

Confronting Gender in Literature: Male-Female Conflict in Dorothy Parker's and Kate Chopin's Short Stories

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Abstract

This article offers a comparative feminist reading of Dorothy Parker's short story "The Last Tea" (1926) and Kate Chopin's "The Storm" (1898) and "The Story of an Hour" (1894), examining how these texts dramatize male-female conflict and the constraints placed on women in different socio-historical contexts. Drawing on feminist theory and close reading, the study analyses power dynamics, gender roles, and the struggle for female autonomy, while foregrounding the underexplored dialogue between Parker's urban modernity and Chopin's late nineteenth-century domestic settings. "The Last Tea" stages a subtle battle of the sexes in which a young woman's search for male attention ends in quiet despair, exposing the emotional cruelty of modern courtship. By contrast, Chopin's stories challenge nineteenth-century gender norms: "The Story of an Hour" offers a wife's brief taste of freedom from patriarchy, while "The Storm" presents female desire as natural and unpunished. The article examines how irony, symbolism, and narrative perspective in these texts reveal both overt and underlying gender conflict. By reading these stories side by side, the study demonstrates that, despite tonal and contextual differences, all three narratives converge in their critique of women's limited agency and patriarchal marriage, thereby contributing to feminist scholarship on American short fiction through a focused comparison of Parker and Chopin's work.

1. INTRODUCTION

Male-female conflict has long been a central theme in literature, reflecting the evolving power dynamics between genders in society. From 19th-century realist narratives to 20th-century modernist fiction, authors have used the interactions between men and women to critique social norms, expose inequities, and imagine new possibilities for female agency. This article focuses on three short stories by two prominent American women writers – Parker and Chopin – each of which offers a distinctive portrayal of conflict between the sexes. Parker's "The Last Tea" and Chopin's "The Storm" and "The Story of an Hour" all center on heterosexual relationships and the tensions that arise within them. However, these stories differ markedly in context and tone: Parker writes with wry, satirical humor about a fleeting Jazz Age encounter, whereas Chopin writes with bold irony and sensual candor about women's lives in the Victorian-era American South.

All three works illuminate the constraints placed on women in patriarchal societies and the conflicts that ensue. In "The Last Tea," a seemingly trivial tea-time chat exposes a latent power struggle: the man's casual cruelty contrasts with the woman's need to hide her pain and

please him, revealing a clear gender imbalance (Parker, 1926). Chopin's stories instead focus on marriage and women's yearning for autonomy. In "The Story of an Hour," Louise Mallard's brief belief in her husband's death brings an intense, short-lived sense of freedom that clashes with the socially imposed role of "wife." In "The Storm," Calixta's adulterous encounter dramatizes a conflict between social morality and natural desire (Borojerdi, 2021).

By examining these stories together, this article seeks to deepen our understanding of how male–female conflict is constructed and critiqued in literature across different periods. In the 1890s, when Chopin was writing, women's legal rights and social freedoms were severely limited – wives were expected to be selfless and submissive under the prevailing "Cult of True Womanhood." Chopin's stories can be seen as subverting these norms, aligning with early feminist calls for female autonomy and sexual freedom (Karami, 2015; Toth, 1999). Parker, writing in the 1920s, was living in a post-suffrage world where women had ostensibly more freedom (the flapper era of drinking, dancing, and dating). Yet Parker's fiction reveals that even in this "permissive" age, the underlying power structures in heterosexual relationships remained unequal and emotionally fraught (Jones, 2016). Parker's trademark satire and irony serve to expose the persistent vulnerabilities of women seeking love and respect in a male-centric social scene.

This study adopts a feminist literary criticism approach to compare Parker's and Chopin's depictions of gender conflict. It will address questions such as: In what ways do these stories illustrate the power imbalances between men and women? How do the authors use literary devices (such as irony, symbolism, or point of view) to highlight conflict or the lack of open conflict? What insights do these narratives offer about women's emotional experiences and agency (or lack thereof) in their relationships with men? By situating the stories in their historical and literary contexts and engaging with relevant scholarship, the analysis will show that Parker and Chopin, each in her own style, poignantly illuminate the struggles of women navigating love, marriage, and societal expectations. Ultimately, this article aims not only to reinforce the original textual analyses of these works, but also to enrich them with interpretive insights from feminist theory and literary scholarship. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper appreciation of how gender and power dynamics are woven into short fiction and how two female authors, a generation apart interrogated the "battle of the sexes" in ways that were ahead of their time.

1.2. Research Objectives

This research sets out a set of interrelated objectives in examining male–female conflict in the selected stories by Parker and Chopin. It first analyzes how Parker's "The Last Tea" portrays subtle male–female conflict through dialogue and character interaction, and what this reveals about gender roles and power imbalance in the 1920s social context. It then examines Chopin's "The Storm" as a narrative of gender and power, focusing on how it depicts a woman's sexual agency in tension with (or in the absence of) traditional marital norms, and interpreting the significance of the story's non-punitive resolution for both female and male characters. In addition, the study investigates "The Story of an Hour" in terms of internal conflict and external constraints, exploring how the narrative conveys a woman's struggle between self-assertion and social expectation, and how the twist ending comments on the

