

narration switches to future events ("Later I would relive these..."). Another technique is **foreshadowing**, which warns or suggests what lies ahead, sometimes through **symbolism**, in which something has a **literal**, everyday meaning but also stands for something else ("The shadows lengthened as he stepped into the dark forest, and from deep within he heard an animal cry of warning..."). Sometimes we pick up on a clue right away on a first reading, though often we might not notice it until we reread the story. Finally, a **narrator**, the one who tells the story, as Homer did, **in medias res**, in the middle of the action, with Achilles at his tent in front of the walls of Troy, and rely on **retrospective** narration, retelling that fills in the earlier parts of the story. In medias res is a technique in modern fiction as well, since we are all living our lives in the middle of things, and often it is only in retrospect that we realize we have experienced something that we could make into a story.

These terms are no doubt fairly familiar, since they refer to common types of story, from religious parables to complex action films. Recent theories and critical approaches by literary scholars have added layers of complexity to the issue of plot, but the main thing is to think of plot as the order an author imposes on the material. The plot of a story is a key part of its structure.

Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is an excellent example of a story that revolves around a **twist** or clever surprise in its plot, with a narrator who consciously shapes the material to keep us in suspense. Chopin wrote her stories in a world she knew well, late-nineteenth-century New Orleans, which was highly influenced by popular stories that depended on odd twists of fate. In addition to highly shaped plots, Chopin's stories had an explicitly feminist perspective, and today she is viewed as an early southern rebel against the oppression of women.



### KATE CHOPIN

*Of Irish-Creole descent, Kate Chopin grew up in various places in St. Louis, Missouri. After marriage to Oscar Chopin, she moved to New Orleans, but she only spent a few years there before his death and her return to St. Louis to raise her children. Her early novels, mostly set in Louisiana, were famous for portraying Creole culture. Her most famous work, *The Awakening* (1899), generated intense controversy for its realistic depiction of female sexuality. Chopin's work fell out of favor until the 1970s. *The Awakening* has been reprinted many times and is considered a feminist insight.*

### *The Story of an Hour*

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, it was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences, that revealed in half-concealing. Her husband's friend, Mr. Richards,

narration switches to future events ("Later I would relive these moments . . ."). Another technique is **foreshadowing**, which warns or suggests to readers what lies ahead, sometimes through **symbolism**, in which something has more than its literal, everyday meaning but also stands for something else ("The evening shadows lengthened as he stepped into the dark forest, and from dense undergrowth he heard an animal cry of warning . . ."). Sometimes we pick up on foreshadowing right away on a first reading, though often we might not notice it until we reread the story. Finally, a **narrator**, the one who tells the story, can begin as Homer did, **in medias res**, in the middle of the action, with Achilles sulking in his tent in front of the walls of Troy, and rely on **retrospective narration**, a later retelling that fills in the earlier parts of the story. In medias res is a very common technique in modern fiction as well, since we are all living our lives in the middle of things, and often it is only in retrospect that we realize we have done or experienced something that we could make into a story.

These terms are no doubt fairly familiar, since they refer to many different types of story, from religious parables to complex action films. Recent theoretical and critical approaches by literary scholars have added layers of interesting complexity to the issue of plot, but the main thing is to think of plot as the particular order an author imposes on the material. The plot of a story is a key part of its art.

Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is an excellent example of a story that revolves around a twist or clever surprise in its plot, with a narrator who constructively shapes the material to keep us in suspense. Chopin set many of her stories in a world she knew well, late-nineteenth-century New Orleans, and was highly influenced by popular stories that depended on odd twists of plot. In addition to highly shaped plots, Chopin's stories had an explicitly feminist point of view, and today she is viewed as an early southern rebel against the sexual repression of women.



## KATE CHOPIN

(1851–1904)

(*O*) Irish-Creole descent, Kate Chopin grew up in well-to-do circumstances in St. Louis, Missouri. After marriage to businessman Oscar Chopin, she moved to New Orleans, but she only began her literary career after his death and her return to St. Louis, with her six children. Her early novels, mostly set in Louisiana, revealed her talent for portraying Creole culture. Her most famous novel, *The Awakening* (1899), generated intense controversy for its sympathetic depiction of female sexuality. Chopin's work fell out of favor for many years, but since the 1970s, *The Awakening* has been reprinted many times and praised for its early feminist insights.

## The Story of an Hour

(1894)

Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death.

It was her sister Josephine who told her, in broken sentences, veiled hints that revealed in half concealing. Her husband's friend Richards was there, too,

near her. It was he who had been in the newspaper office when intelligence of the railroad disaster was received, with Brently Mallard's name leading the list of the dead. He 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.

