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**Review Paper****Critical Perspectives and Textual Analysis of Four Short Stories****Ahmed Gouhar***Brock University (Speech Language and Hearing Sciences BA Program), Canada.***ARTICLE INFORMATION****Corresponding Author:**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper aims to analyze four short stories written by authors from different cultures and depict the relations between men and women from a variety of perspectives. This paper will examine the texts of (The Widow of Ephesus) by Gaius Petronius and (The Story of an Hour) by Kate Chopin in addition to (You can't cover up the sky with your hand) by Oscar Lewis and (Gogol's Wife) by Tommaso Landolfi. These four stories will be critically approached in order to simplify their texts and make them accessible for ESL learners. Further, the paper will explore the complicated male-female intersections in the four stories in order to probe the feminist and masculine underpinnings shaping the thematic trajectories of the stories in addition to an investigation of the four texts from a structural-oriented viewpoint.*

**The Widow of Ephesus**

**Exposition:** The story starts on a conventional note, a woman who is loyal to her husband to the extent that she has become the talk of the town. Her good reputation even goes beyond Ephesus and women from nearby towns come to see her in order to follow her example. When her husband dies, she shows a great deal of sorrow and lamentation over his death. She follows her dead husband's body to the grave and sits beside it weeping and crying. The widow is on the verge of death out of hunger because she stops eating since her husband's death. Her parents and the magistrates fail to convince her to give up her lamentation and leave the grave. The widow instead gives up eating for five days and so does her maid. The maid also suffers because she shares her mistress the sorrows. She lights the lamp for her mistress and supports her in such a miserable situation. By that time of the story, the widow becomes, without doubts, a symbol of love, honesty, loyalty and marital fidelity.

**Conflicts, Development and Climax:** During the time the widow is in the grave of her husband, the governor of the town gives orders that some thieves should be killed and crucified somewhere near the tombs. The bodies of the thieves are guarded by a soldier to prevent anyone from removing them or burying them.

The soldier hears sounds of mourning, groaning and sees the light which comes out of the tomb. His human curiosity makes him go towards the widow and her maid. The soldier is surprised to see a tremendously beautiful lady with tears on her face and fingernail scratches on her cheeks. He realizes that she is a widow in grief. Now, he starts his temptation. He brings his dinner to the widow asking her to eat and stop such a useless mourning. The soldier tries to comfort her by sermonizing that all humans are going to die one day. However, she becomes more violent in her lamentation and she tears her hair and spread it over the dead body of her husband. The soldier, on the other hand, does not give up hope that he may convince her to stop mourning. He goes on with his persuasion till he obliges her to take some food. The maid helps the soldier by eating from his food. She warns her mistress of hunger and starvation. The maid recites some lines from Vergil, a Roman poet, which show the futility of weeping and lamenting over the dead.

The maid plays a very important role here and she does her best to urge her mistress to change her attitude towards the dead husband. After she fulfills her role, the maid completely disappears from the short story. The maid tells her mistress to shake off her sorrow and grief because she must not bury herself alive. Under the logical persuasion of the soldier and the maid, the widow surrenders and eats all the food the soldier brings to her. By accepting the soldier's food, the widow accepts the soldier as a substitute for her husband. She becomes interested in him and finds his argument attractive and convincing. The widow cannot resist overflowing emotions towards the soldier and she inevitably falls in love with him. The widow cannot resist her temptation and she finally gives her body up to the soldier. The maid now disappears in order to give the lovers a chance to enjoy themselves physically. The lovers sleep together inside the tomb of the widow's husband for three nights. They carefully shut the door of the tomb so that passersby would think that the poor widow dies on the body of her husband and this is a fantastically ironic hint.

