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## Time and Gender in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour"

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### Abstract

The aim of this presentation is to show how Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin manipulate temporality to foreground their themes in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and "The Story of an Hour" in the light of Gérard Genette's theory of time. Both stories present female characters oppressed by the patriarchal authority in the marriage and their attempts to liberate themselves from this oppression. The aim is to find out how the gender of the author or protagonist in the narration can affect the time of narration. Gérard Genette's theory of time (order) is applied to these short stories in order to confirm that the theme of the story affects the time of narration regarding women's status in the narration. The results are in agreement with feminist narratologists who believe that the female authors use techniques of time in the narration purposefully to resist or negotiate with patriarchy in the process of women's liberation.

**Keywords:** Gérard Genette, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Temporality, Gender.

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## Introduction

The concept of time, the main concern of human beings in the physical world, is one of the main subjects of literary works. In the real world, as a result of human mortality there is no escape from the passage of time, no return to the past, no shortcut to the future before the present. Narrative fiction has the opportunity to go beyond these boundaries, and make it possible to roam freely in time. The process of reading is the key in making this possible. Time and the experience of time not only are common themes in narrative fiction, but also the constituent elements of narrative.

Classical narratology believes in neutrality of time, and it bases its definition on masculine time as the universal definition. For example, Genette claims temporality is gender-neutral. It is postclassical narratology which proposes the idea of gender-based temporality in the narration. For instance, Julia Kristeva defines “women’s time” as cyclic in comparison to men’s time which is linear. This masculine time is the conventional form of temporality and the representative of patriarchal authority. By contrast, the application of the cyclic time is not limited to female authors, and it does not mean all female authors use this type of time.

However, attribution of cyclic time to women’s style is criticized by scholars such as Margaret Homans (1994), Brian Richardson (2000), and Ruth E. Page (2006). Ruth E. Page in “Gender” explains M. Homans’ rejection of universality of cyclic time in equating this feminine time with all narratives by women. Since this characteristic is applicable to “Euro-American tradition” and not to other women outside this circle (p. 200). Brian Richardson also rejects generalization of cyclic time since he argues that cyclic time is defined as “breaking the sequence” while in doing this female authors use linear temporality in their works considerably (qtd. in Page, “Gender” 200). Moreover, Page herself criticizes the idea of universalism and believes that one cannot generalize specific feminine style over women authors and cannot apply this poetics to all female writers. Another justification for using cyclic time in opposition to essentialist point of view is that female authors or characters reverse chronological order and use cyclic time as a device to resist patriarchal authority and linear time (Polster, 2010). Polster states that “a resistance to a traditional concept of temporality – namely that of linear forward progression – is ultimately a resistance against patriarchal power.”

In this paper, I focus on the time of narration based on Gérard Genette’s techniques of temporality regarding *order* of narration in order to understand how these narrative “constituents” work in the narrative and help the author achieve the expected purpose and effect (Culler 83). In order to understand this, I will try to find “recurrent structure” of temporality by focusing on the female characters and draw a conclusion about the temporality of the narrative text in this study. I will also show that the theme of the story affects the time of narration regarding women’s status in the narration. The results are in agreement with those

feminist narratologists' who believe that the female authors use techniques of time in the narration purposefully to resist or negotiate with patriarchy in the process of women's liberation.

"The Yellow Wall-Paper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892) and "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin (1894) have the same theme of women's confinement in the domestic sphere and their attempt to set themselves free from this confinement. These similar themes give the opportunity of comparing techniques of temporality in these short stories to see how the authors apply techniques of time to foreground their themes and the impossibility of women's success in their struggle. Although these short stories have the same themes, they are different in the structure of narration and story line. While "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is narrated by the first-person in the form of a diary, "The Story of an Hour" is told by a third-person narrator. The female character in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" tries to liberate herself from the patriarchal oppression, but the female character (Mrs. Mallard) in "The Story of an Hour" just achieves freedom out of chance through her husband's death (Mr. Mallard). The results of the stories are the same. Both end in failure: one ending in madness, the other ending in death. The question is how the techniques of temporality can illustrate these subjects and themes in the stories?

