

# On the Spatial Narrative of “The Story of an Hour”

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## Abstract

“The Story of an Hour”, a short story written by American novelist Kate Chopin in the late 19th century, tells the psychological journey of Mrs. Mallard, the protagonist in an hour. Among the so many perspectives to study this story, spatial narrative is an important one. Based on relevant theories of spatial narrative, this paper attempts to explore the narrative art of space from the aspects of narrative of topographical space, mental space and textual space, and social space so as to provide a new way to interpret the story.

**Keywords:** Kate Chopin, The Story of an Hour, spatial narrative

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Kate Chopin and “The Story of an Hour”

Kate Chopin, whose original name was Kate O’Flaherty, was born in St. Louis in 1851. Her mother was a French descendant and her father was of Irish origin. Her father was one of the civic leaders who died in a bridge accident. Thus, Chopin was brought up by a family of single and independent women. Chopin was following a conventional path as a housewife until an unfortunate tragedy, that is, the untimely death of her husband, altered the course of her life. She became a talented and prolific novelist and short story writer. She is one of the first feminist authors in the 20th century and credited with introducing the modern feminist literary movement.

“The Story of an Hour” is deemed as the prelude of a series of her works portraying females’ awakening of self-consciousness and revolt. It was originally published in *Vogue* in 1984 with the name of “The Dream of an Hour”, and later was reprinted in *St. Louis Life* in 1895 as “The Story of an Hour”. Informed of the news of her husband’s death in a railroad accident, Mrs. Mallard, the protagonist with a heart trouble, reacts with immediate grief and then stays at her room upstairs alone where she gradually becomes happy at the news in that she can live for herself with body and soul free in the coming days without her husband. Later, she descends the stairs “like a goddess of Victory” (Chopin, 209) with her sister, only to find that her husband, Brently Mallard, returns safe and sound. Her joy turns to shock and despair, and she dies eventually. The doctors make a diagnosis that “she had died of heart disease — of joy that kills” (Chopin, 210).

### 1.2 Spatial Narrative

Narrative has two important characteristics: time and space, which are interconnected and complementary ways to reflect people’s life. However, for a long time, time has always been placed in a dominant position, receiving much more attention than space in literature. For example, Aristotle believes that plot is the first element of tragedy which exists in a temporal narrative in his *Poetics*. In the second half of the 20th century, with the introduction of the dimension of space into the field of social sciences, space began to receive scholars’ attention in academia. Thus, the phenomenon of “spatial turn” emerged in narratology, which is regarded as one of the most significant events in the second half of the 20th century.

In 1945, Frank published “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, in which he formally put forward the concept of “spatial form” and studied the works of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, James Joyce and other modernist writers. He claims that “modern literature, exemplified by such writers as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust and James Joyce, is moving in the direction of spatial form” (Frank, 225), showing the trend of spatialization in modern and post-modern poetry and novels. “Spatial form” is the author’s breaking up and dissolving of chronological sequence by means of juxtaposition, suspension of time-flow and intersection of time and space, replacing the process of time with the synchronicity of space, which is a kind of artistic effect on spatial

implication. The task of readers is to connect and refer to the combination of words, images, and symbols scattered throughout the text through various hints and clues set by the author, so as to obtain an overall impression of the novel. Due to the interruption of the chronological sequence of narrative, what contains in the same space increases, making the plot show a synchronic effect, thereby providing readers with a sense of simultaneous reading (Chen, 7). Joseph Frank is deemed as one of the forerunners in the exploration of spatial narrative. He pioneers the later research of space in literary works and his analysis of spatial narrative deeply influences later scholars.

Lefebvre analyses the production of space in his monograph *The Production of Space* in 1974. According to him, space is not a static noun but a dynamic verb demonstrating the process of production and the interrelationship between the produced. Space is a product “fundamental to a ‘form’ imposed upon phenomena, upon things upon physical materiality” (Lefebvre, 26). He claims that “the fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical-nature; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social” (11). Thus, space is divided into three types by him, respectively physical space, mental space and social space.

