

A Reader-Response Reading: Kate Chopin's "The Storm"

Author: Mohani Niza

Question: How is your understanding of the themes in Chopin's "The Storm" shaped by your personal experiences and beliefs?

Literature, like most academic disciplines and institutions in society, reflects the values and beliefs of its day (Eagleton 15 and Tyson 21). This view is held by the reader-response theory which contrasts to the formalist literary theory (Dobie 129). While the formalist literary theory holds that literature can be decoded and objectively assessed for its formal properties without bringing the reader's opinions and background to the reading, reader-response theory, meanwhile, posits that a person's values, beliefs and experiences also influence the reading and interpretation of a particular text. In this essay, I will analyse the short story "The Storm" by Kate Chopin (1) and reflect how my personal experiences and beliefs inform my understanding of it using the reader-response theory.

"The Storm" tells of the passionate extramarital romance between an Acadian woman named Calixta and a handsome French planter called Alcée. The affair takes place one stormy evening as Calixta's husband Bobinôt and their son Bibi shelter at a store before they can go home. As the storm ends, so does Calixta's and Alcée's passionate lovemaking, and the story wraps up with everything restored to their normalcy — Calixta back to her

loving husband and child, and Alcée to his lovely domestic arrangement. The reason I choose to analyse this story is due to its unsettling theme of adultery, the theme of the conflict between the self and the society, as well as the theme of sexual freedom. In this essay, I will explain how I initially struggled to comprehend and accept the theme of adultery in this story, and how I had to weigh the story between both my feminist views and my belief in loyalty and fidelity. I will then conclude that this story provides a plurality of meanings and challenges our taken-for-granted assumptions. I will also argue that despite several misgivings that I may have had initially about the story, I have come to the conclusion that the story is a powerful text about female sexuality, especially for its time.

The biggest influence on how I read this story, at least for the first few times, is from my beliefs and experience as a woman who is also Malaysian and Muslim. The first theme identified in this story is that of adultery, a topic I was initially not attracted to but which was softened through my multiple reading of the text. Whether or not my Muslim values are the correct one is not a matter of importance here. What warrants being highlighted here is that I realised that my Muslim upbringing had a role in determining my disapproval of the love affair, which made me a “biased” reader. “The Storm”, while praised as a powerful text for its feminist theme of liberated sexuality, may not sit well with more conservative readers such as myself who have been raised in a Muslim society. It was rather uncomfortable to read Chopin’s passionate description of the lovemaking between

Calixta and Alcée, even for someone who is living in the 21st century. Some examples of the vivid descriptions can be read in lines such as: **“The contact of her warm, palpitating body when he had unthinkingly drawn her into his arms, had aroused all the old time infatuation and desire for her flesh”** (Chopin 3) and **“When he touched her breasts they gave themselves up in quivering ecstasy, inviting his lips”** (Chopin 5). My reaction, I have found, is not uncommon. Stein (1) asserts that this work by Chopin “still has the capacity to startle” readers till this day, attracting various, conflicting views among different literary critics. Some of them found the text sexually liberating; E.Papke (qtd. in Stein 52), for example, describes the story as containing “the search for selfhood and the satisfaction of desire [...] presented as parts of a possible and positive process, despite what the social and moral commandments say”. On a somewhat similar note, Elfenstein (qtd. in Stein 52) describes the lovemaking in this story as containing “a revelation of oneness of man, woman, and nature in an experience that precludes moral judgments”. However, the literary critic Lawrence Ivan Berkove (qtd. in Stein 53) sees the story as morally wrong and argues against the “liberal” tendencies of those who ascribe a positive take on the story's theme of adultery. Berkove even further said that Chopin meant the story to be read as a criticism against extramarital affairs, and not in support of it. According to Berkove, the last line – **“So the storm passed and everyone was happy”** (Chopin 7) – should be read “ironically” (qtd. in Stein 52) and that a grim ending actually awaits. I was further torn regarding my judgement of this story seeing as how *Bobinôt* is written

as a loving father to Bibi, and a kind husband to Calixta. These are evidenced by how Bobinôt **"converse(s) on terms of perfect equality with his little son"** (Chopin 1), denoting egalitarianism between parent and child, and how he buys Calixta her favourite can of shrimps. As a reader who identifies herself as feminist, I do believe in the right for women to freely express themselves sexually. However, at least with the first few readings, I have had to reconcile my more liberal values with my belief in the importance of fidelity and the sanctity of the institution of marriage.