### ***Order of Narration***

To study the concept of *order*, which is defined by Gérard Genette as "connections between the temporal *order* of succession of the events in the story and the pseudo-temporal order of their arrangement in the narrative," it is important to differentiate between time of story (ST) and time of narration (NT) (35). The connection between ST and NT is based on primary narrative (PN) in the text, and the order of the events in the narrative is classified in relation to the PN in the text as *harmony*, *anachrony* and *achrony*. If there is a *harmony* between ST and NT, the discrepancy is zero and it will be "a condition of perfect temporal correspondence between narrative and story" (Genette 36). On the other hand, *anachrony* is the presence of discrepancy between ST and NT, which itself falls into two different categories: *analepsis* and *prolepsis*. The third part in this classification is *achrony*, deviation of time (Bal 97). That is to say, it is not always possible to date the events of narrative in correspondence to the events of story or even find the temporal relationship between the events in narrative text.

Gérard Genette defines *analepsis* as "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story" (40). The discrepancy between ST and NT is helpful in interpreting the story. Bridgeman refers to the function of *analepsis* as a strategy to "fill in the past history of protagonists while avoiding a lengthy introduction or in order to reveal new facts;" in addition, "the experience of reading calls for us to look back and re-evaluate events in light of current circumstances" (57). *Analepsis* is used to engage "the reader" and

generate “the basic narrative momentum” (Barry 227). Next is the function of *analepsis* “as part of something the hero/heroine remembers; sometimes the purpose is to explain unexpected events which have just been related” (Fludernik, “Structure” 34).

The second classification of direction is *prolepsis*. Genette explains it as “any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later” (40). *Prolepsis* functions as a device to “establish a narrator’s mastery of his or her tale” or to “generate suspense” despite its rarity in narrative fiction (Bridgeman 57). It is also “a major motivation for engagement with the text” (58), “testimonies to the intensity of the present memory, and to some extent authenticate the narrative of the past” (Genette 69) and a device in establishing and foregrounding ‘themes’ in a story (Barry 226).

Based on the concepts defined by Genette, I will follow these steps to analyze Gilman’s and Chopin’s short stories. The first step is to define ST, NT, and PN. Then, I will specify the exact chronological order of events in the story and narration in relation to PN. The third step is to differentiate if each sentence falls into the domain of *analepsis* and *prolepsis* or the discrepancy between ST and NT is zero. I labeled *analepsis*, *harmonious*, and *prolepsis* sentences as -1, 0, and 1 successively. I also attributed to each sentence its subject and theme in order to find out the relationship between the themes and order of narration. Based on these data, I will draw different graphs to give a tangible and visual image of what happens in the story regarding the order of narration, and how the order of narration helps with interpretation of the story.

### **“The Yellow Wall-Paper”**

The main point in this study is to find out how Gilman and Chopin use these techniques of time to represent the situation of the main characters and themes in the story and how they apply these techniques to reach their aims? In order to answer these questions, it is important to determine the stories’ genre, structure, and point of view. As mentioned, “TYWP” is written in the form of a diary and divided into twelve different entries. These sections are narrated by a nameless female character in first-person point of view. To find out the order of narration, the first step is to define ST, NT, and PN, since it is the key point in determining *anachrony* in narration.

The format of “TYWP” makes two different lines of PN. It means that there is one main PN and twelve minor PNs if we consider each diary entry a second narration. Diary also has another significant point in relation to the order of narration, since *harmony* is an essential aspect of the diary. Another point is the setting of the story, an unknown summer in a colonial mansion, which makes the summer the story’s main PN. On the other hand, the time of writing of the diary for each entry is a minor PN. In some entries, minor PNs are unknown regarding the time of the narration since there is no specific date for most of the entries in the

diary, and if there is any, it is not clear, except the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in section 3. In other words, there is no clear reference to the dates of the events and entries.

	SECTION	TIME
MAIN PN THE SUMMER	MINOR PN 1	Unknown
	MINOR PN 2	Two weeks after arrival
	MINOR PN 3	4 <sup>th</sup> of July
	MINOR PN 4	Unknown
	MINOR PN 5	Unknown
	MINOR PN 6	Unknown
	MINOR PN 7	Seven days before departure
	MINOR PN 8	Unknown
	MINOR PN 9	Unknown
	MINOR PN 10	Unknown
	MINOR PN 11	Two days before departure
	MINOR PN 12	Last day

Table 1. PN in "TYWP"