power dynamics of marriage. Alongside these text-based analyses, the article offers a thorough literature review of scholarly perspectives on these works, including feminist and literary critical interpretations, by highlighting key arguments from academic sources on Parker's treatment of women's "frailties" and wit (Jones, 2016) and Chopin's commentary on marriage, femininity, and freedom (Mitchell, 1994; Cunningham, 2004). Building on this critical background, the research applies a comparative methodology, using feminist theory as a lens to discuss both common themes and divergent approaches between Parker and Chopin; by comparing their narrative techniques and the outcomes for their female protagonists, it draws broader conclusions about the portrayal of gender conflict in early American women's writing. Finally, the study seeks to deepen interpretive insight beyond surface-level readings of the texts by identifying key symbols (such as the storm in Chopin or the tea setting in Parker) and engaging with theoretical concepts (such as the "New Woman" and patriarchal oppression) that illuminate the conflicts depicted. Taken together, these objectives enable the article to develop a comprehensive analysis that not only revisits the content of the three short stories but also firmly situates them within a wider scholarly conversation about gender, power, and literary form, ultimately demonstrating how Parker and Chopin use the short story genre to critique, in subtle yet powerful ways, the gender inequalities of their respective eras and to speak meaningfully to contemporary debates in feminist literary criticism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of existing scholarship and criticism reveals a rich context for understanding how gender conflict and power dynamics operate in the works of Parker and Chopin. Both authors have attracted significant critical attention, though in different measures: Chopin's work, especially *The Awakening* and her short stories, has been extensively analyzed through feminist and historicist lenses, while Parker's literary output (often overshadowed by her fame as a wit and Algonquin Round Table personality) has seen renewed scholarly interest in recent decades, particularly regarding her commentary on women's roles in early 20th-century America (Barreca, 2010; Jones, 2016).

As Barreca (2010) notes, Parker's short stories offer incisive portraits of women whose emotional lives are shaped by structural inequalities in heterosexual relationships; her heroines remain "chronically dependent on men," suffering both economic and spiritual deprivation. Parker's fiction frequently depicts young urban women trapped in courtship rituals that reveal their vulnerability and men's emotional indifference or dominance. Jones (2016) similarly highlights Parker's sustained focus on gender disparity, portraying "emotionally frail women" who long for affection that men fail to reciprocate. These women are often shown waiting—for a phone call in "A Telephone Call" or a delayed date in "The Last Tea"—outwardly composed yet inwardly distressed. Writing within the Jazz Age, Parker both engages with and critiques flapper culture. Cirugeda (2015) argues that Parker's heroines move beyond the carefree flapper stereotype, adopting a "satirized viewpoint" that exposes their dissatisfaction with love, identity, and social life, thereby foreshadowing broader feminist conflicts of the later twentieth century and underscoring Parker's critical foresight.

Feminist critics have revalued Parker's work as a sharp critique of gender norms rather than mere "bitter" humor. Pettit (2000) argues that Parker's mix of satire and sentimentalism exposes women's constrained choices and the emotional labor expected of them in

relationships (as cited in Literariness.org, 2020). Likewise, Melzer (1997) reads the cynicism and despair of Parker's female characters as a veiled protest against societal expectations that leave them. Even her seemingly passive heroines function as a subtle feminist appeal, revealing how women's happiness depends excessively on male attention and suggesting that women should be "open, assertive, independent" because men "cannot be counted on" to guarantee their well-being. Ultimately, Parker's satire fulfills a moral function by exposing the cruelty and imbalance of male-female relationships and eliciting reader sympathy for women trapped in emotionally unequal dynamics (Jones, 2016).

Turning to Chopin, we find a foundational figure in American feminist literature. Writing in the 1890s, Chopin explored women's inner desires and the confines of marriage with unprecedented frankness. Her short stories, especially "The Story of an Hour," have been widely discussed as early feminist texts that highlight the repressive nature of the traditional patriarchal family. Chopin's contemporary readers often misread or criticized her work for its unconventional views, but modern scholarship recognizes her as a pioneer in portraying women's consciousness and sexual autonomy. Biographer Emily Toth (1999) notes that in the 1890s Chopin produced "fearless and truthful portrayals of women's lives" for magazines like *Vogue*, offering "fearless and truthful portrayals of women's lives" that were ahead of their time. In "The Story of an Hour," academic analyses frequently focus on the theme of marital oppression and the forbidden joy of freedom that the protagonist, Louise Mallard, briefly experiences. Feminist scholars have read Louise's heart trouble and her shocking ending as symbolic: the story suggests that the constraints of marriage can quite literally be deadly for a woman's spirit. As Mitchell (1994) observed, Louise's husband's reported death forces her to reconcile her "inside" and "outside" selves – her private desires vs. her public role – and the complications in uniting both halves of her world are what lead to her demise. In a similar vein, Mark Cunningham (2004) argues that Louise's epiphany of freedom is ultimately untenable in her society – her newfound autonomy is "empty, because she has no place in society" as an independent woman. These interpretations emphasize that Chopin was critiquing not just one woman's fate, but the broader social order that had no room for a woman to live for herself (Chopin, 1894).

Not all scholars see Louise Mallard as a straightforward heroine or victim; there has been debate. In a contrarian analysis, Berkove (2000) contends that Louise is portrayed as an "immature and shallow egotist" whose joyful reaction to her husband's death is self-centered rather than liberating. Berkove argues that Chopin's story carries a more ironic or even cautionary message: "Louise's vision of absolute freedom is unrealistic, and the fact that her death is the only place that will offer her the absolute freedom she desires can be read as a critique of her character's extremity" (Berkove, 2000, p. 156). While Berkove's interpretation is not widely accepted by feminist critics, it highlights the ambiguity in Chopin's text – an ambiguity also noted by Stein (2003), who commented that "The Story of an Hour" is "pervaded by ambiguity" and open to multiple readings. This spectrum of critical views – from seeing Chopin as celebrating a feminist awakening to underscoring a tragic irony – demonstrates the depth of Chopin's work and its ability to spark discussion about the nature of female freedom and its limits at the end of the 19th century.