The soldier smuggles their food to the tomb at night and they continue their sexual activity. The soldier is indulged in sexuality to

the degree that he no longer pays attention to his job as a guard of the crucified thieves. One day, the parents of one of the crucified thieves manage to steal the body of their son and bury it. The soldier is horrified after discovering the disappearance of one of the dead bodies. He is supposed to be sentenced and killed as a penalty. He tells his mistress, the widow, that he will commit suicide by his own sword. She becomes terrified and she offers him a suitable solution. She tells him to take the dead body of her husband and place it on the cross instead of the body of the thief. The inhabitants of the town are surprised to see the dead body of the widow's husband hanged on the cross. The climax happens when the thief's body disappears and the lover's life is at stake. The denouement happens when the widow allows the soldier to take her husband's body, an act which saves her lover's life. The story has many interpretations. It can be explained as a story which revolves round the infidelity of woman and that all women can be easily seduced. We can interpret the story in the sense that, it shows how life and love are more important than death. Life, love and beauty cannot be buried alive. So, the story has many themes and it depends on our own explanation of its significance.

### **The Story of an Hour**

The story starts with Mrs. Mallard receiving the news of her husband's death. Her husband, Brently Mallard is killed in a train accident. Josephine, Mrs. Mallard's sister, breaks the news to her in broken sentences and veiled manner because Mrs. Mallard is suffering from heart troubles and everyone is careful in delivering the bad news. Richard, a friend of Brently Mallard is at home too. He is the one who brings the news of Mr. Mallard's death. He makes sure of the death news by a second telegram. So, we become sure that Mr. Mallard is already dead. His wife weeps when she hears the bad news. After the storm of grief has taken its course, Mrs. Mallard goes to her room alone. In her room, she feels comfortable and happy. Her happy feelings are reflected on her surroundings. She starts for the first time in her life, to see the world more beautiful than before. She could listen to the birds singing on the branches of the trees. The trees and nature around her are vibrating and throbbing with spring life. The rain has a delicious smell. She enjoys everything she sees, hears or smells even the sound of the peddler in the near street looks like a beautiful melody to her ears. She could hear beautiful songs coming from far and vague destinations. She opens the window of her room to look at the surrounding world.

The window is a symbol of her new life. She looks at the sky and finds it covered with clouds. The clouds here are symbolic because they connote that her moments of happiness are momentary and will not last forever. The clouds are emblematic of the unknown future which is waiting for her. The clouds are gathering in the west. The word (west) is significant because the west is where the sun sets, and the sun sets at the end of the day or symbolically at the death of the day. So the west signifies the coming death of her momentary happiness. Thus, the author is preparing the readers for the surprise by the end of the story. During the hour of happiness, the heroine begins to feel afraid. She could not explain the reason beyond her fear. She could not even feel the source of her fear. She only knows that she will not be able to face the coming fear. After moments of deep thinking, Mrs. Mallard comes to the conclusion that she will feel free like the open sea. She knows that she will have a better life in the future, a life of her own which will be populated by her own joys.

Mrs. Mallard will live for herself only. She feels that she becomes independent, that she becomes Louise not Mrs. Mallard. She feels free from the ties of marriage. The heroine, apparently, has a bad marriage experience. She is not on good terms with her husband. She says that she loves her husband at certain moments but she hates him most of the time probably because he is selfish, tyrannical or unkind. The heroine is suffering now from an internal conflict. Two passions are conflicting inside her: Love and self-assertion, but the second wins the struggle. Josephine is crying outside Mrs. Mallard's room thinking that her sister is dying out of grief. Mrs. Mallard is dreaming of her coming future. She imagines a lot of beautiful things waiting for her. Josephine is crying at the door of Louise's room. Finally, she opens the door to her sister and she feels victorious. When they are coming down together, there is someone who opens the door. It was Brently Mallard coming from his travel and he knows nothing about the supposed-to-be accident. Richard who was there tried to hide Mr. Mallard from his wife's eyes but it was too late. Mrs. Mallard died immediately at the sight of her husband. The doctors said that she died of a heart disease of joy that kills.

### **The Ironic Structure of the Short Story**

Mrs. Mallard dies only when she starts to live. This is the irony we meet by the end of the story. However, irony dominates the whole structure of the short story from the beginning up to the end. Mrs. Mallard's friends all assume that she is deeply in love with her husband, therefore, they were careful in delivering the news of his death to her. In reality, the sad message brings life and happiness to Mrs. Mallard. In the beginning she weeps but later she goes to her room where she enjoys an hour of extreme happiness. Another irony appears when Josephine weeps thinking that her sister is dying out of grief. In fact, her sister was enjoying the best moments of her life. The doctors said that Mrs. Mallard died of joy that kills. The medical diagnosis is correct in one way that she experienced a great joy an hour before her death.