It means there is no clear reference to the dates of the events and entries. The case with the extension and reach of the events is the same: no clear references. This also results in a vague picture of the order of the events in the narration. This is presented in Table1, above. Table1 shows that these dates are the arrival and departure dates with the exception of 4<sup>th</sup> of July in section3. The narrator begins this section with “Well, the Fourth of July is over!” which is itself ambiguous for not being clear if the entry is written on 4<sup>th</sup> of July or the following day (8). This date is important in American history as Independence Day. J. Samaine Lockwood argues that Gilman mentions this date in the story to emphasize American nation’s independence while women are still haunted in the colonial mansions and there is no escape for them. Lockwood also claims that Gilman criticizes “nineteenth-century American culture for having prohibited white women’s entrée into the temporality of the progressive modern nation” (88). In addition to 4th of July, which is the only date she clearly states, there exist three other categories of dates. The first includes the diary entry date in section2 which is in relation to their arrival day (“We have been here two weeks and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day” (5)). The second category consists of the dates relevant to their departure day in sections7 (“There is a week more and I think that will be enough” (14)), 11 (“There are only two more days to get this paper off . . .” (p. 16)), and 12 (“Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough” (17)). Finally, the last category is the entries without a date reference.

There can be different interpretations for such unclear date references in the narration. To begin with, this inconsistency of dating the events could imply the narrator’s temporal and spatial detachments from the real life because of her mental crisis and instability. As a result, she is isolated from the whole world and temporally confined to the summer, the PN. One can also argue that the narrator is afraid of John’s disapproval and tries to keep her writing a

secret. This might mean that she has little time to put her thoughts into writing; therefore, she only manages to write as much as she can, leaving out the dates most of the time. Considering the mansion, the symbol of the patriarchal world, the narrator is like a prisoner who is disconnected from the outside world and cannot keep track of time. Another reason for not mentioning the dates in each entry may be that the story line changes suddenly from writing the diary into reading the patterns on the wallpaper as a text. As time goes by, she stops writing about the events and begins interpreting the patterns; hence, the dates and the days lose importance and she just writes about her new discoveries on a daily basis. In addition to this change, she also feels she is running out of time, particularly in the final sections of the story where she is in a rush to decipher the patterns. Every moment plays an important role like a count-down clock, and she prefers to mention the main subjects including the wallpaper, patterns, and the woman. Keeping this in mind, she spends no space and time on going into details leaving the time of diary out. The last but not the least, most of the definite dates used in the last sections of the narration are mostly correlated with the departure date. The application of the departure day as a time scale overemphasizes the sense of imprisonment and longing for freedom. This feeling is particularly illustrated in the sections where the narrator attempts to free the entrapped women in the wallpaper.

PN is not the only element to emphasize the importance of the subjects and events in the story. Events and their order of appearance in the narration can also help the reader with understanding of the narrations. As the second step in my analysis, I ordered the events in the narration based on PN, to find out which events from the past or future are important to be mentioned in the stories. This result is presented in the following tables. For “TYWP,” I assigned imaginary numbers for the order of events because of their unclear and ambiguous references. Therefore, 0 goes for the first diary entry and all other events happen before or after this entry whose exact date is not known. The only estimation is that it is before 14 days from their arrival. It is important to mention that despite the fact that I assigned the imaginary order for section12; the order line in narration is not logically related to the story line. This is because of the *achrony* in the time of narration, since she cannot write what is happening simultaneously, especially narrating the present events in the past tense.

ST	-8					-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	
NT	C1S1	C7S1	C9S1	C3S2	C5S12	C1S8	C1S2	C5S1	C6S1	C4S1	C3S1	C8S1	C2S1
EXT	∞	∞	∞	∞	∞	-7	-6	-5	-4	-3	∞	∞	-7

Table 2. The order of the events prior to the first entry in "TYWP"

ST	7	11	12	17	21	28				
NT	C2S2	C2S3	C1S3	C1S4	C2S4	C1S5	C1S6	C2S6	C3S6	
EXT	$\infty$	$\infty$	1WEEK	17	17	21	-8	1	1	

Table 3. The order of the events 1st entry up to 7th entry in "TYWP"

ST	33	39	53	56	57	58	59	59	59	60	60
NT	C1S7	C2S8	C1S11	C1S12	C2S12	C3S12	C4S12	C6S12	C7S12	C8S12	C9S12
EXT	33	-8	53	56	57	58	59	59	59	60	60