Regarding “The Storm,” for many years this story received comparatively less attention, partly because it was not published until the late 20th century due to its daring content. However, it has since become a staple example of Chopin’s progressive attitude toward female sexuality. Scholars marvel at how “The Storm” depicts an adulterous encounter not with moral judgment but with an almost celebratory naturalism. Seyersted (1969), one of Chopin’s earliest biographers, famously remarked that in “The Storm,” “sex in this story is a force as strong, inevitable, and natural as the Louisiana storm which ignites it.” Chopin does not condemn Calixta and Alcée for their passionate afternoon; instead, the narrative correlates their sexual union with the storm’s passing, after which “everyone was happy” and life resumes harmoniously. Seyersted points out that Chopin focuses on sexuality as “natural – or certainly inevitable – expressions of universal Eros, inside or outside of marriage,” portraying it as “neither frantic nor base, but as ‘healthy’ and beautiful as life itself” (1969). This view is echoed by modern critics who see “The Storm” as a quietly revolutionary text: it suggests that a woman’s fulfillment of her sexual desires need not result in punishment or ruin, a direct challenge to the traditional moral narratives of the time.

Some analysts, however, have examined “The Storm” for subtle irony or moral complexity. For instance, Maria Herbert-Leiter (2009) suggests that Chopin might be “arguing for human passion and desire, but not at the cost of marriage.” She notes that by the story’s conclusion, both pairs of spouses remain intact and affectionate – Calixta lovingly welcomes her husband and child, and Alcée writes tenderly to his wife Clarisse, encouraging her to enjoy her vacation. Herbert-Leiter reads this as evidence that Chopin did not intend to upend the institution of marriage entirely, but rather to propose that personal passions can be fulfilled without destroying marriages, given the right circumstances (as cited in KateChopin.org, n.d.-a). Another scholar, Lawrence Berkove, acknowledges Chopin’s masterful use of irony in “The Storm.” He notes that Chopin “uses irony in the narration to comment on [the relationships] from a moral standpoint,” subtly “undercut[ing] bold but morally untenable positions that she has sympathetically represented.” In other words, Chopin may sympathetically portray the lovers, but through nuanced narrative hints (the ambiguity of whether the happiness will last, for example) she acknowledges the moral transgression. Still, the overwhelming consensus in Chopin scholarship is that “The Storm” is a remarkably forward-thinking story in its positive (or at least neutral) depiction of female sexuality and its implicit critique of the notion that women’s passion must be suppressed for the sake of propriety. Indeed, Chopin’s contemporary norms under the Comstock Act and Victorian prudery made it unthinkable to publish such a story, confirming just how radical her ideas were for 1898 (KateChopin.org, n.d.-a).

The literature indicates that Parker and Chopin use short fiction to foreground gender conflict in subtle yet subversive ways. Parker’s stories bridge satire and social commentary, using witty dialogue to expose the “little tragedies” of women’s everyday dealings with men, while Chopin’s realism and irony lay bare the fault lines of marriage and quietly advocate women’s selfhood and sexual autonomy. These critical perspectives prompt us to attend to Parker’s satirical tone and Chopin’s recurring symbols—heart trouble, open windows, storms—as key to how each text stages either open confrontation or unspoken tension between men and women. They thus provide the foundation for a feminist, historically aware reading of the stories in the analysis that follows.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative literary analysis grounded in feminist and literary theory to explore male–female conflict in the three stories. Through close reading, it examines dialogue, characterization, narrative point of view, symbolism, and irony, with particular attention to scenes that foreground power imbalance, emotional responses, or moments of confrontation and revelation. The analysis is organized comparatively around shared thematic concerns—power and control, communication and miscommunication, freedom and confinement, and irony and symbolism—while also attending to the specific context, plot, conflict, and resolution of each story. Across these themes, a sustained comparative reading draws out convergences and divergences in how Parker and Chopin, writing in different eras, represent gender, power, and autonomy. This includes, for example, comparisons between the emotional suppression of Parker's unnamed protagonist and Chopin's Louise Mallard, and between Calixta's socially transgressive sexuality and the constrained propriety of Parker's tea-time heroine. Interpretation is informed by feminist concepts such as patriarchy, the “male gaze,” the “Angel in the House,” and the “New Woman,” asking whether Parker's protagonist internalizes dominant norms through politeness and waiting behavior, and whether Chopin's women temporarily resist domestic angelhood in spaces like Louise's secluded room or Calixta's reconfigured domestic space. Contextual and historical analysis of the 1890s and 1920s supplements the textual readings, drawing on archival and secondary sources (biographies and histories of women's social conditions) to illuminate, for example, late nineteenth-century marital laws and attitudes toward widowhood in “The Story of an Hour,” and 1920s dating culture and flapper-era expectations in “The Last Tea.” Scholarly work directly informs interpretation: Calixta's behavior is read in light of Seyersted's view of sexuality as natural (Seyersted, 1969) and Herbert-Leiter's remarks on the reaffirmation of marriage (as cited in KateChopin.org, n.d.-a), while Parker's text is approached with Jones's observation about women “waiting for men to come around” (Jones, 2016), which orients attention to waiting and timing. The comparative analysis is organized around thematic categories—power and control, communication and miscommunication, freedom and confinement, and irony and symbolism—asking who holds social or emotional power, how dialogue (or its absence) signals conflict, how spaces function as sites of freedom or constraint, and how techniques such as dramatic irony, the storm, or the artificial camellia signify deeper tensions. The approach is interdisciplinary and interpretive; reliability is strengthened through cross-referencing critical commentary, maintaining reflexive awareness of researcher bias, and consistently citing textual and scholarly evidence to ensure rigor and transparency.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across the three stories, Parker and Chopin stage male–female conflict in different social settings and with different tonal registers, yet all converge on women whose desires and agency are constrained by gendered power structures. Parker's “The Last Tea” locates this conflict in the rituals of modern courtship, while Chopin's “The Storm” and “The Story of an Hour”

relocate it to the institution of marriage, one imagining a fleeting suspension of social rules and the other a brutal reassertion of them. The following discussion therefore moves between the stories comparatively, showing how each text illuminates the others and tracing a spectrum from muted everyday cruelties to radical fantasies of liberation and their limits.