She 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. When the storm of grief had spent itself, she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her. There stood, facing the open window, a comfortable, roomy armchair. Into this she sank, pressed down by a physical exhaustion that haunted her body and seemed to reach into her soul.

She could see in the open square before her house the tops of trees that were all aquiver with the new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was crying his wares. The notes of a distant song which some one was singing reached her faintly, and countless sparrows were twittering in the eaves.

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. She sat with her head thrown back upon the cushion of the chair, quite motionless, except when a sob came up into her throat and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

She was young, with a fair, calm face, whose lines bespoke repression and even a certain strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes, whose gaze was fixed away off yonder on one of those patches of blue sky. It was not a glance of reflection, but rather indicated a suspension of intelligent thought. There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle and elusive to name. But she felt it, creeping out of the sky, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

Now her bosom rose and fell tumultuously. She was beginning to recognize this thing that was approaching to possess her, and she was striving to beat it back with her will—as powerless as her two white slender hands would have been.

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!" The vastness keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body.

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.

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. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women habitually . . .

will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being! 15

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg, open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom. 20

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

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Chopin's short tale lets us see the clear difference between story and plot. Imagine this story as told from the beginning of the journey, with Brently Mallard leaving the house and his wife Louise thinking how glad she was he was going. Or imagine it beginning with a scene in which Richards gets the news and then confers in hushed tones with Josephine. Or imagine it beginning with a scene giving their exact words when they tell Louise the awful news. No, Chopin has chosen to compress all that and to begin with a half-sentence of exposition about Louise's weak heart (a piece of foreshadowing, of course) followed by three sentences of exposition about how they heard the awful news and checked to make sure it was accurate. This is a consciously contrived plot, designed to keep readers in suspense. A newspaper story about what happened would obviously lead with what happens at the end: "A New Orleans wife died of heart failure [or "of joy"] just as her husband, believed killed in a train wreck, unexpectedly returned home." Chopin provides us with a different picture, because her tight plot allows her to focus on the changing reactions inside Mrs. Mallard's mind as the news sinks in. Chopin's way of shaping the plot gives her time to concentrate on both the story, and on her **theme**, the subject or idea dramatized in the story, of a woman's anticipated freedom from male domination, no matter how benign.

Then a car door closed farther away. Then another. A small white light came on farther back in the road. *set how long it would be before his angry feelings stopped marring to world.* He considered faintly why Margorie would admit this to him now. It seemed

then he heard his own car start. The muffled-metal diesel racker of the Mercedes. The headlights came smartly on and disclosed him. Music was imparted, as his own had been, by the salmon dashboard light. He saw the tips of her fingers atop the arc of the steering wheel, heard the surge of the engine. In the woods he noticed a strange glow coming through the trees, something yellow, something out of the low wet earth, a mist, a vapor, something that might be magical. The air smelled sweet now. The peepers stopped peeping. And then that was all.

*Starting Point for Further Research: Richard Ford*

- **Interview:** Jennifer Levasseur, "Invitation to the Storm: An Interview with Richard Ford," *Kennedy Review* 23.3-4 (Summer-Fall 2001): 125-43.

**CHARACTER**

The novelist and short story master Henry James pointed to the tight link between plot and character when he wrote, "What is character but the determination of an incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?" James forces us to note that the terms are both really abstractions, since one would hardly exist without the other. Characters are developed through plot; and part of why plot exists is to depict character.

Some stories, like "The Story of an Hour" and "Under the Radar," seem at first highly plot-driven; they recount a startling or stunning or powerful action, often with an unexpected twist at the end. In such a story, the characters do not seem nearly as important as the actions themselves; the plot. Often there is an absence of rich characterization—that is, description of character through gesture, actions, dialogue—and few subtleties about motivation or feeling. Everyone has read romance or action-adventure books in which the characters seem stock (as if taken off the shelf) or cardboard, the dialogue stiff, the narration wooden, but in which the action moves the story along. (When the stock characters come from standardized portrayals of particular ethnic, professional, social, or personality types, they are often called **stereotypes**—because they create oversimplified, often prejudicial, pictures of those characters and groups.) Such action-driven books—some call them page-turners or **formula fiction**, since they follow a pretty common design—seem perfect reading for a trip, but they usually do not repay rereading, unless they are exceptionally well written.