Table 4. The order of the events 7th entry up to the last entry in "TYWP"

Matching these calculations with the imaginary timeline if ST=NT, the following figure demonstrates the deviations from the ST. To draw this figure, I considered two different timelines for each short story. The first timeline is based on the story time, and the second one is based on the narration time. The results are:

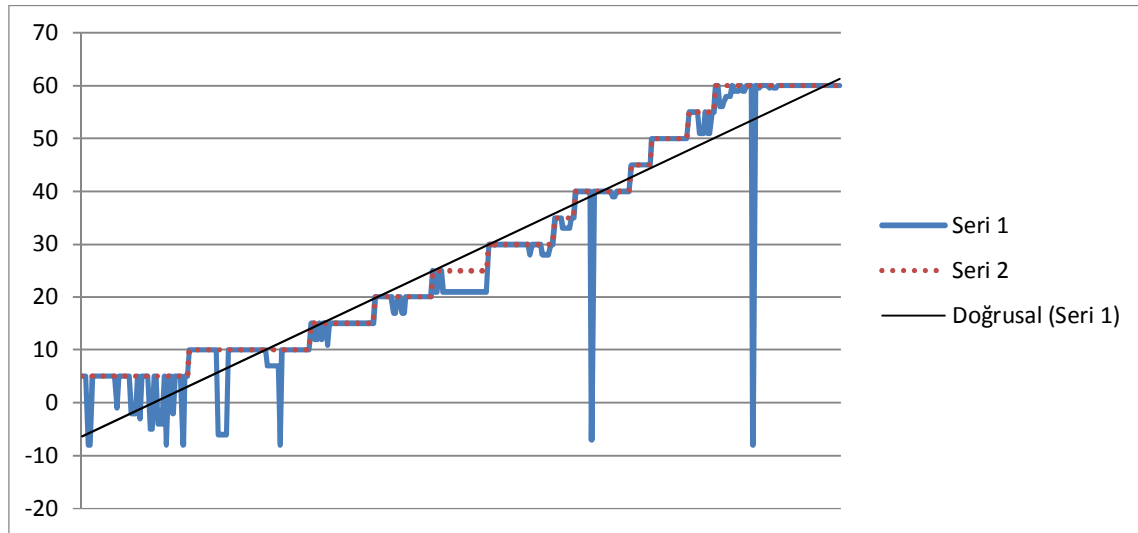


Figure 1. Order of the events in ST and NT in "TYWP" (Series 1: ST; Series 2:NT)

To understand the above figure better, I also provide the table of the events happening in the past in relation to the subject of the events (Table5). This also helps to elaborate Table2, Table3, and Table4 more.

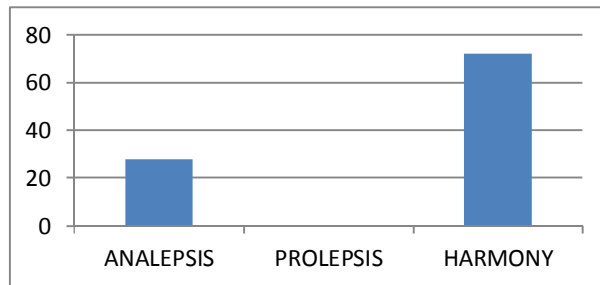


Figure 2. % of analepsis and harmony in "TYWP"

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9
Section1	Mansion	Writing	Mansion	Mansion	Room	John	Room	Wallpaper	Room
Section2	John	Childhood	Room						
Section3	John	Health	Mitchell						
Section4	John	John	John						
Section5	John								
Section6	John	John							
Section7	John								
Section8	Smell								
Section9									
Section10									
Section11	John	Jennie							
Section12	Jennie	Wallpaper	Jennie	Jennie	Room	Lock	Rope	Wallpaper	John

Table 5. Subject Based classification of Analepsis in "TYWP"

With reference to the tables and figures related to "TYWP," it is evident that ST and NT are approximately the same, except at the places where there are flashbacks to fill in the gaps and give more information, particularly about John's control and the mansion (Figure1). John and mansion play vital roles in the narration and discrepancy between ST and NT. Out of 34 cases of analepsis, there are 12 cases related to mansion, and 12 cases related to John (Table5). It seems mansion and John have similar roles in the narrator's life. It is John's authority and control that the narrator tries to escape, and set herself free from. In addition, mansion is the symbol for the oppressive power of the patriarchy as it limits the narrator spatially leaving her without any connection to the outside world. It stands for the prison: the domestic sphere.