The Israeli scholar Zoran established a clear and complete model of spatial structure in his “Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative” in 1984, making a clear division and detailed explanation of space in the narrative text from the vertical and horizontal levels. At the vertical level, Zoran considers the space reproduced in the text as a whole, which can be divided into topographical space, chronological space and textual space. Topographical space is static, so it can be directly described in words. Chronological space is dynamic with synchronic and diachronic relationships. The synchronic relationship refers to the complex interrelation between various objects in the narrative of a text, while the diachronic relationship means that the movement trajectory of characters and the setting of plots determine the direction of spatial conversion from one place to another. Textual space is mainly concerned with the selection of language, the linear narrative of the text and narrative perspective. Generally speaking, the textual space is regarded as the narrative techniques adopted by the author to express the space. Realizing that space is a complex entity composed of many parts which themselves have obvious differences and discrepancies, Zoran then divides space into the total space, spatial complex, and units of space from the whole to the part on the horizontal level (315).

## 2. Spatial Narrative of “The Story of an Hour”

### 2.1 Narrative of Topographical Space in “The Story of an Hour”

According to Zoran, the topographical level is the representation of the highest level of space and is independent of the time structure of the world and the order of the text, also known as “topographic spatial structure” (316). Topographical space refers to the places where the story takes place in the novel, that is, geographic space that presents in the text, which is also similar to physical space proposed by Lefebvre. “Space is never empty; it always implies a meaning...every group of places and objects has a center, and this is, therefore, true of the house, the city or the whole world” (Lefebvre, 154). Topographical space not only functions as the setting of the story but also drives the development of the plots. Moreover, it can be used to analyze and explore the image of the characters since the characters may behave differently in different spaces.

According to spatial conversion, “The Story of an Hour” can be divided into the following parts, each part also corresponding to each period of time: First, Mrs. Mallard is informed of the bad news about her husband’s death in the train accident with Mrs. Mallard, her sister Josephine and Mr. Mallard’s friend Richards all gathering in the living room. Second, Richards receives the information of the railroad disaster with Mr. Mallard’s name in the list of “killed” in the newspaper office. Third, Mrs. Mallard weeps bitter tears upon hearing the bad news in the living room. Fourth, Mrs. Mallard vents her emotions to her heart’s content and imagines her future life without her husband in her room upstairs. Fifth, Mrs. Mallard descends the stairs to the living room when Mr. Mallard opens the door and enters the house unexpectedly. Sixth, Mrs. Mallard dies and the doctors make the diagnosis that she dies of heart disease — of joy that kills when other people including Mr. Mallard, Josephine and Richards are all present in the living room. From the above analysis, we can find that in terms of chronological order, the first space of the whole story is the railroad, which is closely related to the news of Mr. Mallard’s death since an accident happens there and Mr. Mallard’s name is exactly in the list of the killed. The next space is the newspaper office where Mr. Mallard’s friend Richards receives the death news. He checks the “truth” of the death news of Mr. Mallard through two telegrams and hastens to the house of Mr. Mallard to inform Mr. Mallard’s families of the sad message before other “less careful, less tender friends”, which naturally contributes to the development of the plot and the conversion of space.

The living room is a main space in this short story. As we know, it is not only a place where family members can gather together but also a place where the host can entertain guests and friends. It is an intermediary space for

people to keep in contact with the outside world. Generally speaking, people have to behave in accordance with social etiquette here. Knowing that Mrs. Mallard suffers from heart disease, Josephine and Richards tell the death news with great caution for fear that Mrs. Mallard's sudden and deep distress would trigger her heart disease. Josephine "told her in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing" (Chopin, 209), while Richards "had only taken the time to assure himself of its truth by a second telegram, and had hastened to forestall any less careful, less tender friend in bearing the sad message" (Chopin, 209). After hearing the death news, Mrs. Mallard "wept at once, with sudden, wild abandonment, in her sister's arms" (Chopin, 209). Although this kind of reaction may not be the same with most women encountering the same circumstance, it still meets Josephine and Richards' expectations and conforms to the mainstream ethical ideas of the society at that time. The living room with the presence of outsiders is a public space, in which a good wife must conduct herself in accordance with traditional social ethics. Besides, it should be noted that in the living room, a public space, Mrs. Mallard just weeps without uttering a word. On the surface, it seems that Josephine has gained the right to speak in the public space of the living room, but that is actually based on the premise that she compromises with the patriarchal society (Zhang, 60).

