

# A Lacanian Interpretation of Chopin's *Story of an Hour* & *Storm*

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*If by understanding human psychology...we can appreciate literature on a new level, then we should acquaint ourselves with t (his) insight.*

-Peterson

*What am I? I am in the place from which 'the universe is a flow in the purity of Non-Being' is vociferated .....This place is called Jouissance, and it is Jouissance whose absence would render the universe vain.*

-Lacan

*I always speak the truth. Not the whole because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet through this impossibility- that the truth holds onto the real.*

-Lacan

**Abstract-** Any Psychoanalytical interpretation focuses primarily on the inner workings of human mind. Freud originated psychoanalysis and Lacan reoriented it. Freud found the term 'unconscious' which Lacan modified and made the most essential subject of his Psychoanalytical theory. He believed that the desire is formed through the Symbolic Other and Imaginary other in the formation of Jouissance. He maintained that desire exists due to the presence of the Other. In naming it, the subject goes on attaining newer forms and shapes or roles. In fact, desire hides itself in discourse which never presents it fully or never gives it a full expression and as such there remains a leftover – a surplus of desire is invariably present in the discourse. This notion made Lacan to shape his faith and belief that desire is the desire of /for the Other. For him, desire is central to all human roles, endeavors or activities. It gives birth to almost all Lacanian concepts and as such is named in the presence of the Other. It is generally believed that Chopin's fiction is highly pregnant with Lacanian realm of desire or symbolic and almost all her stories seem an exploration of the self, other and social assertion of individuality. This paper will analyze & interpret Kate Chopin's *Story of an Hour* & *The Storm* through 'Lacanian lens' in order to search for newer meanings or explore modern Lacanian dimensions such as the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the aforementioned stories.

**Key Words-** Psychoanalysis; Unconscious; Lacanian; Symbolic; Jouissance

## Main Argument

Sigmund Freud is the real founder of Psychoanalysis for he placed it on the academic map of the world as a distinctive field of study. M.A.R. Habib rightly points out:

*Freud opens up a number of literary critical avenues: the linking of a creative work to an in-depth study of an author's psychology, using a vastly altered conception of human subjectivity; the tracing in art of primal psychological tendencies and conflicts; and the understanding of art and literature as integrally recurring human obsessions, fear, and anxieties (Habib 2008:89).*

Freud states that human unconscious is a repository of unfulfilled wishes, desires, dreams, repressions, suppressions, unsolved conflicts, painful experiences and emotions, fears and memories. He believes that if anything

enters mental life, it never perishes or dies. He says that unconscious gets birth at the very beginning of childhood of an individual through lost dreams, unfulfilled wishes, unhappy memories, and unhappy psychological events. This is why Lacan made the 'unconscious' the center of his study and a very debatable subject of psychoanalysis and especially his psychoanalytical theory. It was Freud who initially gave three new concepts – the *id* (forming the reservoir of libido or psychic energy), the *ego* (representing conscious life) and the *superego* (functioning as the voice of conscience and censorship). Later on, Lacan puts forward his own trajectory regarding humans through which they pass from childhood to adulthood. His three newly created terms – need, demand, and desire – roughly corresponded to the three phases of human development or three stages in which humans grow and live their lives: The *Imaginary*, the *Symbolic*, and the *Real*. Lacan considered 'Other' as a multilayered and multifaceted term which refers to numerous things and

meanings – its own image, desires and other people – in an individual's life. He treats a child's mirror stage / image as the first 'Other' for it. Here, the child realizes the distinction between *Self* and *Other*. From this stage onwards, the child knows that it lives searching 'others' and Lacan refers this search as desire / loss of object as *objet petit a*. The little other goes on changing with an individual's age and roles. It lives in Lacanian *imaginary* realm. However, the big 'Other' is Lacanian Symbolic i.e., *law-of-the-father*, societal norms, conventions, language, and exterior police. The individual has to accept it otherwise the individual would grow as an abnormal being. Lacan believes that language and speech originate from the *Other* and hence 'the unconscious is the discourse of the Other'. Pertinently, for a child, it is the mother who initially emerges as the big *Other*. It is she who receives the child's primitive cries and gives them a particular message and sense. It is this entry into language which is the first stage for him / her to become a prey to desires which never come to an end. In fact, on the basis of this notion, Lacan stated throughout his life that desire is the desire of the Other. Tyson says:

*Our desires, beliefs, biases, and so forth are constructed for us as a result of our immersion in the Symbolic Order, especially as that immersion is carried out by our parents and influenced by their own responses to the Symbolic Order. This is what Lacan means by his claim that "desire is always the desire of the other" (See, Seminar Bk. XI: 235).*

For Lacan, desire is the main power behind all human acts. He places main focus on human satiation of desire through various acts and endeavours. In fact, Professor Ruth Parkin-Gounelas makes it clear that for Lacan pleasure or enjoyment (*Jouissance*) was a libidinal imperative, whose frustration, however, lies at the heart of human suffering. The subject does not simply satisfy a desire, he enjoys desiring. In lacking the satisfying object, desire endlessly pursues a phantom satisfaction, deriving *Jouissance* only from the pursuit.

Similarly, Lacanian Real is a realm which is beyond the comprehension of an average human being as it is a state wherein an individual doesn't experience crisis. Here, an individual is free from all worldly desires / demands and hence an individual is fully liberalized as he /she stays outside the linguistic domain. It is a state which is completely pre-linguistic. It is a place beyond language, and unrepresentable in language. The Real in itself is undifferentiated, it bears no fissure. The Lacanian concept of the 'Real' is certainly a difficult concept and as such beyond the comprehension of meaning of an average reader because it lies almost outside the world created by ideologies, which our societies generally use in order to explain 'existence'. According to Tyson:

*One way to think of the Real is as that which is beyond all meaning — making systems that which lie outside the world*

*created by the ideologies society uses to explain existence (Tyson 2006:32).*

It is the uninterpretable dimension of existence; an existence without the filters and buffers of our signifying or meaning-making systems. It is the experience of an individual, may be even only for a moment, to feel that there is no purpose or meaning in life; and other rules that govern society are hoaxes or mistakes or the mere results of chance. For Lacan, the real is impossible: that which occurs beyond the entire framework of signification. The real is a sign of its own absence, pointing to itself as merely signifier. Not only opposed to the *Imaginary*, the *Real* is also located outside the *Symbolic*. Unlike the latter which is constituted in terms of oppositions, i.e., presence/absence, "there is no absence in the *Real*." Whereas the Symbolic opposition presence/absence implies the possibility that something may be missing from the Symbolic, "the Real is always in its place".

Viewed in this perspective love, beauty, truth and God are some of the evident instances of the Lacanian real. Love is not desire but an escape from all determinations and conditionings which are associated with desire. It demands sacrifice, the sacrifice of ego and, therefore, presupposes transcendence of ego and, therefore, demands acceptance of fate, as there is no desiring willing self that wishes things cut according to its own measure. It is not a rejection of the law of desire or symbolic domain but transcendence of them. Lacan too believes that love is to give; it is a continual act of self-sacrifice and an escape from personality. It is absolute and unconditional giving, and denial of all claims of self. Accordingly, lover just is: his action is no action because he has only needs but not demands and desires and also because he has no need of recognition from the Other, a reciprocal act of love from the Other. Thus, it is an open death of *self* for the sake of the *Other*.

It is pertinent here to state that the research methodology used for accomplishing this study is Lacanian psychoanalytic literary theory especially the desire domain. As such, Lacanian above cited Psychoanalytical notions & concepts will be applied to various scenes and characters within the given texts. After conducting a thorough research of these texts, the instances will be identified in Chopin's select novels for completing this study. Pertinently, psychoanalytic reading has been practiced in the literary paradigms since long, which has continuously evolved to transform into a heterogeneous interpretive tradition. As Celine Surprenant quotes in this regard, "Psychoanalytic literary criticism does not constitute a unified field. However, all variants endorse, at least to a certain degree, the idea that literature ... is fundamentally entwined with psyche" (Surprenant 2018: 200). Lois Tyson states that while conducting a Lacanian psychoanalytical study or interpretation the researcher has to see:

*In what ways does the text seem to reveal characters' emotional investments in the Symbolic Order, the Imaginary Order,*

*the Mirror Stage, or what Lacan calls objet petit a? Does any part of the text seem to represent Lacan's notion of the Real? Do any Lacanian concepts account for so much of the text that we might say the text is structured by one or more of these concepts.* (Tyson 2006: 38-39)

Now a thorough study shows that in most of the Kate Chopin's stories, one comes across such characters and protagonists who generally spend a lot of their time in craving and thinking about themselves. They seem to be self-centered developing their own ego and trying to win the place that they have been craving for themselves over years in life. Each character has "the self" of his or her own or a 'self-identity' developed through the interactions and struggle with others. Her protagonists and many other characters perform functions that have social and individual significance. There are evident instances in her stories where the critical focus is on the way his protagonists fulfill their obligations to themselves and to others. The process of realizing one's self through a network of socio-cultural institutions is the staple reality that we find in her stories.