Figure1, Figure3 and Table5 also represent the story as beginning with a great deal of discrepancy, oscillating between the past and the present time of writing. There are nine cases of flashback. It seems that Gilman emphasizes the main themes of the story by using *analepsis*, since these flashbacks cover all main themes in the first chapter. The ultimate harmony is in section9 and 10 as the narration is parallel to writing. However, it returns to *anachrony* in section12 with the same number of cases of *analepsis*. It illustrates the impossibility of writing, since section12 happens both in the past and at the moment of writing. That is to say, it reaches *achrony* in writing.

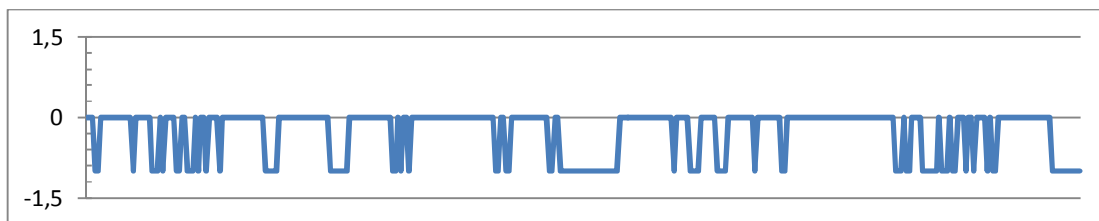


Figure 3. Anachrony in "TYWP"



The mentioned oscillation between present and past is more evident in Figure 3 which depicts *achrony* in the narration of “TYWP.” In drawing this figure, I considered *analepsis* = -1, *harmony* = 0, and *prolepsis* = 1. This proves that the female narrator begins her narration with instability, tries to reach stability, but fails and ends again in instability. Wherever there is *harmony*, there is reading and deciphering of the wallpaper and the woman captured in the wallpaper. Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that “the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and the narrator’s double” (p. 91). For this reason, it can be argued that *harmonies* occur where the narrator succeeds in her process of self-identification, independence, and escape from the domestic confinement. The problem emerges when she loses control over the temporality of her writing/reading. The sections written about the reading of the wallpaper and the discovery of the woman are short, implying that the narrator’s success in this self-identification process is short-term, too. For her, there is no chance of success, and eventually she ends in *achrony* and madness. It is worth mentioning that there is no single case of *prolepsis* in the narration. Lack of *prolepsis* is due to the narrative’s diary format.

The classification of *analepsis* and subjects also help the reader in interpreting the main themes. It can be inferred that the female narrator is confined temporally and spatially. Temporal confinement refers to the limited time of narration (the summer). It is John who directly decides about the length of their stay in that mansion, not even accepting his wife’s request of leaving. There are some references to the past, exterior to the time they stay in the mansion, and yet their extension and reach from the PN are indefinite. For instance, once she mentions her childhood without providing the reader with the exact information about the time and place. At the same time, spatial confinement is imposed by the place they stay the whole summer: the mansion. It seems as if there is no escape from the time and space for the narrator, and even her thoughts are imprisoned by them. Thereupon, it is her ultimate goal to set herself free from the temporal and spatial imprisonment.

In the same way, we can talk about John’s role in the story. As the story goes on, John disappears from the present time of the story, forced back to the past, and “TYWP” ends with John in *analepsis*. Putting John in the past conveys that she is successful in making herself free from his authority as the symbol of patriarchal authority despite her madness at the end of the story. This madness is considered a way of liberation as Annette Kolodny states: “Liberation here is liberation only into madness: for in decoding her own projections onto the paper, the protagonist had managed merely to reencode them once more, and now more firmly than ever, within” (p. 459).

## “The Story of an Hour”

There is no similar point between “TSOAH” and “TYWP” regarding the structure and point of view in these short stories. As mentioned “TYWP” is in a diary form narrated by first-person, while “TSOAH” is narrated by third-person who is not present in the story. However, the themes and story lines of the stories make these two short stories a good case for comparison. To start the analysis, the first step is to define the PN and order of the events, which is illustrated in Table6. In this table, I put the events in order in the story and assign numbers for their order, considering Mrs. Mallard’s being informed of Mr. Mallard’s death as the zero point or starting point of the story.

