will make [herself] ill" is ironic as the illness with which Louise was afflicted was induced by social restrictions as imposed by the institution of marriage. Josephine's disturbance of the atmosphere intends to relieve Louise of her internal turmoil by encouraging the suppression of her emotions. The seclusion of each protagonist from society in an effort to pursue her female individuality is interrupted by a female minor character who convinces the protagonist to suppress those emotions. Chopin accomplishes this by establishing atmosphere in each story, then introducing the female minor character as an atmospheric disturbance. Her objective is to demonstrate how minor characters, who reconcile with social constructs, affect the atmosphere in which the protagonists are situated. In each story, the protagonist is afflicted with an internal turmoil that is incited when the protagonist attempts to challenge the social restrictions of gender. Zoraïde and Louise both exhibit the physical detriment of challenging these social constructs as is evinced through Chopin's use of symbolism. Furthermore, Chopin situates each protagonist in an atmosphere which conveys the influence of the social construct of gender on each protagonist. Minor characters also play an important role. Evidently,

in both short stories, Chopin develops the internal turmoil of the female protagonist due to the constraints of gender that society imposes upon her.