

Kate Chopin's Use Of Symbolism

Posted on October 8, 2018

Kate Chopin's fiction is distinguished by a subtle symbolic language through which weather, domestic spaces, clothing, doors, windows, bodies, and ordinary household objects reveal conflicts that her characters cannot always state openly. The original essay compares Chopin's "The Storm" with Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," and that comparison is worth preserving because both writers use familiar settings to expose the violence hidden beneath social order. However, the two stories use symbolism differently. Chopin transforms a natural storm into a changing image of sexual desire, secrecy, disruption, and release. Jackson transforms a civic lottery into a symbol of inherited communal violence sustained by ritual obedience. Chopin's symbolism is intimate and bodily; Jackson's is collective and institutional. Both writers rely on irony: the storm that appears threatening coincides with a moment of emotional satisfaction, while the lottery that sounds festive ends in execution. Their symbols do not merely decorate the stories. They organize the moral questions readers must confront (Chopin).

Symbolism and the Compressed Form of the Short Story

Short stories must create meaning with unusual economy. A repeated object, setting, or action can carry several layers of significance without requiring extended explanation. Symbolism allows the writer to connect the visible plot with larger issues such as marriage, gender, desire, class, violence, and conformity. A literary symbol is not a code with one fixed answer. Its meaning develops through context, repetition, contrast, imagery, and the character's relationship to it. The storm in Chopin's story cannot be reduced simply to "sexual passion," just as the black box in Jackson's story cannot mean only "tradition." Each symbol changes as the narrative proceeds and gains force through its place within the entire structure.

Kate Chopin and the Social Limits Placed on Women

Kate Chopin wrote during a period when respectable womanhood was commonly associated with domestic duty, sexual restraint, motherhood, and obedience to marital expectations. Her fiction often examines the distance between those social roles and women's private consciousness. Calling Chopin a "feminist" can be useful if it refers to her sustained interest in women's autonomy and restrictive gender norms, but the label should not flatten the complexity of her work. She does not always provide exemplary heroines or straightforward political solutions. Instead, she reveals desire,

contradiction, selfishness, confinement, pleasure, and consequence. “The Storm,” written in 1898 but not published during Chopin’s lifetime, was especially daring because it depicts adultery without conventional punishment or confession (Seyersted; Toth).

The Storm as External Event and Emotional Atmosphere

The approaching storm first functions as a practical event. Bobinôt and Bibi must remain at the store, leaving Calixta alone at home. The weather rearranges the domestic situation and creates the opportunity for Alcée Laballière to seek shelter. Yet the storm quickly becomes more than plot machinery. The darkening sky, rising wind, heavy rain, and electricity create an atmosphere in which restrained feeling becomes difficult to contain. Chopin links physical weather with the characters’ bodies without saying that nature morally approves of their actions. The symbolic force lies in parallel intensity: pressure accumulates, breaks, and passes. The natural event makes visible an emotional energy that ordinary domestic routine has kept hidden.

Calixta at the Sewing Machine

At the beginning of “The Storm,” Calixta is sewing. The sewing machine associates her with domestic labor, repair, productivity, and the role of wife and mother. She is so absorbed in work that she does not notice the approaching weather. This detail suggests that routine has narrowed her attention. Sewing joins separate pieces into an orderly whole, while the storm interrupts that order. The machine is not a prison in a simple sense; Calixta appears capable and active within her home. Nevertheless, Chopin places the symbol of disciplined domestic work beside a force that cannot be stitched into social form. When Alcée arrives, the movement of the narrative shifts from mechanical repetition toward bodily sensation and memory.

Doors, Windows, and Thresholds

The house is repeatedly opened and closed against the storm. Doors and windows mark boundaries between domestic respectability and uncontrollable nature, between public identity and private desire. Alcée enters as a visitor seeking shelter, but his crossing of the threshold also reopens the history between him and Calixta. They look outward together as lightning strikes, yet the house becomes the space in which they turn inward toward memory and attraction. Threshold imagery matters because Chopin’s characters occupy a temporary zone outside ordinary social supervision. The storm isolates them without transporting them to a fantasy world. Their transgression occurs inside the marital home, the very space associated with fidelity and family order.