Other stories are not so obviously about exterior action but interior feeling. James Joyce's "Araby" (later in this chapter, p. 34) makes a dramatic story out of

a young boy's desire simply to get to a sleepy provincial circus. People seeing the events or listening to a plain description of them would not think much happened, but Joyce's narrator is transformed by the experience. In such a story, the outward actions of the characters seem unimportant or trivial, while their inward actions are all-powerful. The drama comes only because Joyce has created a character who is someone we recognize and care about. On the other hand, Tim O'Brien's "stockings," a brief short story from his Vietnam book *The Things They Carried* (1990), presents us with a simple character who seems to represent all Americans.

**TIM O'BRIEN**

(b. 1946)



Tim O'Brien was born and raised in rural Minnesota and graduated from Macalester College in St. Paul. After graduation he was drafted into the Army, served honorably in Vietnam, where he earned a Purple Heart, and continued to be firmly against that war. He turned his Vietnam experience into the powerful, highly successful story collection *The Things They Carried* (1990), which includes "Stockings." O'Brien's work includes *Northern Lights* (1975), *Going after Cacciato* (1978), and his war memoir *Hell in a Combat Zone: Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973). O'Brien lives in Austin, Texas.

**Stockings**

(1990)

Henry Dobbins was a good man, and a superb soldier, but sophistication was not his strong suit. The ironies went beyond him. In many ways he was like America itself: big and strong, full of good intentions, a roll of fat jiggling at his belly, slow of foot but always plodding along; always there when you needed him, a believer in the virtues of simplicity and directness and hard labor. Like his country, too, Dobbins was drawn toward sentimentality.

Even now, twenty years later, I can see him wrapping his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck before heading out on ambush. It was his one eccentricity. The pantyhose, he said, had the properties of a good-luck charm. He liked putting his nose into the nylon and breathing in the scent of his girlfriend's body; he liked the memories this inspired; he sometimes slept with the stockings up against his face; the way an infant sleeps with a blanket blanketed, secure and peaceful. More than anything, though, the stockings were a talisman for him. They kept him safe. They gave access to a spiritual world, where things were soft and intimate, a place where he might someday take his girlfriend to live. Like many of us in Vietnam, Dobbins felt the pull of the superstition, and he believed firmly and absolutely in the protective power of the stockings. They were like body armor, he thought. Whenever we saddled up for a late-night ambush, putting on our helmets and flak jackets, Henry Dobbins would make a ritual out of arranging the nylons around his neck, carefully tying a knot, draping the two leg sections over his left shoulder. There were some jokes, of course, but we came to appreciate the mystery of it all. Dobbins was invulnerable. Never wounded, never a scratch. In August, he tripped a bouncing mine, which failed to detonate. And a week later he got caught in the open

during a fierce little firefight, no cover at all, but he just slipped over his nose and breathed deep and let the magic do its work.

It turned us into a platoon of believers. You don't dispute.

But then, near the end of October, his girlfriend dumped him. Dobbins went quiet for a while, staring down at her letter. He took out the stockings and tied them around his neck as a talismanic object.

"No sweat," he said. "The magic doesn't go away."

### **Talking about the Text**

1. How do you regard the comparison of Dobbins's character with the narrator's? Unfavorable? Wildly inaccurate? On target? What generalizations about the comparison seem to be most apt?
2. Do you or does anyone you know carry any kind of odd "talismanic" object? How does that connect to the narrator's character?

### **Writing about the Text**

1. List Dobbins's character traits, using what the narrator tells us in the first paragraph as well as what you can glean from the second and third paragraphs.
2. Describe in a paragraph or two some person or character, real or fictional, who can be seen as standing for something, as Dobbins does for America.

### **Linking the Text to Other Texts**

1. "Talismanic" objects are common in films and stories. Compare the narrator's "stockings" from your experience to the one in "Stockings."
2. Compare Dobbins's naiveté in "Stockings" with the narrator's naiveté in "The Story of an Hour" (p. 34). How does the naiveté help make them endearing characters?

### **Starting Points for Further Research: Tim O'Brien**

- **Critical Essay:** Alex Vernon, "Salvation, Storytelling, and I: Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Study of Literature* 36:4 (December 2003): 171-88.
- **Interview:** "Interview with Tim O'Brien," *Readers Read*, 2003. [www.readersread.com/features/timobrien.htm](http://www.readersread.com/features/timobrien.htm).

## **Types of Characters**

Characters come in many forms, from complex, finely drawn to general "types," deliberately simplified, one-dimensional characters. In "The Story of an Hour," who are only sketched in to stand for something else, in his case for "the family friend." Characters do not always provide rich character descriptions; instead, they are introduced at a single moment in their lives, or made vivid by a single scene. A more leisurely world of a 300-page novel provides opportunities for more complex characterization than a ten- or twenty-page story that focuses on a single event or action. Short story characters by necessity are often sketched in.