EVENTS	ORDER	
Mrs. Mallard’s love to Mr. Mallard	-4	
Mrs. Mallard’s thoughts	-3	
Mr. Mallard’s death	-2	
Richard knowing the news	-1	
Mrs. Mallard knows the news	0	PRIMARY NARRATION (ONE HOUR)
Mrs. Mallard in her room	1	
Josephine’s interruption	2	
Mrs. Mallard leaves room	3	
Mr. Mallard comes	4	
Mrs. Mallard’s heart attack	5	
Mrs. Mallard’s death	6	
Mr. Mallard’s funeral	7	
Mrs. Mallard’s future	8	

Table 6. PN, events, and order of the events in "TSOAH"

The case of ST, NT, and PN in “TSOAH” is simpler in comparison to “TYWP.” The title of the narration exactly defines the PN as one hour of the main female character’s life; that is to say, the last hour of her life. All the events in the story should be put in order according to this last hour. Being not complex does not mean “TSOAH” is not rich in techniques of narration. This simplicity limits the whole story to one hour which is very crucial to Mrs. Mallard (the main character), who finds her liberation from the domestic confinements for the first time because of her husband’s death. The difference between the female characters in both short stories is that Mrs. Mallard achieves this freedom suddenly through her husband’s death and it lasts just for a short time, and again this freedom is taken from her by her husband’s arrival. It seems Mrs. Mallard plays no role in finding her freedom, and she only tastes it, and then loses all the freedom in the plays of fortune. It is the narrator in “TYWP” who struggles to set herself free, she goes through this mission for three months to set the symbolic women figure imprisoned in the wallpaper free. However, to protect the state of freedom, she pays with her sanity and being detached from the real life and time, and ends in madness.

There is another interesting point in this table and order of the narration. The point is the dominance of Mr. Mallard’s presence in the events despite the fact that he is dead. The

only moments, Mrs. Mallard feels free to think about herself is in her room, and it is all her imagination of her future being free to live for herself. The ironical point in her thoughts is that Mr. Mallard is present even in her future. Even her dead body seeks a way to enter her future life, where she thinks about his funereal. Besides being a burden, the funeral scene is also the climax point in the female character's life, if we consider the moment as the starting point of her freedom, since she becomes sure of her husband's complete death and being sent to the world of dead people. The mentioned irony will be confirmed when Mr. Mallard returns, a return from the underworld to claim his authority in the marriage and over Mrs. Mallard. This return costs Mrs. Mallard her life since she felt and imagined the essence of freedom in the future and wherever there is Mr. Mallard, there is no freedom. Consequently, the husband rules over the past, present, and the future, and the female character has no place in the territories dominated by the husband.

To realize the importance of temporality in the narration and mentioned subjects in the previous paragraph, the second step gives a more concrete image of the time of narration. In this step, I will draw two timelines. The first one is related to the order of events in the story, and the second one is related to the order of the events in the narration in order to see the exact deviation of the time in the narration. This comparison is shown in Figure4, below. It is important to consider that the interval between event0 and event6 is related to the time of narration where  $ST = NT$ .

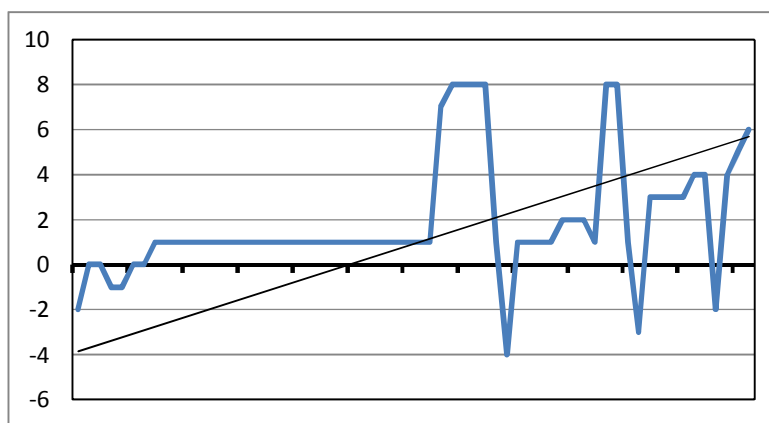


Figure 4. Order of the events in ST and NT in "TSOAH"