Lightning and the Chinaberry Tree

When lightning strikes the chinaberry tree, the image concentrates danger, violence, illumination, and sexual energy. The sudden flash startles Calixta and leads Alcée to draw her close. The tree is rooted in the yard, part of the domestic landscape, but it is vulnerable to the force from above. This moment symbolizes the collapse of distance between the characters, though it should not be interpreted as a mechanical equation in which tree and lightning correspond neatly to female and male bodies. Chopin's imagery is more fluid. The flash exposes what has been latent, while the damaged tree reminds readers that intensity can carry risk even when the story does not impose punishment.

White Clothing and Sensual Imagery

Chopin repeatedly describes Calixta through white garments and luminous skin. White traditionally suggests purity, innocence, and respectable femininity, but the story complicates that symbolism by making whiteness part of explicitly sensual imagery. Purity and desire are not treated as mutually exclusive qualities. The language refuses the assumption that a married woman's sexuality must be invisible or that bodily pleasure automatically transforms her into a degraded figure. At the same time, the imagery reflects the racialized conventions of nineteenth-century writing, in which whiteness could function as an aesthetic ideal. A modern reading can acknowledge both Chopin's challenge to sexual norms and the cultural assumptions embedded in her descriptive language.

The Bed as a Domestic and Transgressive Symbol

The bed belongs to the marital household, but during the storm it becomes the site of an extramarital encounter. This symbolic reversal is central to the story's provocation. Chopin does not move the affair to an inn, forest, or distant city; she places it within the ordinary architecture of family life. The domestic institution contains desires that its public language may deny. The bed symbolizes marriage and secrecy at the same time. It also complicates the idea that domestic order is transparent. Bobinôt later returns with food and concern, unaware of what has occurred, and the household resumes its appearance of stability.

The Passing Storm and the Absence of Punishment

After the sexual encounter, the rain ends and the world appears refreshed. Alcée leaves, Calixta prepares for her family, and Bobinôt and Bibi return. The famous closing statement that "the storm passed and every one was happy" is deeply ironic. On one level, the affair appears to relieve tension rather than destroy the marriages. Alcée writes to his wife, Clarisse, encouraging her to remain away longer, and she welcomes the temporary freedom of separation. No one confesses, suffers public shame, or experiences supernatural punishment. The symbolic clearing of the weather challenges

moral conventions that expected adultery to produce ruin. Yet the ending does not prove that deception is harmless. Readers are left to question whether happiness based on ignorance is stable, ethical, or complete.

Bobinôt's Bare Feet, Alcée's Horse, and Class

The original essay notices the contrast between Bobinôt's modest condition and Alcée's social status. This class dimension should be handled carefully. Bobinôt's practical shopping, muddy appearance, and concern about Calixta's reaction present him as an ordinary, affectionate husband. Alcée arrives on horseback and carries the confidence of a wealthier landowner. The contrast contributes to the erotic memory between Calixta and Alcée, whose earlier connection belongs partly to a world of social possibility that marriage has closed. Chopin does not simply equate wealth with desirability and poverty with inadequacy. Bobinôt's kindness complicates any attempt to justify the affair through his supposed failure.

Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" and the Symbol of Tradition

Jackson's "The Lottery," first published in 1948, begins with a bright summer morning, children gathering stones, and villagers assembling for what appears to be an ordinary civic event. The title encourages readers to expect a prize. Gradually, the lottery is revealed as an annual selection for death by stoning. The central symbol is therefore a ritual whose familiar name hides organized violence. Unlike the storm, which erupts and passes, the lottery repeats because the community preserves it. Jackson's symbolism examines how cruelty becomes normal when distributed through procedure, custom, and collective participation (Jackson; Whittier).

