

Kate Chopin's Use Of Symbolism

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Introduction

Kate Chopin's "The Storm" and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" both use familiar objects and settings to expose tensions hidden beneath ordinary social life, but their symbolic systems operate differently. Chopin turns weather, domestic space, clothing, doors, windows, and household objects into a language of sexual desire, secrecy, constraint, and temporary release. Jackson transforms a village lottery, a deteriorating black box, stones, and the town square into symbols of inherited violence maintained through ritual obedience. The contrast is especially revealing because both stories begin inside apparently normal communities. In Chopin, a threatening natural storm coincides with an adulterous encounter that the narrative refuses to punish conventionally; in Jackson, a civic event with a cheerful title ends in collective killing. Symbolism allows both writers to make visible what respectable appearances conceal. These symbols are not codes with one fixed answer. Their meanings develop through repetition, irony, setting, and the characters' relationships to them. Chopin's symbolism remains intimate and bodily, while Jackson's becomes collective and institutional, producing distinct critiques of social order (Seyersted, 1969).

Weather, Domestic Labor, and Thresholds in "The Storm"

The storm begins as a practical event that separates Calixta from Bobinôt and Bibi and brings Alcée into the house seeking shelter. Chopin gradually transforms the weather into an emotional atmosphere as pressure, wind, rain, electricity, and release parallel the intensifying attraction between Calixta and Alcée. The symbolism does not mean that nature morally approves their affair; it makes private desire physically perceptible. Domestic objects deepen the contrast. Calixta is sewing when the weather changes, associating her with household labor, repair, and disciplined routine. Doors and windows mark boundaries between public respectability and private desire as the house is closed against the storm while becoming the location of transgression. Lightning striking the chinaberry tree combines danger, illumination, and sudden bodily proximity. The bed produces the strongest reversal because a symbol of marital domesticity becomes the site of an extramarital encounter. Chopin keeps the affair inside the family home rather than moving it to a distant or conventionally illicit setting, suggesting that desires excluded from respectable language remain present within the ordinary structures designed to contain them.

White Imagery, Class, and the Unpunished Ending

Chopin repeatedly associates Calixta with white clothing and luminous bodily imagery, complicating the conventional connection between whiteness, purity, and respectable femininity. Desire does not transform her into the punished “fallen woman” expected by many nineteenth-century moral plots. The class contrast between Bobinôt and Alcée adds another layer. Bobinôt returns muddy, carrying food and worrying about Calixta’s reaction, while Alcée arrives on horseback with the confidence of a wealthier landowner. Yet Chopin does not make Bobinôt cruel or inadequate in order to justify the affair; his kindness prevents a simple moral equation between social status and desirability. After the encounter, the storm clears, the household resumes ordinary life, and Alcée writes to his wife Clarisse encouraging her to extend her absence. The closing statement that “the storm passed and every one was happy” is therefore ironic and provocative. It challenges the expectation that adultery must lead immediately to exposure, punishment, or collapse. The story does not prove deception is harmless. Instead, it leaves readers with an unstable question about whether private satisfaction and social order can coexist when important knowledge remains deliberately separated.

The Black Box, Stones, and the Violence of Tradition

Jackson’s symbols move in the opposite direction: the danger is not disruptive nature but orderly social ritual. The black box is old, splintered, and associated with an earlier box, yet villagers resist replacing it even though much of the lottery’s original ritual has been forgotten. Its physical decay symbolizes institutional continuity after coherent justification has faded. The stones are equally significant because children gather them before the victim is selected, showing how violence is normalized and transmitted across generations. Stoning distributes responsibility among the entire community so that no single person appears to be the sole killer. The town square intensifies this effect because the lottery occurs in the same ordinary public space used for civic gatherings. There is no secret conspiracy and no visibly monstrous ruler. Mr. Summers administers the process with routine efficiency while neighbors talk casually. Jackson’s symbolic power comes from this ordinariness. Tradition becomes dangerous when age substitutes for justification, procedure substitutes for moral judgment, and shared participation allows individuals to treat collective violence as nobody’s personal responsibility (Jackson, 1949; Whittier, 1985).

Women, Social Order, and Opposite Forms of Disruption

Comparing Calixta and Tessie Hutchinson reveals how both stories use women’s positions to expose social expectations. Calixta experiences sexual desire outside the identity assigned to wife and

mother, and the storm temporarily suspends ordinary supervision without removing her from the domestic setting. Tessie begins as an ordinary participant in village life and protests only after her household is selected, demonstrating how secure membership can become vulnerability within minutes. She is not responsible for the institution simply because she previously accepted it, but her late protest shows how communities normalize harm when individuals assume someone else will bear the cost. The storm and lottery therefore function in opposite symbolic directions. Chopin's natural disruption releases a private desire condemned by society, whereas Jackson's human-made order destroys an individual in the name of continuity. The respectable home contains secrecy; the peaceful village contains murder. Neither writer offers a simple program of reform. Symbolism allows each to reveal that familiar institutions can contain contradictions that ordinary social language suppresses, especially when gender, duty, desire, and conformity define which behaviors remain speakable.

Conclusion

Kate Chopin and Shirley Jackson use symbolism not as decoration but as the structural method through which their stories question apparently stable social arrangements. In "The Storm," weather, sewing, thresholds, lightning, white clothing, and the marital bed connect domestic routine with desire, class, secrecy, and release. The absence of conventional punishment leaves the meaning of happiness unresolved rather than turning the affair into a simple moral lesson. In "The Lottery," the black box, stones, town square, and annual procedure show how violence can survive through habit even after rational explanation disappears. The contrast between the stories makes their symbolic strategies especially clear: Chopin uses temporary natural disorder to reveal what social respectability contains, while Jackson uses repetitive social order to reveal what community conformity can normalize. Both make the familiar unstable. A house cannot be assumed to guarantee moral transparency, and a long-standing civic tradition cannot be assumed to deserve obedience. Their enduring power comes from symbols that invite interpretation without collapsing into one fixed message about sexuality, gender, tradition, violence, or social belonging.

Works Cited

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