4.1. “The Last Tea” – Subtle Conflict and the Power of Indifference

Read alongside Chopin’s more openly dramatic plots, Parker’s “The Last Tea” is a masterclass in understated conflict. On the surface, the story appears to be a trivial chat between a young woman and a young man meeting for tea after a party. However, through Parker’s sharp, dialogue-driven storytelling, it becomes clear that a quiet battle of wills and emotions is taking place. The central conflict in “The Last Tea” lies in the imbalance of interest and power: the young woman seeks validation and connection, while the young man holds all the social power – he is late, blasé, and emotionally withholding, even as he talks at length about another woman in front of his companion. Where Chopin will later dramatize the clash between female desire and marital norms through storms and sudden deaths, Parker compresses gendered conflict into the micro-aggressions of a single tea date.

One of the key results of the analysis is identifying how Parker encodes the conflict in conversational subtext. The young woman’s behavior exemplifies the learned social convention that she must not appear upset or eager, even when affronted. When the man arrives 40 minutes late, she immediately lies to save face, saying, “I was late myself. I haven’t been here more than a minute.” (Parker, 1926). This false nonchalance is her defense mechanism against humiliation. Yet, as a third-person narrative voice later notes, this very silence and accommodating attitude put her at a disadvantage: “Her silence unconsciously makes her inferior to the young man. The fact of waiting that long... is a sign of submissiveness”. The man, by contrast, feels free to criticize and command – he tells the waitress to limit her sugar and remove the cakes, exclaiming “Terrible!” about the food and thereby implicitly belittling the woman’s choice to order them (Parker, 1926). This dynamic shows the gendered power play: the man assumes a position of control and entitlement, while the woman placates. Unlike Chopin’s Calixta or Louise, who briefly experience intense subjective freedom, Parker’s protagonist never escapes this asymmetry; her conflict remains internalized and socially silenced.

The conversation quickly turns more hurtful when the man mentions Carol McCall, another woman from the party, lavishing praise on her looks and charm. This is the moment the latent conflict becomes palpable. Parker shows the internal agitation of the protagonist through her suddenly vehement, though still indirect, responses. Feeling jealous and slighted, the young woman attempts to compete with the absent Carol by disparaging her: “She is ages older than I am... I’ve heard people say she would be sort of nice-looking if she wouldn’t make up so much.” (Parker, 1926, p. 325). These catty remarks are a transparent attempt to cope with her insecurity. In doing so, the woman momentarily steps out of her sweet facade to engage in a covert conflict with Carol (by proxy) and with the man’s perception. The man, however, seems either oblivious or amused; he continues to extol Carol’s beauty (“What a couple of eyes she’s got on her!”) (Parker, 1926), oblivious to – or perhaps perversely enjoying – the effect on his companion. This indicates a cruel imbalance. Parker’s male characters often exhibit a “flippant treatment” of their female counterparts’ feelings (Jones, 2016). Here, the man’s

insensitivity becomes a subtle form of emotional dominance, effectively putting the young woman “in her place” by implying she is less interesting or attractive than Carol (Jones, 2016). In contrast, Chopin's Alcée in “The Storm” is not emotionally indifferent but enthusiastically responsive, suggesting that Parker and Chopin map different male roles within the same patriarchal system: one built on cold dismissal, the other on clandestine complicity.

A significant aspect of conflict in “The Last Tea” is that the woman's fight is largely with herself – she struggles to maintain dignity and to impress the man, while internally feeling inadequate. After Carol is discussed, the young woman resorts to fabrication to bolster her worth. She concocts a story about a movie director named Wally Dillon who supposedly finds her irresistible and is begging her for dates. She even pretends she has an active social life and a telephone call from a (nonexistent) suitor. These lies are transparent to the reader (and likely to the man as well), which creates dramatic irony and pathos. As Parker's narrative voice remarks, on no account does she “need to boast of her attractions, which no one asks her to mention. Yet, she has to say something to regain her prestige which is on the verge of vanishing” (Parker, 1926). The woman's compulsive lying is a direct result of the emotional conflict and humiliation she feels – it is her desperate (and ineffective) way to assert some power or desirability. Feminist critics have read such Parker scenarios as indictments of how women were socialized to tie their self-esteem to male approval (Literariness.org, 2020). Indeed, in this story the young woman's sense of self crumbles in real time as the man's indifference and mention of a rival highlight her loneliness and lack of romantic validation. Where Calixta's transgressive desire in “The Storm” briefly strengthens her sense of self, Parker's protagonist grows weaker the more she tries to assert her desirability, underscoring two opposite narrative outcomes for women seeking affirmation from men.

