

A Stormy Justification: New Criticism on Chopin's "The Storm"

Kate Chopin's short story "The Storm" is centered on a one-day affair during a thunderstorm between a lonely housewife and the man she had feelings for in the past. After the two part ways, they are shown to be happier and their unknowing families reflect that joy. The story portrays their adultery as a good thing for everyone, which goes against the usual convention that infidelity is a horrible sin. The actions of the characters Calixta and Alcee are considered justified because they are in unhappy marriages. It is that justification that creates and supports the organic unity and overall theme of the story. The lines between right and wrong can blur depending on the particular circumstances.

The actual storm that occurs serves as an ambiguous metaphor for the affair between Calixta and Alcee. The fury of the thunderstorm builds as their desire for one another does, and it ends just as suddenly as it began when their moment of infidelity is over. The first sentence of the story says, "The leaves were so still that even Bibi thought it was going to rain" (342). This is describing the moment of the calm before the storm. It is also describing Calixta and Alcee's marriages. The stillness of the leaves symbolizes their feelings of entrapment and inability to move forward. There is a tension building, and it so strong that even a child like Bibi can feel it. This tension is hinted at again when Calixta says, "If this [rain] keeps up, *Dieu sait* if the levees goin' to stan' it" (343). Like the literal strain the excess rain water is putting on the levees, Calixta and Alcee's desire for one another is straining against their will. There is the feeling that something will eventually have to break, and it does.

The storm itself also brings about a sense of inevitability. The releasing of their sexual desires is just as unavoidable as an oncoming rainstorm. Therefore, it is best to just accept

that it is happening and deal with the consequences afterward, whether they are good or bad. In this case, the text argues that the passing of this particular storm is a good thing because everyone is happier in the end. Calixta and Alcee are pleased to have had their needs fulfilled and their families mirror their pleasure even though they are oblivious as to why it has occurred. The important thing is that things have changed for the better and how it happened is not to be thought about.

The text further justifies Calixta's unfaithfulness by showing how unfulfilling her marriage is. Her husband, Bobinot, is shown as a man who expresses more fear of his wife than affection for her. For example, he only goes to buy shrimp for Calixta once he realizes she will be alone in the storm. It is as though he hopes to appease her when he returns. This happens again when Bobinot becomes upset that there is mud on his son's clothes (345-346). He clearly is afraid of what Calixta will think of their nice clothes being dirty and tries to rub away the dirt to avoid facing the wrath of his angry wife. His cowardice is shown also when the thunderstorm is first approaching and his four-year-old son, Bibi, shows more bravery than he when Bibi "la[ys] his little hand on his father's knee and [is] not afraid" (342). Bibi ironically seems to be reassuring his father to not fear the storm either instead of the more common reversed roles where the father is reassuring and the son frightened. To further Bobinot's unlikable image, he is described as sitting "stolidly" (342), which means he is sitting dully or impassively (OED). He is resigned to the oncoming storm, meaning he is also resigned to his unhappy marriage. These tensions help to justify Calixta's need to look elsewhere for satisfaction, both physical and emotional.

Not as much is said about Alcee's wife, Clarisse, but it can still be inferred that it is also at least a somewhat discontented marriage. Alcee writes a letter to Clarisse encouraging her to stay on her vacation longer than had been planned—he doesn't mind being without his wife and children for another month. Clarisse likes the idea of staying away longer and is reminded of "the pleasant liberty of her maiden days" (346). She is happy to not return home yet and remain away from her husband in order to enjoy the freedom of feeling like a single woman again. These instances show that both Alcee and Clarisse feel stifled by their

marriage and are happier away from each other and possibly with other people altogether—people like Calixta and Clarisse’s friends and family.

In the paragraph where Calixta is introduced, there is a sense of discontent within her. “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. But she felt very warm and often stopped to mop her face...” (342). Calixta is shown as having no real interest in her husband and son. She is described as sewing “furiously”, which could either mean that she is sewing in a very swift or frantic manner or that she is sewing while full of anger or fury (OED). There is also a feeling like she is stifled when she is described wiping sweat from her face and feeling “warm.” Later on, her bedroom is said to look “dim and mysterious” (343) as though she is unfamiliar with it. It hints that she and Bobinot are not sexually active, and it also hints at her curiosity and desire. Calixta is feeling very stuck in her marriage and life. She must focus on menial tasks, such as sewing, and stay at home while her family goes out. It is this unhappiness that later drives her to make the decision to have the affair; she is hoping to ease her dissatisfaction with her life.