My Asian values also play a role in influencing my understanding of this story, particularly regarding the second theme which I have identified as the conflict between the self and society. The discussion surrounding Asian values emerged from the consequences of the administration of the now-deceased Singapore leader Lee Kwan Yew who ruled his country with a paternal fist (Barr 3). Asian values could be deduced to a few core characteristics such as communalism, 'society over the self', filial piety and traditional family values – in contrast to western values such as independence, freedom and individuality. My initial view was that Calixta was selfish and thoughtless and did not care much about her family, which I interpreted in the beginning of the second paragraph: **"Calixta, at home, felt no uneasiness for their safety. She sat at a side window sewing furiously on a sewing machine. She was greatly occupied and did not notice the approaching storm"** (Chopin 1). The Storm here is a metaphor for trouble and mayhem, and Calixta's obliviousness to it

metaphorically refers to her

casualness about the danger of extramarital romance. My initial readings somewhat echoed Berkove's views, which as I have mentioned above, predicts a gloomy end to the story. These can be seen perhaps in lines such as: "[...] **certain sombre clouds that were rolling with sinister intention from the west, accompanied by a sullen, threatening roar**" (Chopin 1) and "**It shook the wooden store and seemed to be ripping great furrows in the distant field**" (Chopin 1). Nature can therefore foretell what might happen. Such lines can be interpreted as the danger of extramarital affairs and the potential wreckage they can cause to the family unit, and in the end, either Calixta or Alcée – or both – will have to atone and pay for their actions, at least according to my interpretation.

Upon more rereading, I was then struck by the story's powerful feminist theme of sexual freedom. This view is informed by my feminist beliefs and experiences. Ruiz (3) identifies the following characteristics of the feminist theme of this story as "the right to live happily with oneself, the rejection of patriarchy and sexual independence, which even leads to adultery". Patriarchy means the system of governance where men, rule, especially as figureheads of the family and society. The theme of sexual freedom is more impressive considering that "The Storm" was written during the Victorian era, where rigid social mores, especially pertaining to female sexuality and agency, were prominent, and women played very little role in public life and were mostly confined to the

domestic duties of wifehood and motherhood (Showalter 167). This can be seen in the various domestic tasks that Calixta have to shoulder, for example, in the line: **“Alcée flung himself into a rocker and Calixta nervously began to gather up from the floor the lengths of a cotton sheet which she had been sewing”** (Chopin 3). To return to the point about sexual freedom, Ruiz (7) also describes Chopin as trying to “interpret the relationship between oppression and release” which are typically written in her female protagonists. Chopin had a tendency to write about women trying to break free of social conventions through having torrid affairs. This can be read in the title itself — the storm can be alluded to Calixta’s sensual passion itself which suddenly emerges with the coming of the storm to her rural Louisiana town; hence her domestic concerns for the day are swept away temporarily as she gets locked into a fervent and passionate lovemaking with Alcée. Ruiz (8) asserts that “the storm is a sexual explosion, a punctual desire without feeling.” Such a sexual explosion can be further read in the way that Chopin wrote about Calixta’s fierce sensuality: **“She was a revelation in that dim, mysterious chamber; as white as the couch she lay upon. Her firm, elastic flesh that was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world”** (Chopin 4). It is no wonder then that even though Chopin wrote this story in 1896, it was only published in 1969 as she was sure of the uproar that it would cause in her Victorian society (Showalter 167).

To conclude, having read “The Storm” multiple times, I realised that my various positionalities – as a Muslim Southeast Asian reader who also identifies as a feminist – yield contradictory interpretations based on multiple readings. The ambiguity in “The Storm” should not deter people from reading the story but lends a certain excitement to how the story could be perceived by different people. “The Storm”, just like all text, can be read and re-read in multiple ways and yield multiple meanings. After all, reading is a process of meaning-making — it is a democratic process whereby not one voice dominates. Text is always in flux because society itself is in flux. I must conclude that Chopin wrote a powerful story on female sexuality, despite my initial misgivings and despite the controversies that the story still causes till today.

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