The outcome of “The Last Tea” is quietly devastating and sharpens Parker's critique of gender dynamics. After all the strained politeness, the young woman's hopeful “When will I see you again?” meets the man's familiar, noncommittal “I'll call you up,” a phrase both silently recognize as false (Parker, 1926). Knowing it is not true, she leaves in “dissatisfaction, despair and loneliness,” while he remains largely unperturbed (Parker, 1926). The conflict never erupts into an open quarrel; it stays an unspoken wound beneath small talk and civility. Parker thus exposes a stark imbalance in which male indifference meets female emotional vulnerability. This dynamic exemplifies the everyday cruelty of male–female relationships, where women's emotional needs are dismissed and their social pretenses collapse into bitter self-awareness (Jones, 2016). Placed next to the apparently harmonious ending of “The Storm” and the catastrophic ending of “The Story of an Hour,” Parker's conclusion represents the most banal yet pervasive form of defeat: nothing changes, no rules are broken, and yet the woman is left emotionally shattered.

In broader terms, “The Last Tea” illustrates a common Parker theme: women's socially enforced passivity versus men's social freedom. The man in the story can show up late, direct the conversation as he pleases, talk about another woman he likes, and then leave with a vague promise – all without repercussion. The woman, constrained by convention, cannot openly challenge him (to do so would risk being seen as hysterical or impolite), so she internalizes the conflict. She “stoically endures” his behavior, as the analysis in the introduction put it, and the result is internal conflict and misery. Parker uses this scenario to implicitly question why

women accept such terms. In a feminist reading, Parker's piece becomes a commentary on how patriarchal social norms – like the pressure on women to be agreeable, and the double standard that men's time and attention are more valuable – create inequitable relationships. As one interpretation concluded, in this story “a man in society is in a position that allows him to do and say what a woman is... incapable of” by convention (Literariness.org, 2020). Parker's subtle genius is that she doesn't need a loud argument to show a conflict; through witty but painful dialogue and the desperate subtext of the woman's lies, she exposes the “battle of the sexes” simmering under the decorum of a tea date. Compared with Chopin's more overtly dramatic plots, Parker thus represents the low-intensity, high-frequency conflicts of everyday heterosexual interaction, which form the quiet baseline against which Chopin's more spectacular moments of passion and revelation can be read.

4.2. “The Storm” – Passionate Transgression and the Question of Conflict

If “The Last Tea” shows conflict as emotional deprivation in modern dating, Chopin's “The Storm” presents a very different scenario of male–female relations, one that initially seems to lack conflict – after all, every character ends up content. However, a deeper analysis through a feminist lens uncovers that “The Storm” engages with gender conflict in a more symbolic and societal sense. The story depicts a brief extramarital encounter between Calixta, a housewife, and Alcée, her former beau, during a sudden Louisiana storm. Notably, the story features no direct confrontation or negative fallout: Calixta's husband Bobinôt and young son are safely waiting out the storm elsewhere, and Alcée's wife Clarisse is away on holiday. In the story's conclusion, Calixta welcomes her husband and child home with love and laughter, and Alcée writes to his wife kindly suggesting she take her time returning — “So the storm passed and everyone was happy” (Chopin, 1898/1969). On the surface, this resolution implies no conflict at all — a radical narrative move for its time, as Chopin avoids the moralistic punishment that convention would dictate for a wife's adultery. Compared with Parker's quietly devastating ending and the lethal irony of “The Story of an Hour,” this apparently happy closure positions “The Storm” as the most utopian point on the spectrum.

Our analysis shows that the main conflict in “The Storm” is internal and societal rather than interpersonal: it opposes individual desire—especially female sexual desire—to social and moral expectations. Calixta is not portrayed as tormented by guilt; any tension stems from the taboo nature of her encounter, not from remorse. Chopin's natural imagery normalizes this desire: as the storm intensifies, so do Calixta's long-suppressed feelings for Alcée, and their union is described in sensuous terms (her “firm, elastic flesh,” his “ardent glance”). The storm itself becomes a metaphor for the overwhelming force of attraction, externalizing what might otherwise remain an inner conflict. As Seyersted (1969) argues, “sex in this story is a force as strong, inevitable, and natural as the Louisiana storm which ignites it.” The narrative tone supports this reading: the narrator never shows Calixta weighing moral options; once nature—both the weather and their mutual passion—takes over, the lovers are swept up in a sudden, almost elemental moment of consummation. In contrast to Parker's protagonist, whose desire is continually thwarted by male indifference, Calixta's desire is met and fulfilled, raising the question of whether conflict is temporarily dissolved or merely displaced into the invisible realm of social judgment.

Interestingly, power dynamics in “The Storm” are portrayed as balanced and mutual during the encounter. Unlike Parker’s story, where the man clearly dominates the social situation, here Calixta is an equal partner in passion. Chopin describes Calixta as not just passive or a victim to Alcée’s advances, but actively responsive and joyful. There is an erotic equality in lines such as Calixta being “a revelation” to Alcée, whose “arms encircled her” as “her mouth was a fountain of delight” (Chopin, 1898/1969). This mutual enjoyment is crucial: Chopin implies that in the realm of sexual expression, Calixta finds an empowerment and freedom that her daily life perhaps lacks. The absence of regret afterward — she “lifted up her lovely eyes... and laughed aloud” when her family returns, relieved they are safe and utterly at ease — suggests that the episode has not harmed her psyche or marriage. On the contrary, it might have refreshed her; she greets Bobinôt with playful affection, noticing that he brought home her favorite fried shrimp and indulging in a family laugh about it. Where Parker’s heroine leaves her encounter depleted and Louise Mallard dies when confronted with the return of marital normality, Calixta emerges revitalized, underlining how Chopin imagines one possible – if precarious – reconciliation between female desire and domestic stability.