Mrs. Mallard's room upstairs can be considered as the most significant space in "The Story of An Hour" since it is there that Mrs. Mallard's self-consciousness is awakened. Virginia Woolf believes that a woman must have a room of her own in which she can think quietly in her *A Room of One's Own* (46). After the storm of grief, Mrs. Mallard moves to her room upstairs alone. Contrary to the living room mentioned in the last paragraph, the room can be deemed as a private and personal space for Mrs. Mallard. The only furnishing mentioned in her room is the comfortable, roomy armchair, which is not only a place to rest her exhausted body, but also a place to console her soul and to alleviate her mental trauma. Mrs. Mallard is deeply confined both in body and mind, which deprives her of the freedom and renders her tortured, as "it was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long" (Chopin, 210). We can see from the text that the window of the room is open, from which Mrs. Mallard can view the outside world, and the armchair is right facing the window. The open window associates Mrs. Mallard's room or Mrs. Mallard with the outside world. Sitting in the armchair, she can see that the tops of the trees are all aquiver with the new spring life and that patches of blue sky show here and there through the clouds meeting and piling one above the other, smell the delicious smell of rain in the air and hear the peddler's crying in the street below, the notes of someone's singing in the distance as well as sparrows' twittering in the eaves. All these are full of vitality, but Mrs. Mallard can only perceive them through the window, failing to steep herself in them. It is these vigorous scenes that trigger Mrs. Mallard's internal monologue afterwards and eventually lead to her uttering the words: "free, free, free!" (Chopin, 209). Compared with her aphasia in the living room, a public space, she has words in her room, a private space, which shows her awakening of self-consciousness and her eager pursuit for freedom to some extent. However, what should be paid attention to is that these words are whispered over and over under her breath, forming a contrast with her tumultuous inner activities. This in turn reflects her aphasia and foreshadows the ultimate failure of her pursuit of freedom. In this room, the emotion of Mrs. Mallard changes from sorrow and repression to fear and then to relaxation and excitement. She vents her true and secret feelings there, finds her real self and realizes that she can live an independent life without the participation of her husband.

Realizing the coming independence and freedom for her, Mrs. Mallard, "like a goddess of Victory" (Chopin, 210), "arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities" (Chopin, 210), and descends the stairs to the living room at the bottom. Therefore, the space converts to the living room again. "Richards stood waiting them at the bottom" (Chopin, 210) when "someone was opening the door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his gripsack and umbrella" (Chopin, 210). Despite Richards' "rescue", Mrs. Mallard still sees her husband and loses her life. At last, the doctors come and make a diagnosis that "she had died of heart disease — of joy that kills" (Chopin, 210). From this point of view, the only living space for Mrs. Mallard seems to be her own room. Walking out of the room means the disappearance and demise of her self (Zhou and Cheng, 94). The story makes an end here in the living room of Mr. Mallard's house. The loop in space implies that Mrs. Mallard cannot completely escape from the social space, and that it is not realistic to seek absolute freedom, which can only exist in dreams for her. Perhaps this is also the reason why the author named the novel "The Dream of an Hour" originally (Du, 72).

## 2.2 Narrative of Mental Space and Textual Space in "The Story of an Hour"

Mental space, also "conceived space", refers to "the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination" (Lefebvre, 12). It usually includes three parts, respectively the composing space in the author's mind, the appreciable space in readers' mind and the mental space of the characters. Lefebvre deems that "space lends a miraculous quality to thought, which becomes tangible through design. The design serves as a

mediator between mental activity and social activity” (27). It is conceived rather than perceived and the spatial knowledge is produced through the spatial workings of the mind. According to Lefebvre, physical space and social space are objective space while mental space is subjective space which needs readers to give it initiative.

Textual space proposed by Zoran includes “the structure which is imposed on space by the fact that it is formed within the verbal text” (319). It is about the linguistic nature of the text and the “organization of the reconstructed world” (319). As mentioned in the introduction part of the paper, textual space is mainly concerned with the selection of language, the linear narrative of the text and narrative perspective.

In this paper, mental space and textual space will be analyzed together since point of view plays a very significant role in the construction of mental space in “The Story of an Hour”. According to Abrams, “Point of view signifies the way a story gets told — the mode (or modes) established by an author by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events which constitute the narrative in a work of fiction” (231). It is evident that third-person narrative is used in the short story. Moreover, there are shifts between the third-person omniscient point of view and the third-person limited point of view. In the omniscient point of view, “the narrator knows everything that needs to be known and has privileged access to the characters’ thoughts, feelings, and motives” (Abrams, 232) and he “is free to move at will in time and space” (Abrams, 232), while in the limited point of view, although “the narrator tells the story in the third person, he stays inside the confines of what is perceived, thought, remembered and felt by a single character (or at most by very few characters) within the story” (Abrams, 233).