Within the text, colors are used to symbolize two very different ideas that help give reason for why the affair is a helpful rather than harmful event. The first color used is white, which is often associated with purity and innocence. However, in this story it is used numerous times to describe parts in the story when the “impure” infidelity is taking place. Calixta’s jacket that she unbuttons is white (342) as well as her bed (343). Her throat and breasts are white and her skin is described as being “as white as the couch she lay upon.” Her passion is described as a “white flame.” Similarly, her “flesh” is likened to a “creamy lily” (345). The word “creamy” again gives the idea of something white, and the lily is the flower associated with purity (OED). This paradoxical imagery is used to mock the ideas that the color white represents. It questions the idea of purity and whether it is really as important as common beliefs make it out to be.

Another symbolized color that is used is red. The color red can be associated with passion and lust. Calixta’s lips are called “as red and moist as pomegranate seed” (344). Like

the Greek myth where Persephone succumbs to temptation and eats the pomegranate seed in Hades's underworld despite the known consequences, Alcee is giving in to his desire to kiss Calixta. Calixta's lips are just as tempting and irresistible as that pomegranate seed. This simile is trying to point out how inevitable their coupling is-- as unavoidable as eating the "forbidden fruit." They are on the verge of surrendering to their desires and satisfying their curiosity.

Once the affair is over and the storm has passed, the sun comes out and seems to make everything appear brighter and more beautiful as the text says, "...the sun was turning the glistening green world into a palace of gems" (345). Yet another color—this time it is green—is used to symbolize the idea of new life and starting fresh like new green leaves in springtime. This shows Calixta and Alcee's change in how they see things. They have a new appreciation for their world and their families, especially their spouses. This is emphasized even more when they are shown coming into contact with their families again. Bobinot and Bibi are worried about Calixta's reaction to their muddy clothes and are shocked at how she greets them. Instead of being the "over-scrupulous housewife" (346) that she has been in the past, she is happy to see them and thankful they were unharmed by the storm. This ambiguous moment could also be hinting that she is pleased they are unharmed by her infidelity since the storm and act are interrelated. Bobinot and Bibi's surprise at how Calixta acts shows that her behavior is not normal and that they are used to being scolded by her. Even though they are bewildered as to what brought on the sudden change in Calixta, they are happy with it. The family is said to laugh "much" and "loud" (346) as they sit at the table to eat their meal. This small scene effectively shows their new joy and happiness with each other due to Calixta's change in demeanor from the affair. Calixta feels appreciation for her family again and is happier with her life—she no longer feels so stifled. Her happiness, even though it was brought about in an unconventional way, helps to bring her family closer together and most likely keep it together.

Similarly, Alcee is shown caring more for his wife and children's happiness when he is said to realize "their health and pleasure were the first things to be considered" (346). Again,

there is ambiguity in this statement because he could be thinking of how he put his own “health and pleasure” first when having the sexual encounter with Calixta. Now that he has done so, he is able to put aside some of his selfish desires and think of his family’s. Also, he now knows what it is like to put such things first and wishes to share that feeling with his wife and children. Alcee has grown from his experience with Calixta, which has enabled him to think more deeply and less selfishly. The forbidden affair has made it so that he can look upon his spouse and children with a new appreciation and strive to think of their needs as well as his own—making him a better husband.

“The Storm” uses ambiguity, irony, paradoxes, and tensions to help make its point clear. As the overall tension of the storm and affair ending is resolved, the main unity is unearthed. What is wrong for one person isn’t necessarily wrong for another. In this instance, Calixta and Alcee’s infidelity helped to bring them closer to their families and possibly save their marriages. The spontaneity of the act shows that it was not premeditated; and therefore, not done with malicious intent. It was a way to release tension and move on to look at the future with a much brighter view. The story ends with the sentence: “So the storm passed and every one was happy” (347). This gives a sense of finality because the storm and affair are over and both families are said to be content. There is no suggestion that Calixta and Alcee will get together again, nor is there the promise that this happiness will last forever. However, the simple bluntness of this statement gives the feeling that all is well and will remain well. The fact that all the characters benefitted from this one act helps to make the point that the ideas of right and wrong are not clean cut. Every person must decide what is right for them and not simply rely on conventional ideas to make life decisions. The justification shown in this story emphasizes the idea that it is important to think as an individual and do what feels right, not necessarily what is seen as right.

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. "The Storm." *The Awakening and Other Stories*. Ed. Pamela Knights. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. 342-347. Print.

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