The irony here is that doctors believe that she dies because of the joy she felt when she saw, her husband alive. The fact is that she dies when she realizes that the great joy she experienced for only an hour is over. The central irony lies in the phrase "But Richard was too late". In the beginning, Richard with the best wishes is at hurry to break the bad news to Mrs. Mallard. If he comes late nothing will happen and Mrs. Mallard will not die. At the end, Richard is late, however, to conceal Mr. Mallard from his wife who consequently dies. Another irony resides in the notion that Louise lives with her husband a long time but experiences death-in-life because she has been dead, a mere body subjected to her husband's will. Now his apparent death brings her fresh life because she feels that she will get rid of her marriage burden. Such a new life comes to her at spring but ironically her real life will last only for an hour. She feels free only until her husband comes back alive. She looks forward to summer days; ironically, she dies even before the end of the spring. Her life is ironic because its vision of a long progression of years is cut short within an hour on a spring day.

### **You can't cover up the sky with your hand**

This is an interesting story by Oscar Lewis, which records the life history of a bad woman. In the beginning, the readers are horrified by the narrator's violence and sadism. The narrator of the story is an aggressive woman. She is a prostitute and a criminal. She says she carries a blade with her and hides it under her tongue. She says she can fight with the blade. She is ready to cut the face of anyone. She can cut a man with a razor, slash him with a bottle. So we got a very bad impression about the narrator of the story. She says that she wipes her ass with men, an indication of her indifference and criminality. However, we gradually discover that the heroine of the story is not completely a bad woman. We begin to discover the human side of the narrator. Despite being a whore, she is not a house breaker. She never takes a husband from his wife and children but she prefers to sexualize with unmarried people.

The rest of the story reveals the background of the narrator. She comes from a poor, disintegrated family. She was born in Rio Garande about fifty miles from San Juan. Her family was divided, a drunken father and a poor, ill-mannered, ill-tempered mother and a crazy grandmother. The narrator loves her mother more than her father. Her parents are separated and her mother marries another man called Jorge. Her mother takes care of her even after she marries Jorge. As a child, the narrator was deprived of all kinds of fun and parental sympathy. Her grandmother loves her sister Megdalia more than she loves her. So, the narrator feels that she is not wanted and that her relatives are neglecting her. All the suffering experience of her childhood affects the structure of her personality as we see in the beginning.

The narrator tells us that the grandmother's craziness made her relatives rob her of all the properties she had, leaving her the house only. The narrator's uncle Aurelio was a wicked man. He was very rich but he was not kind with the narrator. He became crazy too under the spell which was cast on him by a woman. The woman even made his testicles useless so as not to sleep with another women. The narrator's mother was kind with the wicked uncle. She helped him to be cured by magicians (spiritists) because she was a merciful woman who never hold grudge against the man who mistreated her and her daughter. The narrator never knows her father's love. Her father was a bad man who spent all his life drinking and rioting.

In this story we do not have any action. We do not have either conflicts or plots or climaxes. What we have is some sort of a biography. We have a woman talking about herself and her family. All the characters in the story are psychologically abnormal and the best way to study this story is to subject its characters to psycho-analysis. The story can be analyzed in a way to show the influence of environment and society on human beings. The narrator is a woman without a name. This means that such a story can happen to anyone if he undergoes the same circumstances and social conditions. The narrator is not a bad woman by nature but due to her social background she has been transformed to a criminal and a prostitute. The narrator becomes aggressive in order to defend herself against a hostile society. She feels that she was victimized by society when she was a child. Now, she is a grown up person and she has to defend herself against such a society. She may think of taking revenge on society because it was the reason for her recent condition. So, the reader was shocked in the beginning by the violence, vulgarity and sadism of the heroine but later we become sympathetic with her when we discovered that she was a victim of her society.