From Paragraph 1 to Paragraph 4, through the third-person omniscient point of view, readers can construct a base space where the couple is positioned in the upper class, Mrs. Mallard is afflicted with heart disease and Mr. Mallard is away from home. With the participation of Mr. Mallard’s friend Richards, a mental space where Mrs. Mallard is extremely sorrowful at her husband’s death and Mr. Mallard dies in a railroad disaster can be constructed. But the inner world of Mrs. Mallard cannot be sensed here.

From Paragraph 5 to Paragraph 19, through the third-person limited point of view interwoven with the third-person omniscient point of view, readers can construct a mental space according to the perspective of Mrs. Mallard since this part focuses on the description of Mrs. Mallard’s inner activities and the process of the awakening of her self-consciousness. Sitting in the armchair facing the open window, Mrs. Mallard sees “the tops of trees that were aquiver with the new spring life” (Chopin, 209) and patches of blue sky showing through the clouds, smells the “the delicious breath of rain in the air” (Chopin, 209), and hears the notes of someone’s distant song and the sparrows’ twittering. Such vigorous scenes are quite different from Mrs. Mallard’s exhaustion, which paves way for the change of Mrs. Mallard’s inner activities. At first, she gazes at one patch of blue sky, and feels that “there was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully” (Chopin, 209). Then, she strives to beat this thing “that was approaching her” (Chopin, 209) back with her will, but after the struggle, she “abandoned herself” and tries to accept this thing when “a little whispered word escaped her slightly parted lips” (Chopin, 209) and she repeated under her breath: “free, free, free!” (Chopin, 209). From these descriptions, readers can discover that Mr. Mallard’s death is actually a kind of extrication for Mrs. Mallard since she can live for herself in the future. After the awakening of her self-consciousness, “her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body” (Chopin, 209). In this mental space, Mrs. Mallard undergoes a sense of daze, hope, fear, acceptance and ecstasy.

In Paragraph 12, a mental space where Mrs. Mallard doesn’t fulfill her obligations as a good wife can be constructed. At that time, women should be subordinate to men in the patriarchal society. In terms of traditional social ethics and morals, faced with the husband’s decease, the wife must be prostrate with grief. However, from the description that “she did not stop to ask if it were or were not a monstrous joy that held her. A clear and exalted perception enabled her to dismiss the suggestion as trivial” (Chopin, 209), Mrs. Mallard’s state is far from her obligations as a good wife and social ethics. Paragraph 13 focuses on the description of Mr. Mallard and the speculative reaction and feeling of Mrs. Mallard when she sees her husband’s body. A speculative space can be constructed where Mr. Mallard is a kind and tender husband who loves his wife. However, Mrs. Mallard would rather welcome the days belonging to her absolutely without her husband. Then, from Paragraph 14 to Paragraph 16, a wish space from the perspective of Mrs. Mallard can be constructed where she can live for herself with self-assertion and free body and soul. “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” (Chopin, 210). Although Mrs. Mallard is loved, she is not happy at all since she considers her husband’s love a private will imposed on her, which is no less a crime. Thus, it’s no doubt a kind of burden and constraint for her. For Mrs. Mallard, neither men nor women in marriage should impose their own will on their companions. Instead, they should respect each other and render full freedom and space to each other. When Mrs. Mallard

locks herself in her room and lets her fancy run riot along the future days, her sister Josephine kneels before the closed door and implores for admission. In Paragraph 17 and Paragraph 18, the third-person omniscient point of view is used. Here, it is in the mental space the same with the first occurring at the beginning. From the perspective of Josephine and Richards, Mrs. Mallard must be in the depths of despair for losing her beloved husband, which is exactly the opposite to the current state of Mrs. Mallard.

At the end of the story, when Mrs. Mallard descends the stairs with Josephine, “like a goddess of Victory” and with “a feverish triumph in her eyes” (Chopin, 210), Mr. Mallard returns unexpectedly. From the perspective of people present except Mrs. Mallard, the return of Mr. Mallard is a nice surprise for Mrs. Mallard. For fear that the extremely sorrowful Mrs. Mallard cannot bear this surprise, Richards specially hastens to screen Mr. Mallard from the view of Mrs. Mallard. Moreover, the doctors make a diagnosis that “she had died of heart disease — of joy that kills” (Chopin, 210). However, as is analyzed above, readers know that from the perspective of Mrs. Mallard, her husband’s return is a severe blow dealt to her, and she dies of despair for losing her freedom again.