Lacanian Symbolic Order in his characters who accept *the Law-of-the-father* and live a normal life that is full of aspiration and desires. Among Chopin's two stories *The Story of an Hour* & *The Storm* are important in the sense that the main characters in these stories display a complete detachment from the accepted norms of life and even from conventional social restrictions. However, their partial, or even total acceptance of a meaningful engagement with life or with the living, comes after their encounter with *the Law-of-the-father*.

A detailed study of the story, *The Storm*, shows that heroine's romance and sexual passion for Alcee flows like the water of a river that displays the continuous flow. She violates the strict codes of traditional morality. Though, we find her experiencing the best while satiating her sexual drives or desires, in the Lacanian language, continuously till she returns to normality as a new human being.

This can be termed as Calixta's living life in a state of Lacanian *Jouissance*. The story ends on a true-to-life-note with Calixta finding new resources of love in the conventional setting and welcoming her new obligations as a householder and this way accepting the Lacanian Law stating:

In *The Story of an Hour* & *The Storm*, we see characters who fall blindly in love ignoring the traditional norms of society, who wants to set an example by realizing the Lacanian desire. *The Story of an Hour* and *The Storm* by Kate Chopin are heavily loaded with Lacanian concepts of *the Real, the imaginary and the symbolic*. In *The Story of an Hour*, the news about Mallard's husband's death places her into a traumatic state which leaves her speechless. Her case as it is stated in the narrative is a clear example of Lacanian Real. When Mallard receives the news about her

husband's death, (Mallard) "... did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms." – The aftermath of the shock for Mallard resembles the child's pre-mirror stage when her intellectual and linguistic caliber fail to interact with the outside world as if it does not exist. She becomes blacked out and cut off from her surrounding as she expresses her willingness to withdraw into her room. As the intensity of the situation alleviates "she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her." As she is all alone by herself, silence prevails and through silence she seems to address the difficult phase in which she finds herself in. She is wholly in pain and is totally inarticulate. "There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul."

In view of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, *The story of an Hour* allows for clearer insight into the idea of the unconscious as the most positive aspect of the human psyche as it cuts across the different realms of the human mind. However, the mirror stage with its apparent negativity and detrimental effects on Mallard is sort of presenting her to a new phase towards attaining control of her selfhood which she had lost only to find it again uplifted with all the tools towards achieving better life. The new phase which is beginning to show is presented as follows: "There were patches of blue sky showing here and there through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other in the west facing her window."

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the emergence of the imaginary order underscores a state of duality between the *self* and the *other* which is reflected in the clouds being the *self*, and the blue sky, the *other*. Again in light of Lacanian theory the imaginary stage is not only as a moment which reveals division in the self or the subject, but a moment of creation of the process of expansion on many levels in several directions which finally culminates in the formation of Freudian ego. In Lacanian terms Mallard's crossing into the mirror stage has already put her in the process of reevaluating her status as a woman in a way contrary to the stage before the mirror stage i.e., the real. As an example of such extensive motivational pursuit which the subject consciously and unconsciously glides into, is what Lacan comes to refer to as desire which according to Lacan's theory leads to or indicates the lack. A term which Lacan uses to highlight the state of deficiency which desire generates throughout man's existence. When a person shows a desire for something this desire indicates a need for the thing desired.

On the whole, Lacan associates the imaginary phase with the growing sense of the self and its need to evolve into a new thing, person and level which Lacan calls the other. (However, *The Story of an Hour*, taken from a Lacanian perspective, can be integrated as a representation of the human psyche in action.) Although Mallard's vision of what is happening in the post trauma phase is vague at



least at the outset, the upcoming stage registers a moment of transition and transformation where some kind of separation occurs from the earlier submissive and passive Mallard and the new split in her life begins to take shape of the other. Although her experience of the “patches of blue sky” is not yet ripe and inchoate, it is natural at this stage when her new self is in the process of formation. At this stage, she is largely unconscious and mystified. That is to say, she is a blank gazer whose traditional and passive existence continue to control and restrain her abilities to make the right decision towards effecting a breakthrough in her life. Hers, “was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought.”