The Black Box

The black box is the story's most visible object of tradition. It is old, splintered, stained, and possibly constructed from pieces of an earlier box. Villagers resist replacing it even though they have forgotten much of the ritual's original form. The box symbolizes institutional continuity without understanding. Its physical decay mirrors the weakening of any rational justification, but its authority persists because age itself is treated as legitimacy. The villagers preserve the object more faithfully than they preserve a coherent explanation. Jackson thereby shows how tradition can survive after meaning has disappeared.

Stones and Collective Responsibility

The stones are prepared before the victim is selected. Children gather them as part of a familiar seasonal routine, which shows how violence is transmitted across generations. Stoning requires the participation of many people, distributing responsibility so that no one person appears to be the sole killer. Even family members join. The method symbolizes communal enforcement: the village maintains unity by sacrificing one of its own. The biblical and historical associations of stoning deepen the ritual's antiquity, but Jackson does not locate the violence in one religion. She depicts a modern village using inherited forms to avoid personal moral judgment.

The Village Square and Ordinary Evil

The lottery occurs in the same public space used for dances, clubs, and civic activities. The setting symbolizes the integration of violence into normal community life. There is no secret conspiracy and no visibly monstrous leader. Mr. Summers administers the event with bureaucratic efficiency, while villagers make small talk. This ordinariness is more disturbing than spectacular villainy. Jackson suggests that cruel systems can be maintained by ordinary people who perform limited roles, follow procedure, and fear standing apart. The village square becomes the opposite of democratic community: participation is compulsory, but moral debate is absent.

Tessie Hutchinson and the Limits of Protest

Tessie arrives late, jokes with neighbors, and accepts the lottery until her household is chosen. Only then does she protest that the process is unfair. Her response does not make her responsible for the system, but it reveals how people may tolerate injustice while believing it will affect someone else. Tessie's repeated cry is morally correct in the immediate situation, yet it comes too late to challenge the institution as a whole. Jackson uses her character to expose the instability of social belonging. A fully accepted member can become the community's victim within minutes.

Natural Force Versus Social Ritual

The contrast between the two stories becomes clearest when comparing the storm and the lottery. Chopin's storm is natural, temporary, sensual, and disruptive. It suspends ordinary control and permits a private act that society would condemn. Jackson's lottery is human-made, repetitive, procedural, and publicly enforced. It destroys an individual in order to preserve social order. In Chopin, disruption creates release; in Jackson, order creates violence. The symbols move in opposite directions, but both expose the inadequacy of appearances. The respectable home contains adultery, while the peaceful village contains murder.

Gender in the Two Stories

Both stories also use symbolism to examine women's social positions. Calixta experiences desire outside the narrow moral identity assigned to wife and mother, while Tessie becomes the selected object of communal punishment. Chopin grants Calixta bodily agency but leaves the consequences hidden within domestic secrecy. Jackson gives Tessie a public voice only when the community has already stripped her of power. Neither story presents women as merely passive, yet both show institutions that define acceptable female behavior. The symbolic settings—the marital house and village square—are spaces in which gender is enforced and contested.

Why Symbolism Makes the Stories Endure

The storm, black box, stones, lightning, sewing machine, and lottery remain memorable because they connect concrete images with unresolved moral problems. Readers can debate whether Calixta's happiness is liberation, self-deception, or both. They can recognize the lottery in practices that continue because "it has always been done," even when those practices do not involve literal violence. The symbols invite application without collapsing the stories into simple lessons. Chopin and Jackson trust readers to notice contradiction rather than announcing a final judgment.

Conclusion

Kate Chopin's use of symbolism in "The Storm" transforms weather and domestic objects into a language of desire, confinement, class, secrecy, and temporary release. Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" uses ritual objects and public space to symbolize conformity, inherited violence, and the division of responsibility. The comparison preserves the original essay's insight that both writers rely on symbolic structures, but their methods are fundamentally different. Chopin's symbols intensify private consciousness and challenge sexual convention; Jackson's symbols expose collective obedience and institutional cruelty. In both stories, the familiar becomes unstable. A home is not simply a place of moral certainty, and a community tradition is not automatically worthy of respect. Symbolism enables each writer to reveal what ordinary language and social appearances attempt to conceal.

Works Cited

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