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Finding Freedom at the End of an Abusive Relationship

Abusive and unhealthy relationships are an unfortunate occurrence in society that are often endured for unseen reasons. Although relationships are a natural part of life, regrettably not all are healthy, and many become physically and mentally abusive. These unfulfilling relationships are a popular topic in literature, often giving the wronged character's point of view and a glimpse into his or her psychological perspective. Though it may not always be clear why a person tolerates an unhealthy relationship, there is something remarkable found after enduring a toxic relationship where the only escape is through one person's death. Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat," William Faulkner's "Barn Burning," and Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" all display the sense of freedom that can only be found through the ending of an unhealthy relationship brought about by death, and how this freedom is perhaps the truest form.

To that end, a marriage is meant to be a sacred vow, uniting two people, who are supposed to love, cherish, and respect one another, yet all too often in Western society, this is not upheld. In "Sweat," the main character, Delia, is married to a wicked man named Sykes. The two have been married for fifteen years, and Delia has provided for them throughout the entirety of their marriage, as well as endured Sykes' abuse. Sykes is a terrible husband in every possible way; he has a mistress that he spends Delia's money on, he enjoys tormenting his wife and if not physically abusing her, then mentally or emotionally; evidence of this is presented early and often in the story. The reader is meant to infer how unhealthy this relationship is almost

immediately. Why Delia tolerates Sykes' abuse is unknown, and their relationship is a topic of conversation among their neighbors: "He done beat huh 'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks" (Hurstun 1024). According to Judith Musser, literary critic and professor, in her thesis, this is explained as "the violence that can occur as a result of sexist oppression" (42). This sets the stage for the eventual freedom and sense of release the protagonist will feel at the story's end.

Furthermore, oppression itself can be a form of abuse, as evident in Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour." Mrs. Mallard has a serious heart condition, which is widely known, so when word is received that her husband has died in a railroad accident, all care is taken not to upset her because of it. Mrs. Mallard immediately weeps and then is left to be alone with her thoughts and emotions. Once alone, Mrs. Mallard realizes the emotion she feels are that of relief and freedom, not pain and grief, as is to be expected from someone so recently widowed; "What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in the face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being! Free! Body and soul free!" (Chopin 426). Mrs. Mallard defies conventional behavior and rejoices at the newfound freedom her husband's death had brought her, for she is no longer oppressed. Thus, it need not be physical torment alone that imprisons.

And yet, not all abusive relationships are between husband and wife, as is apparent in William Faulkner's short story, "Barn Burning," in which a young boy, Colonel Sartoris Snopes is forced to lie for the father in a court of law. Sartoris, or Sarty, is a victim of his father's physical and mental abuse, as he is made to take part in, and cover up the crime of barn burning that the father has committed. Sarty is conflicted because he knows that what his father did was wrong and doesn't want to lie, but feels he has no choice due to the abuse he faces, "His father

struck him with the flat of his hand on the side of his head, hard” (Faulkner 1007). Sarty feels trapped by the abusive life he lives and shows signs of wanting a change “the light weight of his few years, just heavy enough to prevent soaring free of the world as it seemed to be ordered but not heavy enough to keep him footed solid in it, to resist it and try to change the course of its events” (Faulkner 1007).

The realization of being unhappy and wanting a change, an abusive relationship, is also exemplified through Delia, in Hurston’s “Sweat”. Delia begins to show signs of gaining courage in her situation with Sykes, as she finally tells him that she hates him, and “Ah’m goin’tuh de white folks about you, mah young man, de very nex’ time you lay yo’ han’s on me” (Hurston 1028). This change in her demeanor towards her abuser is what triggers him to release the rattlesnake in Delia’s clothes hamper. Delia flees from the house, as she is terrified of snakes, and hides in the hay loft and eventually falls asleep, until she is awoken by Sykes returning home. She moves closer to the house and witnesses the struggle between man and beast which ensues. She waits outside the house hearing Sykes calling her name softly, he finally hears Delia and calls out to her, but she does not move to help him, instead she does nothing, for the first time in her life. When examining this type of relationship and the woman in it Hongzhi Wu states “They are used and abused till they can be put to no use any more, and then they are left alone to die” (1053). However, Delia did not let this become her fate and was determined to be free from the nightmarish life she lived. She overcame her abuse, and her abuser, and found freedom on the other side of the ordeal.

The freedom found at the close of an unhealthy relationship is not always a typical idea of freedom, as shown in “The Story of an Hour”. Mrs. Mallard’s relief and freedom is short lived, as she is coming out of her room, her husband surprisingly appears at the front door. Mrs.

Mallard's heart gives out, as what the doctors say was due to the joy of seeing her husband alive. That is, however, not true, Mrs. Mallard's newfound freedom is drawn to a close upon seeing her husband alive and her heart cannot take the thought of being stuck in that oppressive relationship for the rest of her life. Death, her death in this case, was the only escape from the unhappiness that consumed her life and marriage.

Occasionally the revelation of this freedom is found through the protagonists' own active choice, as in Faulkner's "Barn Burning". Sarty cannot be witness to another barn burned by his father, so he alerts the barns' owner, who shoots his father. The young boy then runs away from the barn, the town, and the abuse he suffered for so long, Charles Hannon states that "Sarty's desire to break away from the oppressive conditions of his family life" (133-134) was a significant part of his finding of freedom. Through his action of alerting the owner of the barn, he brought about the end of his abuse at the hands of his father. Upon reaching the top of a hill, he ponders about his father for a moment, and then decides to continue on, away from the town and his remaining family, as Audrey Friedman states "the boy breathes more easily, knowing and believing that soon the sun will rise on a new day and a new life" (97).

Though at first glance, these three stories seem to have little in common, different time periods, different characters, plot, and diction, yet all show the struggle of an oppressed individual trying to escape from an abusive relationship. Delia finds courage and strength towards Sykes, and is able to let him die; Mrs. Mallard feels free when she finds out her husband is dead, only to die upon seeing him alive, still remaining free of him; and Sarty turns out to be the cause of his own freedom, by breaking the cycle and stopping his father. These three stories are incredibly powerful in the discussion of an abused person finding his or her own freedom, and how often that freedom coincides with one person's death.

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