However, the ambiguous state continues to affect and dominate Mallard’s with a prevailing sense of apprehension and fear. The patches of the blue sky remain the source of this fluctuating sense of fear blended with a meager and tiny touches of change to the better. “There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know.” Therefore, the dominating feeling at this point in time is that of confusion; she is overridden by obscurity and therefore becomes divided between a forthcoming feeling though “subtle and elusive to name” yet, has some sort of relief in it; ...she felt it creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.” And a feeling of something coming to “possess her” and re-impose on her the earlier state of existence which she decries and detests. Therefore, she puts up a defense against this coming *bête noire*. “ ..., ...she was striving to beat it back with her will- as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.”

The above stage in Mallard’s post trauma experience is a befitting representation of the imaginary phase in Lacanian psychoanalytical theory which marks the creation of the ideal I which again marks the subject’s drift into the world of language. This stage according to Lacan is inevitable and crucial to the growth of the human psyche as the human subject is bound to pass through at the age between six and eighteen months. So, the shock experience which Mallard received puts her face to face with the new Mallard she wants and desires to be. She for the first time encounters her newly born self who though not sufficiently grown to the level of achieving complete autonomy and self-hood, still it aspires through the ideal I to grab and attain whatever desires the *petit other* and the *big other* want her to achieve.

Now at this juncture, Mallard strikes a deal with her other when she expresses her desire for the first time to be free from the yoke of the past. She is crossing through language to the other level of presenting herself as free for the first time. So, language has introduced her to a new realm of existence where her earlier life within the patriarchal society of the time denied her even the right to think and live independently from the male gender. “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!”” Therefore, Mallard’s post

trauma is the watershed stage in her life which stands for the mirror stage the moment when she steps into the realm of language and into autonomy and the realization of her other’s desires. She enters a new phase in her life when fear and passivity are replaced by courage and boldness. “The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes.” Now she is clear-sighted and watchful after having been transformed into a woman with the ideal I that unfolds before her what never crossed her mind to think about. Her eyes “ stayed keen and bright” unwavering with the new prospect of freedom and her body too is in a state of unprecedented relaxation. “ Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.”

Moreover, her perception of what she is in now is no more repulsive to her, but a state of existence she begins cherishing and would never retreat from. “ She did not stop...” Mrs Mallard’s pursuit to discover her independent selfhood is now is an inexorable duty of her irrespective of how heart-breaking the experience might be. It is now about her freedom and her independence which cannot be weighed against anything how precious it may be.

*“She knew that she would weep..... welcome.”*

In addition to her present stand on her freedom as a personal issue, she shifts her perspective to handle the issue of marriage as a relationship which is to her remains defective. This relationship, namely marriage is about will struggle where a man or woman tries to have control of the other part of the relationship. She now expresses her optimism at the upcoming stage in her life as an independent woman with no restraining and checking influences which try to impose itself on her. “There would be no one to live for.....” Taken from the point of view of Lacan such a drift and shift in the way of reviewing her position was not possible without the shock following her husband’s death. This shock represents for her the mirror stage which brought in Mallard’s the other, ideal I. Therefore, Mallard’s state of consciousness at this juncture stands in opposition to her pre-mirror stage when she had to live in harmony with her surrounding unheeding the all types of oppression she encounters as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Again, Mallard is evolving as a rational being unlike the earlier stage before the trauma. The earlier stage before the trauma was about a woman so fully in harmony with what she was as a woman in a patriarchal society. Now she is a woman with a mature sensibility. She under-sizes the importance of love if it undermines and repress the individual’s aspiration for an independent will and self-determination. “And yet she had loved him— sometimes.....” However, her version of love and even her otherwise, her hatred for him is a question about the futility of love in the absence of “self-assertion which she values high as irreplaceable. She regards “self-assertion...as the strongest impulse of her being!”

Again, this intense feeling of freedom travels with her growing sense of becoming an individual. She again and

again reverts to the same whisper which unfolds a deep sensation of excitement waiting to make known to her household.

Like the Story of an Hour, Kate Chopin's story *The Storm* stands for Lacan's second stage. It is the knob on the door of the impending phase, the mirror stage where Calixta finds herself face to face with Lee, whose arrival at the scene incites her to initiate into a new phase of life guided by the new manifestation of the *self*, the ideal *I*. Calixta like other characters of Chopin, experiences a segue and transformation as soon as she discovers her *other* who not only prompt them to swerve from their past practices of living in accordance with laws dictated by society, but it buttresses their needs to transverse this stage which is dominated by humble and content experiences. At this stage, Calixta wants to become the duplicate of the reflection in the mirror which the storm has facilitated her to be.