However, to declare that “The Storm” shows no conflict at all would be an oversimplification. The social context outside the text’s frame is fraught with potential conflict: adultery was (and is) considered a serious breach of trust and morality. Chopin skirts this by ensuring neither spouse discovers the other’s actions and by implying that both marriages remain loving. Yet, the story implicitly asks: What if such secrets became known? What is the long-term reality? Chopin leaves these questions unanswered, confining the narrative to the “momentary joy” of passion which does “not exclude the possibility of later misery” beyond the story’s scope (Seyersted, 1969). In other words, the ambiguity itself is a statement — for the duration of the storm, societal conflict is suspended, but the outside world (sunshine after the storm) might bring conventional judgments back into play. Stein pointed out that within five pages Chopin presents five points of view (those of Calixta, Alcée, Bobinôt, Bibi, and Clarisse), highlighting fragmentation and the idea that multiple perspectives on the situation are possible (2003). To one observer, what happened might be pure passion and positive; to another, a grave sin or betrayal. Chopin doesn’t resolve that conflict of interpretation, which is why some scholars like Berkove find an ironic undertone suggesting Chopin was aware of the moral questions she was raising. Seen next to “The Story of an Hour,” where social codes reassert themselves violently, and “The Last Tea,” where they quietly govern behaviour, “The Storm” occupies a liminal space in which those codes are temporarily suspended but never entirely abolished.

The research also highlights how Chopin subtly addresses gender roles in the story’s aftermath. After the storm, Alcée does something noteworthy: he writes to his wife Clarisse and, rather than confessing anything, he encourages her to enjoy her freedom at the bay a while longer, since a little time apart is good for them. Clarisse’s reaction to that letter is telling — Chopin writes that “the first free breath since her marriage seemed to restore the pleasant liberty of her maiden days.” This line reveals that Clarisse, too, feels a conflict between her identity as a wife and her desire for independence. She is relieved to have personal space (away from conjugal duties), which implies that even a contentedly married Victorian woman might find the role of wife confining. The irony here is rich: Alcée’s adultery indirectly grants Clarisse a

taste of freedom, just as it gave Calixta a renewal of joy. Chopin is hinting that marriages can be restrictive for women (and even for men) and that sometimes breaking the strict rules (albeit discreetly) leads to better outcomes for everyone involved. This is arguably a proto-feminist, or at least radically liberal, suggestion — it questions the assumption that strict monogamy and constant togetherness are ideal or natural for all. Instead of conflict between husband and wife, Chopin presents an unusual dynamic: men and women as accomplices in breaking societal rules for mutual satisfaction. The real “antagonist,” if any, is the social code that says they shouldn’t do this — but that antagonist is temporarily vanquished by the literal storm providing cover. Compared with Parker’s heroine, who never gains such a “free breath,” and Louise Mallard, whose glimpse of freedom is instantly revoked, Clarisse’s quiet relief extends Chopin’s exploration of constrained female autonomy into a more subdued but still significant register.

Chopin’s “The Storm” ultimately presents a scenario where potential marital and moral conflict simply does not erupt, turning adultery into a kind of comedy of fulfillment in which everyone is happy and unharmed. This invites a provocative question: what if fears about female sexuality are exaggerated, and rigid social structures can bend without breaking? Critics like Maria Herbert-Leiter argue that Chopin was not attacking marriage itself but suggesting it could be more flexible and accommodating of human passion (as cited in KateChopin.org, n.d.-a). Feminist readings highlight how radical it is that Calixta enjoys sexual pleasure without punishment—unlike figures such as Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary—making the story a utopian feminist vision in which the real source of male–female conflict lies not in individuals, but in patriarchal rules that seek to police desire. Placed in dialogue with “The Story of an Hour” and “The Last Tea,” “The Storm” thus represents the most optimistic experiment in reimagining heterosexual relations, even as its reliance on secrecy and chance reveals how fragile such a vision remains.

4.3. “The Story of an Hour” – The Epiphany and Irony of Marital Conflict

If “The Storm” imagines a brief reconciliation between desire and domesticity and “The Last Tea” exposes the grinding disappointments of courtship, in “The Story of an Hour,” Chopin presents perhaps the most explicit meditation on male–female conflict, albeit in an internalized form. Unlike “The Storm,” this story centers on a single female protagonist (Louise Mallard) and her reaction to the (mistaken) news that her husband, Brently Mallard, has died in an accident. The conflict here is not between two characters arguing or deceiving each other; indeed, Brently is absent until the final moments and there is no villainous action on any individual’s part. Instead, Chopin explores the conflict between a woman and the social institution of marriage — that is, between Louise’s newly awakened selfhood and the repressive expectations of being a wife.

The critical turning point of the story, and the focal point of our analysis, is Louise’s emotional journey in the hour after she hears of her husband’s death. Initially, she reacts with understandable grief, weeping wildly in her sister’s arms. But when she is alone in her room, a profound transformation occurs. Chopin famously describes a feeling approaching her like a gentle, irresistible force — Louise realizes it is the feeling of freedom. She whispers, “Free! Body and soul free!” (Chopin, 1894), and her eyes brighten as she looks out an open window at the new spring life outside. This moment is the crux of the story: the conflict it reveals is

that Louise feels joy, not devastation, at the loss of her husband. The implications are daring — Chopin suggests that for this woman (and by extension perhaps many women of her time), marriage, even to a kind and loving man (we are told Brently was never cruel and often kind), was an oppressive, identity-limiting state. Louise's exultation that "there would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself" encapsulates the patriarchal conflict: in her marriage, even a gentle one, her life was effectively not her own; with him gone, she owns herself again. (It is worth noting that Chopin's original text itself emphasizes the word "her" in that key sentence, a small detail that dramatically changes the meaning, underscoring how Brently's will had been bending Louise's to his; Chopin, 1894.) In contrast to Parker's protagonist, whose imagined social alternatives are flimsy lies about suitors, Louise's vision of the future is structurally transformative: she imagines an entire life lived for herself.