The same interpretation of the events can be more to the point according to Figure4. The story begins with a past event, Mr. Mallard's accident which makes two deviations in the beginning. The third and fourth deviation is related to the future and freedom, but the past hunts her and stops her from being in the future, even though it is not real. Wherever she tries to remain in the future where she finds freedom, she is drawn into the present or the past. It implies that she has no place in the future and she cannot have any freedom. She cannot

escape the authority of patriarchy and the only solution is to give up. Here, it is Mrs. Mallard's death.

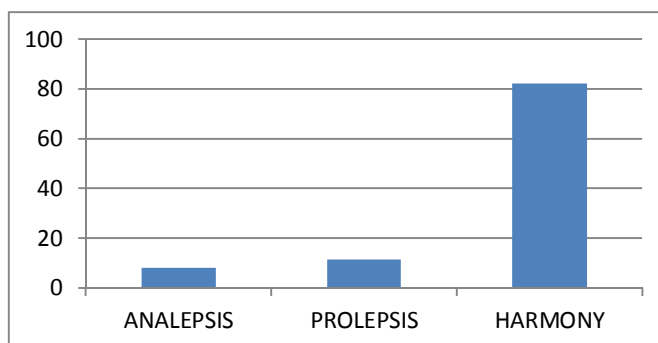


Figure 5. % of analepsis, prolepsis and harmony in "TSOAH"

All these deviations in the time of narration can be labeled as *analepsis* or *prolepsis* and Figure5 gives exact percentage of usage of each in "TSOAH." In contrast to "TYWP," there is similar amount of *prolepsis* in this short story (Figure5). That is to say, there is hope in liberation of women from domestic confinement. This hope is bestowed by the disappearance of the patriarchy (Mr. Mallard) without any attempt by the women (Mrs. Mallard). If there is no patriarchy, there will be freedom. However, this is a delusion, since patriarchy does not leave the power. Even if it happens accidentally, it comes to reclaim its authority. The problem is that, after tasting freedom, it is very difficult to go through oppression again. This leads to two options. You should give up and accept the confinement again or you should struggle for your freedom. None of these options is present in the story. The solution is not mentioned in the story but the outcome of the situation is Mrs. Mallard's death. She has no idea about the struggle and she gains this liberation by chance. Therefore, the outcome will be erasure of the whole situation. The patriarchy is not going to disappear; it just rises from death. Mrs. Mallard should give up; in consequence, it is her death which sets her free.

### Conclusion

When we comparing "TYWP" and "TSOAH," it shows that both female characters are hoping for a free and promising life, and both are hunted by their past where patriarchy belongs. The present time does not give any opportunity and place for their presence. It is also dominated by the patriarchy. These female characters cannot gain freedom while their husbands are present, since they are the origins of oppression and confinement. Husbands should remain in the past by death (as in "TSOAH") or sent to past mentally and psychologically (as in "TYWP").

In “TYWP,” there is no future due to the fact that there is no single case of *prolepsis*, which symbolizes the failure of the female narrator. This failure is presented through her madness and her inability to differentiate between the past and the present and narrating both simultaneously in section 12. It is her madness and psychological break-down that sends her husband into the past. On the other hand, the female character in “TSOAH” does not struggle to set herself free from the dominance of patriarchy and there is no clue of her unhappiness in her marriage. The news of her husband’s death results in the revelation and a sense of freedom which up to that moment in her life she had. There is no struggle, there is no challenge. She gains this liberation by chance, and she experiences it only through daydreaming. However, this freedom is interrupted by the return of the husband. She enjoys the sense of freedom only for one hour. Losing this sense of liberation causes her death.

It can be concluded that the difference of outcomes in these two stories does not mean that the two female characters are in different situations. Both of them end in failure in achieving freedom since there is no escape from the domestic confinement in their lives. Patriarchy is omnipresent and everlasting. There is no power to push it back into the past. It belongs to the past, present, and even to the future. No one can occupy the present time without going crazy. Women have no place in the present. Even their imaginary freedom in the future is a delusion and unreal. Women cannot annihilate patriarchy, and patriarchy would not hand its power and dominance over women.

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