### *2.3 Narrative of Social Space in “The Story of an Hour”*

Social space, as its name suggests, is closely related with social elements. According to Lefebvre, it “is a social product” (26). Social space is not only “an already produced space that can be decoded, can be read” (17) but also “a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26). It reflects the existence and development of society and the status and hierarchy of people in society. Social space is an interpersonal space where various social elements are constructed. In “The Story of an Hour”, social space is mainly concerned with male space and female space in America in the 19th century.

Males in this story include Mr. Mallard, Richards and the doctors, and the scenes they are in include the railroad, the newspaper office and the living room. In the story, there are not many descriptions of Mr. Mallard as he is out. At the beginning, he takes the train out and in the end, he returns home, “a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his gripsack and umbrella” (Chopin, 210), which shows his independence and freedom in a sense. Richards hastens to tell the bad news before other less careful, less tender friends, but he only “assures himself of its truth by a second telegram” (Chopin, 209). The news turns out to be false, so he is the same as those so-called less careful, less tender friends he thinks of, which indicates his opinionatedness and arbitrariness. At the end of the story, the doctors “said that she (Mrs. Mallard) had died of heart disease — of joy that kills” (Chopin, 210). However, as doctors, they can only make a diagnosis in terms of their medical knowledge. Why must the joy trigger Mrs. Mallard’s heart disease? They cannot infer the true emotions of Mrs. Mallard exactly as they do not understand her at all. All of these reflect the authority, independence, freedom and publicity of male space.

Females in this story are only Mrs. Mallard and her sister Josephine, and the most typical scene is Mrs. Mallard’s room, a quite private space. For a long time, women as the “second sex” were in a subordinate position in the patriarchal society. What they were taught under the influence of the male-dominated culture is to attach to men, rather than to live for themselves (Hu, 91). For one thing, before marriage, women usually inherit their family name from their father rather than their mother and after marriage, they should change their last name in accordance with their husband’s, showing the transfer of control on them from their father to their husband. In the final analysis, they, without their own subjectivity, cannot escape from the dominance of males. Right at the beginning of the story, she is called “Mrs. Mallard” rather than her first name “Louise” which appears only once in Paragraph 17 from her sister’s mouth. When Mr. Mallard returns, she is called “his wife” and at other places of the story, “she” is most frequently used. Readers also don’t know her original last name. However, her husband’s full name “Brently Mallard” appears at the beginning and in the end. Descriptions of Mr. Mallard are no doubt far fewer than that of Mrs. Mallard, but Mr. Mallard has his full name while Mrs. Mallard doesn’t, implying the independence, status and dominance of Mr. Mallard. Correspondingly, Mrs. Mallard loses her independent self and has to attach to her husband. Her female identity is not recognized and she is marginalized in the male-dominated patriarchal society. For another, Mrs. Mallard is confined both in body and in mind. From the descriptions that “she was young, with a fair, calm face” (Chopin, 209), “her two white slender hands” (Chopin, 209) and “she knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead” (Chopin, 210), we can infer Mr. Mallard’s care and protection to her wife. Different from other ordinary women in America, Mrs. Mallard doesn’t have to do the burdensome and trivial housework at home. But she is not happy at all. Instead, what she feels is only burden and constraint in this house. As we know, the main space she is positioned in is her room and the only furnishing mentioned in her room is the armchair facing the open window. After hearing the bad news, Mrs. Mallard stays at her room alone, sinking into the armchair with no one following her. It is only in this private space that she can think for herself. What’s more, her husband imposes his powerful private will on her and deprives her freedom both in body and in mind. She can’t live for herself. She has to depend on her husband.

Therefore, after inner struggle, she feels relieved at the news of her husband's death and finally keeps whispering: "Free! Body and soul free" (Chopin, 210)! In general, female space shows characteristics of privacy, dependence and restraint.

### 3. Conclusion

Space plays a vital role in "The Story of an Hour". The conversion of topographical space promotes the development of the plots as well as the process of Mrs. Mallard's awakening of self-consciousness, and the shift of point of view makes great contributions to the construction of mental space, through which the contrast between traditional mainstream ethical ideas of society and Mrs. Mallard's individual ethical ideas can be perceived. Moreover, readers can discover females' dependent and restrained living conditions in the male-dominated American society of the 19th century. It is a tragic song of a woman pursuing freedom.

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