### **Gogol's Wife**

In reality, the story is part of the biography of the famous Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol. In fiction, the narrator of the story (Gogol's Wife) by the Italian author Tommaso Landolfi, is a biographer who writes everything about Nikolai Vassilevitch who is a writer. The narrator of the story knows many things about Nikolai's wife who is not an ordinary woman or any sort of human being or animal or vegetable but she is a balloon. The relatives and all of Nikolai's friends never see his wife, never hear her voice. This gives them opportunity to deduce all sorts of dark, disgraceful and criminal implications about Nikolai's wife. Gogol's wife (Nikolai's wife) is a dummy made of thick rubber, naked at all seasons. She is sometimes thin with little breasts. She changes her skin color and her hair color. Later on, we discovered that all the changes which happen to the dummy are done by the author (Nikolai) himself to obtain the type of woman he wants. Obviously, the form of woman he obtains incarnates his desire at a certain time.

The author falls in love with the dummy (his wife) to the extent that she becomes no longer his slave but his tyrant. Nikolai creates the dummy then he falls in love with her, marries her but afterwards she keeps control over him. (In Greek mythology, we have many stories about artists who create statues, fall in love with them, then marry them. So, the story of "Gogol's wife" is not strange within this context). After their marriage, Nikolai gives a name to his wife. Her name is Carcas, the Capital of Venezuela. Nikolai's wife is well-built and proportioned in every part. Her backbone is made of whalebone and her genital organs are formed by means of ingenious folds in the rubber.

The genital organs of the dummy are operated by various devices and the internal air pressure. She has two dark eyes whose color can be changed. She can even speak in a soft feminine voice and the narrator hears her saying : "I want to go poo poo". Nikolai never tells the narrator about the person who makes the dummy but we understand from the story that the dummy is Nikolai's own creation. The relation between Nikolai and his wife goes on smoothly for some years. They were friendly and they were even sleeping with each other. Then their relation comes to a dead lock when Gogol's wife begins to feel independent and autonomous. We are not informed about the manner in which she becomes independent. The narrator speaks about Gogol's wife throughout the story as if she were a real woman.

The gap between Nikolai and his wife becomes wider when both of them get a shameful, sexual disease. They become suspicious of each other. Nikolai has doubts that his wife is sexualizing with other people and she is no longer loyal to him. Nikolai never has any physical contact with other women; yet he is suffering from a sexual disease. Nikolai discovers later that Carcas suffers from syphilis which is a shameful sexual disease. Nikolai tries to cure his wife from such a disease but her illness is incurable

though he blows her up and down to immune her from contagion but in vain. The narrator was an eyewitness of all the incidents of the story. Nikolai becomes depressed, stricken and broken-hearted because of his wife's illness. He accuses her of growing old. He even accuses her of surrendering to solitary pleasures which he has forbidden. Nikolai's wife has been metamorphosed to a bitter creature, querulous, hypocritical and subject to religious excess.

Consequently, Nikolai becomes tired and he shows signs of great worry. He was weeping, crying and was always nervous. He was preparing himself for an extra-ordinary act. The decisive moment comes and Nikolai comes to a point of no return. He got a pump, placed it in Carcas's anus and started blowing till it was destroyed completely. Then he put her fragments in the fire place and burnt it to ashes. Then he asked the narrator to hide and brought Carcas's son, a small dummy too and put it in the fire together with its mother. By the end of the story, we get the impression that Nikolai himself will die very soon.

The story is interesting, eccentric and rather strange. Carcas can be an illusion which is created by Nikolai in order to help him to live. All human beings need some sort of illusion to help them to carry on with their miserable life on earth. So, the story shows that Nikolai creates such an illusion to sustain his own life. When he was young he was able to enjoy his illusion but when he grows old and becomes more and more disillusioned due to life's burdens he could not believe his illusion anymore. Thus he destroyed it and consequently ruined his own life as well. According to the story human beings cannot live without illusions. On the other hand, the story can be interpreted as a myth or a legend which looks like Greek mythology. We have an artist Nikolai who creates a beautiful woman, then falls in love with her, then marries her but when he feels that she will corrupt his life he destroyed her. The ruin of Carcas brings an end to Nikolai's life because he cannot live without her.

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