



READING 2 Analyze theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts. **2A** Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition.

The Story of an Hour

Based on the short story by Kate Chopin

Do all CAGES have BARS?

Prisons and animal cages have bars to keep those inside them from escaping. But people can feel “caged” even if they are not behind bars. In “The Story of an Hour,” Kate Chopin explores how someone can feel trapped by normal family life.

LIST IT In the first column of the chart at the left, list things that can make someone feel “caged,” or restricted. Then put check marks next to the things from which people can free themselves.

Things that Can Make Us Feel “Caged”

<i>a fatal illness</i>	
<i>an unsatisfying job</i>	✓

Literary Analysis: Theme

At the heart of every effective piece of literature is a **theme**—the writer’s message or observation about life or human nature. Often, a good short story writer doesn’t state the theme directly. Instead, he or she wants readers to draw their own conclusions about the story’s central meaning.

In “The Story of an Hour,” Kate Chopin focuses on the internal life of Mrs. Mallard, a woman who has just received some terrible news. As you read, you will note Mrs. Mallard’s thoughts, feelings, and actions and then use these details to identify the story’s theme. Below is an example.

Mrs. Mallard’s feelings	Mrs. Mallard’s thoughts	Mrs. Mallard’s actions
<i>“exhaustion that seemed to reach into her soul”</i>	<i>It seems as though she has “stopped thinking.”</i>	<i>She sinks into a chair.</i>

Pay attention to Mrs. Mallard’s reactions to the story’s opening event, and think about what theme or message her reactions might suggest.

Reading Skill: Analyze Patterns of Organization

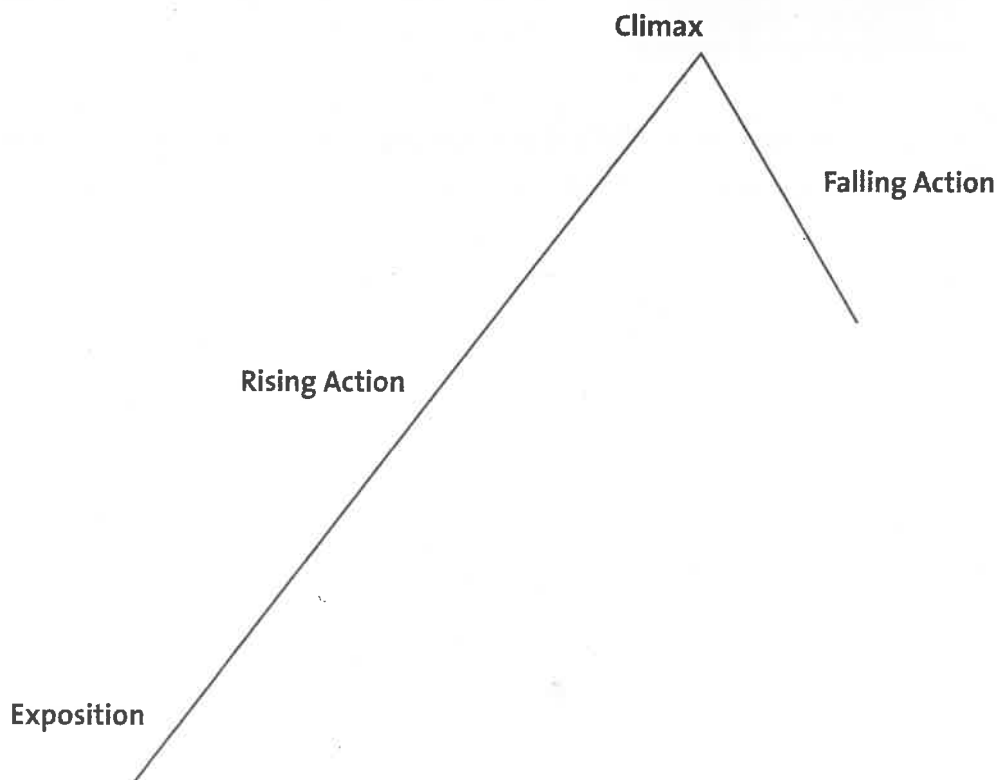
Most short stories are organized around a **plot**—the sequence of actions and events in a literary work. Plots are driven by **conflict**, or the struggle between opposing forces. Plots usually include the following stages:

- **Exposition** provides background information needed to understand characters and their actions.
- During the **rising action**, the conflict develops and story events build toward a climax.
- The **climax** is the turning point in a story. It is the moment when the reader's interest reaches a peak.
- The **falling action** occurs after the climax. It shows the effects of the climax. Sometimes the falling action is gradual and sometimes it is sudden.

As you read “The Story of an Hour,” activities in the margin will prompt you to note the stages of the plot shown in the following graphic.



READING 9C Make and defend subtle inferences and complex conclusions about the ideas in text and their organizational patterns.



**SET A PURPOSE
FOR READING**

Read “The Story of an Hour” to learn about a woman’s surprising reaction to tragic news.

The Story of an Hour



Based on the short story by
KATE CHOPIN

BACKGROUND This story takes place around 1900, when women could not vote or own property and had few opportunities for education. Few careers were open to middle-class and upper-class women, who were expected to be supported by their husbands. In most marriages of the time, the husband made all the decisions.

**A PATTERNS OF
ORGANIZATION**

The **exposition** of a story introduces characters and provides background information. Reread lines 1–9, and **circle** the names of characters. Then, **underline** the event that sets the plot in motion.

