

Title: Widows in Chekhov and Chopin

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Abstract:

Anton Chekhov's 1883 short story "V rozhdestvenskuiu noch'" tells the story of Natalia Segreevna Litvinova, a woman who learns that her husband, Andrei Petrovich, has perished on a dangerous fishing expedition. To her dismay, she feels overjoyed at the thought and even looks forward to her widowhood, until her husband turns out to be alive. In her 1894 "Story of an Hour," Kate Chopin presents a similar plot. Upon hearing that her husband died in a railroad accident, protagonist Louise Mallard finds herself momentarily sad, but, more importantly, feeling reborn. In both stories, the unexpectedly widowed women feel little despair about their husbands' deaths; instead, the ladies look forward to their new lives. Few scholars have addressed Chekhov's "V rozhdestvenskuiu noch'," and there has been virtually no comparison of these two stories. My presentation examines widowhood as a gendered category in patriarchal societies and analyzes how the authors posit liberation, however nugatory, from oppressive social forces as an ambiguous experience. In the process so, I explore how, in the condensed genre of the short story, Chekhov's and Chopin's portrayals of widowhood in Russian and American life in the late 19th century accord with the sociopolitical reality of that era.