However, the arrival of the storm leads Calixta to encounter a train of conflicting actions before she yields fully to the calls of the *other*. Calixta's at this very juncture is a bit removed from adopting the status of an independent person despite having a newly unified existence in relation with the ideal *I*. Therefore, she stands somewhere between her past self, the pre-mirror stage and the new self, the mirror stage which is beginning to illuminate her passage along a different track.

On sensing the arrival of the storm " [Calixta]got up hurriedly and went about closing windows and doors." However, the storm leads Calixta to move backward to her past instead of trying to explore new possibilities which unfolds her strong bonds with the pre-mirror stage where she used to enjoy a unified and harmonious existence. Therefore, Calixta continues to live under the influence of the pre-mirror stage in the absence of an effective ego at least in the initial stage. In the same way, at the time when she gets into a more intimate relationship with Alcee, she persists in the middle of this passionate encounter to go back and forth between experiencing fully this transitional moment of her life and flinging back to an earlier time. She hopes that her husband "...Bobint's got sense enough to come in out of the cyclone." Furthermore, Calixta preserves the same level of intensesness and anxiety in regards to her family's safety during the storm. "She went and stood at the window with a greatly disturbed look on her face." At another point she "put her hands on her eyes, and with a cry, staggered backward." And to alleviate things for her, Alcee "encircled" with his arm. With this in mind, Calixta's indecisiveness about bettering her life in line with the ideal *I* of the imaginary stage which has become a part of her new life is due to the fact that the time is yet unripe for the ideal *I* to lead an independent existence of the earlier pre-mirror stage.

However, the moment of decision comes in and Calixta goes far beyond the clouds into the vast area of freedom outside the bounds of traditions that have for so long captivated her and confiscated her personal life attitudes and decisions. Her passionate encounter with Alcee has

given her and for the first time the opportunity to feel the taste of a new life, designed by her not in accordance with the pre-mirror perception where life is not designed, but given. The storm and Calixta's experience with Alcee has now brought her to be oblivious about her family members and the dangers they might encounter during the storm. " They did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms. She was a revelation in that dim, mysterious chamber; as white as the couch she lay upon. Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily..." Instead, she has grown selfish with herself at the center of attention. In the meantime, the Ideal *I* takes over, triggers and motivates Calixta to act in response to its needs being her object of desire.

The third section of the story corresponds with Lacan's symbolic stage where the subject incepts into the world of language. Consequently, the navigation of the subject into the realm of language expresses his/her inherent and infinite state of lack. According to Lacan the symbolic stage of language is the most tragic stage in a subject's life. That is to say, it is the stage where the subject acquiesces and identifies submissively with the *other* in an unending series of associations. Moreover, the subject's burgeoning state of illumination of his life and society's laws contribute to the subject's irresistible expression of desire infinitely. In this section, Calixta is more than willing to manipulate and act out her love for her family after returning from the market after the storm subsided. She has already risen to a new level of perception where she can outmaneuver her family and society's conventions and eliminate any doubts about her infidelity. On receiving her husband and son, Bibi, Calixta says "Oh, Bobint! You back! My! But I was uneasy. W'ere you been during the rain? An' Bibi? he ain't wet? he ain't hurt?" She had clasped Bibi and was kissing him effusively." Again, when Bobint informs her about the shrimps he brought her, she becomes exhilarated "'Shrimps! Oh, Bobint! you too good fo' anything!" and she gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek that resounded, "J'vous rponds, we'll have a feas' to-night! umph-umph!"

However, Calixta's rebellious nature against the norms of society as shown in the third section of the story, unfolds Calixta's promiscuous nature far beyond any further aspirations at achieving more rights. Calixta in Lacan's terms is getting trapped throughout the story between the imaginary and the pre-mirror stages. She neither could eradicate in totality the pressing weight of her past nor could find herself fully attracted to the new aspirations of the other. In the third section and towards the end of the story, she regresses to the pre-mirror stage by restoring strong ties with her family, being a loving mother who honors and prioritizes conventions over anything else. Moreover, Calixta's case may be diagnosed as suffering from some kind of a delayed *ego* strength or *dyslexia* which undermine her natural pursuit to become something new at every stage of her life. However, her regressive attitudes which brought her to spin around the same

motives and desires which she had earlier explain the fact about her entrapment between the two stages, *the Real* and the *Imaginary*.

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