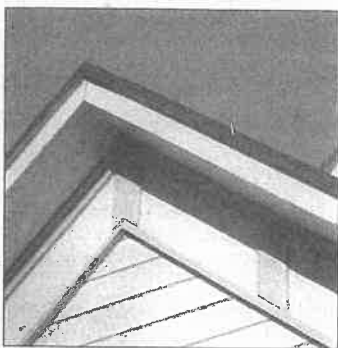
Because Mrs. Mallard was known to have heart trouble, great care was taken to break the news of her husband’s death to her as gently as possible.

Her sister Josephine told her. Her husband’s friend Richards was there, too. He had been in the newspaper office when news of the railroad disaster arrived, with Brently Mallard’s name leading the list of people “killed.” After a second telegram confirmed that it was true, he hurried over so that she would not hear the sad message from someone less caring, less tender. **A**

10 She did not respond with stunned disbelief. She wept at once, with wild abandonment, in her sister’s arms. When the storm of grief had passed, she went away to her room alone.

A comfortable chair faced the open window. She sank into it, pressed down by exhaustion that seemed to reach into her soul.

Outside, she could see the tops of trees trembling with new spring life. The delicious breath of rain was in the air. In the street below a peddler was calling out. She heard a song from a distance. Sparrows twittered in the **eaves**.



VISUAL VOCABULARY

Eaves (eevz) refers to the lower edge of a roof.

There were patches of blue sky showing here and there
20 through the clouds that had gathered. ⓑ

She sat with her head thrown back. She was motionless except when a sob arose and shook her, as a child who has cried itself to sleep continues to sob in its dreams.

IN OTHER WORDS Mrs. Mallard's husband is reported to have been killed in a railroad accident. Her sister Josephine and her husband's friend Mr. Richards tell her the news carefully because she has heart trouble. She cries and then shuts herself in her room.

She was young. Her pretty, calm face showed signs of some strength. But now there was a dull stare in her eyes. Their gaze was fixed far away on one of those patches of blue sky. It was a look that suggested she had stopped thinking.

There was something coming to her and she was waiting for it, fearfully. What was it? She did not know; it was too subtle
30 and elusive to name. But she felt it, reaching toward her through the sounds, the scents, the color that filled the air.

She began 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 lips. She said it over and over: "free, free, free!" Her eyes became keen and bright. Her pulse beat fast, and the swiftly flowing blood warmed and relaxed her. Ⓒ

She did not stop to ask if the joy that held her was monstrous.
40 She dismissed the idea as unimportant.

She knew that she would weep again when she saw her husband's kind, tender hands folded in death. She would cry when she saw his loving face gray and dead. But beyond that bitter moment, she saw many years to come that would belong to her absolutely. She spread her arms out to them in welcome.

During those years, she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will dominating her. Now she saw that such behavior was a crime whether intended kindly or cruelly.

ⓑ THEME

Reread lines 13–20. Mark brackets [] around the sentence that describes how Mrs. Mallard is feeling. How do her feelings contrast with the world she observes outside her window?

Ⓒ PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION

Reread lines 28–38. What plot stage occurs in this section of the story? Explain your answer.

D THEME

Reread lines 46–53. Why does Mrs. Mallard think that her love for her husband doesn't matter?

E THEME

Reread lines 59–62. What do Mrs. Mallard's thoughts about living a long life suggest about her marriage?

F PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION

At the beginning of the story, there is a misunderstanding about what happened to Brently Mallard. What new misunderstanding is introduced in the last sentence—the story's **falling action**? Do you think this is an effective way to end the story? Explain.

Yet she had loved him—sometimes. Often she had not.
50 What did it matter! What could love count for in face of this self-assertion, which she now saw as the strongest impulse of her being!

“Free! Body and soul free!” she kept whispering. **D**

IN OTHER WORDS Mrs. Mallard suddenly feels joy when she realizes that she is now free of her husband's control. He was kind and loving, but she is overcome by this feeling of freedom.

► With a partner, discuss the change in Mrs. Mallard's feelings.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, pleading to be let in. “Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill.”

“Go away. I am not making myself ill.” No, she was restoring her health.

Her imagination ran wild about those days ahead. Spring
60 days, summer days, all sorts of days would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. Only yesterday she shuddered at the thought that life might be long. **E**

She finally rose and opened the door. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards waited for them at the bottom.

Someone was opening the front door with a key. Brently Mallard entered, carrying his small bag and umbrella. He had been far from the accident, and he did not even know there had
70 been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry and at Richards' quick motion to hide 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. **F**

IN OTHER WORDS Mrs. Mallard emerges just as her husband, who wasn't on the train that crashed, arrives. Mrs. Mallard dies. Her doctors say that joy caused her heart attack.

After Reading



READING 2A Analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition. **9C** Make and defend subtle inferences and complex conclusions about the ideas in text and their organizational patterns.

Do all CAGES have bars?

Before “The Story of an Hour” begins, what makes Mrs. Mallard feel confined? Why, during the story, does she feel as if she has been released from a cage? Explain your ideas on the lines below.

Reading Skill: Patterns of Organization

Analyze the organization of “The Story of an Hour” by noting key events in the plot stages listed in the chart.

Exposition: *Josephine and Richards tell Mrs. Mallard that her husband has been killed in a train accident.*

Rising action: _____

Climax: _____

Falling action: _____