Scholars have often read this as a feminist critique of marriage as an institution that demanded women's self-sacrifice (Paudel, 2019; Sabbagh & Saghaei, 2014). Mitchell (1994) speaks of Louise's "female double consciousness" — the split between her true self and the self she must present as a wife. In that hour, those halves reconcile as she envisions a future of autonomy. The conflict Louise experiences is almost entirely internal but it is caused by an external social reality: she may have loved her husband in a certain way, but she relishes her freedom more. This is a scandalous hierarchy of emotions for a 19th-century woman: personal independence ranked above spousal love. Emily Toth and others have called "The Story of an Hour" one of Chopin's most radical works for this reason (Toth, 1999). The story doesn't villainize Brently at all — he's a good man — which only strengthens the point that even under the best circumstances, the structure of marriage was such that the wife lost a significant part of her freedom ("a powerful will bending hers," as the text says of his influence). Seen in relation to Calixta and Parker's unnamed tea-drinker, Louise represents the most developed articulation of female self-awareness: whereas the former two characters only partially recognise or articulate their dissatisfaction, Louise explicitly names and celebrates her desire for self-determination.

The tragic irony at the end — Brently walks in alive and well, and Louise dies on the spot — brings the conflict to a climax and resolution simultaneously. On one level, Louise's death could be read as just a cruel twist of fate or a shock to a weak heart. But virtually all critical interpretations see deeper meaning. The doctors in the story absurdly conclude she died of "joy that kills," implying she was so overjoyed to see her husband that it killed her. The reader, of course, knows the opposite is true: it was the loss of her joy, the snatching away of her newly found freedom, that was too much for her heart to bear. This is a dark, ironic commentary on the irreconcilability of Louise's personal freedom with the return to married life. In effect, the brief conflict (Louise vs. her role as wife) is "resolved" by nature in the only way it could be given the social context: Louise's heart gives out, a physical manifestation of her inability to go back to living under another's will. Mark Cunningham's analysis aligns with this: he posits that Louise's death illustrates how society has no place for an autonomous female self (Cunningham, 2004). Once Brently returns, Louise cannot put the genie back in the bottle — she has seen a life of her own and cannot revert to the old life, so her body rebels in fatal collapse. Compared with Calixta's safe return to domesticity and Parker's heroine's silent

departure from the café, Louise's death marks the most extreme narrative cost attached to female desire for autonomy.

Analyzing the imagery and symbols in this story further illuminates the conflict. The open window in Louise's room, showing patches of blue sky after rain, sparrows singing, and the smells of a new spring, symbolizes the new life and opportunities now visible to Louise. Nature is celebrating renewal, which parallels her internal awakening (much as nature mirrored passion in "The Storm," here it mirrors spiritual rebirth). When she descends the stairs with triumph in her eyes, it is as though she has transcended the conflict – she is victorious, a free soul. That is why the shock of Brently's appearance is so brutal; it annihilates that victory instantaneously. The closed door to Louise's room (which she locks to be alone) is another potent symbol: it represents her personal space and freedom to think. Her sister Josephine pleading outside for her to open up represents the pressure of the outside world (and conventional female roles) trying to draw her back out. Louise only opens it after she has privately transformed, indicating she will emerge on her own terms. But again, that assertion is foiled by patriarchal reality in the form of Brently's entrance. In this respect, the spatial symbolism of the room and the window provides a useful counterpoint to Parker's public tea table and Chopin's storm-sheltered house: each setting marks a different threshold between inner desire and outer constraint.

The result of Louise's story is arguably the most clear-cut condemnation of patriarchal dynamics among the three works studied. Parker's story ended with a woman's quiet despair; Chopin's "The Storm" ended with a mutual contentment undercut by questions. "The Story of an Hour" ends with a stark sacrifice: the woman dies rather than return to subjugation (even if affectionate subjugation). The fact that everyone around misinterprets her death – framing it as joy to be back in the old role, when it was really sorrow at losing freedom – doubles the irony. It implies that society fundamentally misunderstands women's inner lives, crediting them with the "right" feelings (devotion, joy in marriage) when in fact something else entirely might be going on. Chopin, by letting the reader in on Louise's true feelings, gives voice to the voiceless conflict of millions of women of her era who could not openly say that they sometimes felt constrained or even oppressed by well-meaning husbands and domesticity.

In a feminist theoretical context, Louise Mallard's experience can be related to the concept of the "Angel in the House" vs. the independent woman. Louise was expected to be the devoted, loving wife (an angel in the house who lives for her husband), but Chopin reveals that under that angelic exterior there was a passionate being yearning for self-determination. The shock ending underscores how transgressive that yearning was: it essentially has no place in the world, leading to her annihilation. Some contemporary readers might even interpret Louise's death not literally but metaphorically, as if the self that had awakened in that hour cannot survive once the external conditions revert – so either the physical self dies or the spiritual self would have. Chopin chooses the physical death, but symbolically it is the death of her freedom.

This story's discussion highlights the stark nature of male–female conflict in Chopin's view: it is institutional and systemic. Brently Mallard personally has done nothing wrong, yet his very existence (and the return of the status quo he represents) is lethal to Louise's being.

The power imbalance is almost cosmic – he has the power (unwittingly) to give her life or death, which is exactly the kind of power patriarchy held over women's lives legally and socially in the 19th century. Chopin's genius is compressing this into an intimate, relatable scenario that unfolds in real time. It's no wonder this story is widely taught and anthologized as an early feminist text. Taken together with "The Last Tea" and "The Storm," it marks the darkest endpoint of the shared concern with women's agency: where Parker shows emotional damage without structural change and "The Storm" imagines temporary accommodation, "The Story of an Hour" insists on the impossibility of compromise between Louise's freedom and the marital order.

In comparing "The Story of an Hour" to the other works, we can see that while Parker and Chopin both address gender conflict, Chopin's approach in this story is more explicit in theme and uses dramatic irony to make a social argument. Parker's conflict was an everyday conversational minefield, largely personal and psychological. Chopin's here is structural and results in mortal consequences. Yet, both authors converge on a critical point: the depths of women's inner lives and dissatisfactions are often hidden beneath societal norms and polite facades. Parker's young woman cannot say what she really feels; Chopin's Louise must subdue her elation until she's alone. In both cases, the reader is given privileged access to the truth, whether through Parker's biting between-the-lines commentary or Chopin's transparent narration of Louise's thoughts. This narrative strategy builds empathy and also a sense of tragedy for the female characters who are, in different ways, casualties of their social contexts – one ends lonely and despairing, another ends literally dead.

All in all, the discussion of the three stories illustrates a spectrum of male–female conflict in literature. Parker's "The Last Tea" dramatizes the subtle, often invisible slights and imbalances that can make modern dating and relationships a source of female misery. Chopin's "The Storm" imagines a scenario where conflict is seemingly avoided by sidestepping societal rules, but leaves open questions about the broader implications. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" starkly portrays marriage itself as a site of conflict, resolved only in the most extreme way. Across these narratives, we see a common thread: women seeking agency or respect in environments that constrain them. Whether through satire, sensual symbolism, or searing irony, Parker and Chopin both shine a light on the gendered conflicts – quiet or explosive – that define their characters' experiences. These stories, though written over a century ago, continue to resonate because they confront issues of gender equity, personal freedom, and emotional fulfillment that remain relevant in literary discourse and society today.

5. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the three stories shows how male–female conflict in short fiction reflects and critiques changing gender norms from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Each text exposes the emotional costs of socially prescribed roles for women and questions the conventions that structure relations between men and women.

In "The Last Tea," Parker reveals a quiet but intense battle of the sexes conducted through polite talk and psychological manipulation. Beneath the Jazz Age surface of modern dating,

the man's casual entitlement and the woman's conditioned submissiveness expose a persistent power imbalance. Her forced smiles and fabricated stories dramatize how women's self-worth is tied to male approval, a condition Parker both satirizes and laments (Jones, 2016). The protagonist's quiet defeat and emotional dependence implicitly endorse the need for women's independence and refusal to invest their happiness in unreliable men (Melzer, 1997).

Chopin's "The Storm" reverses expectations by imagining an affair that does not destroy, but paradoxically stabilizes, domestic life. Calixta's fulfilled desire, and the story's harmonious ending, challenge rigid moral codes and suggest that the conflict between passion and marriage may be socially constructed rather than inevitable. Yet the secrecy and ambiguity surrounding the affair indicate the fragility of this resolution. Chopin's sympathetic portrayal of female pleasure anticipates later feminist arguments for women's bodily autonomy and sexual liberation (Seyersted, 1969).

"The Story of an Hour" offers Chopin's most radical indictment of patriarchal marriage. Louise Mallard's brief experience of ecstatic freedom, followed by her sudden death, dramatizes a systemic conflict between female selfhood and a social order that denies women autonomous identities within marriage (Mitchell, 1994; Cunningham, 2004). The conflict is not with a cruel husband but with a structure in which even a kind husband's "dominion" limits his wife's life. Chopin's heavy use of irony—especially the doctor's misreading of "joy that kills"—exposes the gulf between what society assumes women feel and their actual desires (Chopin, 1894). Louise's tragedy, like those in other feminist texts of the period, anticipates later critiques by writers such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, who insist on women's need for independent space and identity.

Taken together, these stories show that male–female conflict is not monolithic: it may appear as a war of words and timing ("The Last Tea"), as a transgressive but stabilizing passion ("The Storm"), or as an internal struggle against suffocating norms ("The Story of an Hour"). Concepts such as the patriarchal bargain, the New Woman, and the critique of the domestic sphere illuminate how the protagonists navigate or resist gendered expectations. Parker's heroine enacts a patriarchal bargain by tolerating disrespect for the sake of companionship; Chopin's Louise briefly embodies the New Woman in her vision of a life lived for herself; and Calixta recasts the romance plot so that female passion leads not to ruin but to a precarious equilibrium. The scholarly reception of these authors further contextualizes the analysis. Early critics sometimes condemned Chopin or, like Berkove, read Louise Mallard negatively, whereas more recent criticism emphasizes the feminist dimensions of her work. Parker, long dismissed as merely humorous, is now recognized for her sharp social commentary on gender (Jones, 2016; Seyersted, 1969). By engaging with this scholarship, the article underscores Parker and Chopin as incisive critics of their cultures' gender regimes rather than minor or purely entertaining writers.

Overall, the male–female conflicts in these stories point beyond individual relationships to systemic struggles between women and restrictive social roles. Parker and Chopin invite readers to empathize with women who, through sarcasm, sensual fulfillment, or private epiphany, seek agency in constrained worlds. Their work confirms the feminist insight that the personal is political: the tensions staged in parlors, tea rooms, and bedrooms mirror and

challenge broader social values. By reading these texts together, the article deepens our understanding of how early feminist short fiction exposed, questioned, and subtly reimagined the gendered dynamics of power, freedom, and desire.

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