

# A Pair of Silk Stockings



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE CHOPIN

Born in 1860, Katherine O'Flaherty was the daughter of Thomas O'Flaherty, an Irishman who moved to the United States in 1823 to escape the prosecution experienced by Irish Catholics at that time. Kate grew up in a busy household in St. Louis, Missouri. Her French mother, Eliza O'Flaherty, had married Thomas when she was just sixteen years old, and her mother and sisters remained living in the Flaherty family home throughout Kate's childhood. At age five, Kate was sent to boarding school at Sacred Heart, where she was taught by nuns, until her father was killed in a train accident. After Thomas's death, Kate's mother inherited the entire family estate, becoming a rich widow virtually overnight. Kate moved home, but returned to Sacred Heart periodically throughout her childhood, forming lifelong bonds with her female friends there. Kate then moved to New Orleans, Louisiana, after marrying her husband, Oscar Chopin. The Chopins lived comfortably in a large house while raising their six children, born between 1871 and 1879. When Oscar died tragically in 1882, he left Kate with an overwhelming amount of financial debt. Shortly after moving back to St. Louis, Kate's mother also passed away. Faced with financial ruin and crippling depression, Chopin began writing fiction. By the 1890s, Chopin's work was being published in famous periodicals and magazines. While she did experience some harsh criticism for her then-controversial portrayal of women, deemed too radical by some, critics across the country generally received Chopin's work positively.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the nineteenth century, the emergence and expansion of the middle class had diminished the necessity for women to contribute to household income, allowing increasing numbers of wives to stay within the home. This created two distinct realms within society, referred to as the "private" and "public" spheres. The former alludes to the sentimental, emotional, and domestic attributes of women within the home, and the latter refers to the rational nature of men, who occupied the political and economic world. Although the decidedly patriarchal doctrine of "separate spheres" had begun to loosen by the end of the 1800s, Chopin's writing ambitions were bold and unusual for a woman at that time. Much of her writing deals with questions about women's place in society and the unfair moral codes used to control and restrict their behavior.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Chopin's objective and realist writing style was heavily influenced by the French short story writer Guy de Maupassant, whom she greatly admired. Like Maupassant, Chopin placed importance on character, rather than on plot, and often constructed an amoral narrative voice to reveal the inner psychological workings of her complex characters. Published in the late nineteenth-century, an era where women were constrained by marital and household obligations, Chopin's stories boldly champion female characters in their search for independence and fulfillment. Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894) is often referred to as one of the first examples of American feminist literature because of its portrayal of a wife who experiences happiness and freedom for the first time when she learns of her husband's death in a train accident. The story was influenced by Chopin's mother's life: Eliza O'Flaherty also gained control over her life for the first time when her husband died in a train accident. In order to remain publishable, however, in Chopin's fictional version of events, the protagonist is killed as punishment for her for her disloyalty to her husband. Chopin often concealed her bold assertions about women by situating her decidedly feminine characters—dutiful wives or seemingly naive young women—in familiar domestic settings. In her second novel, *The Awakening* (1899), Chopin tackled similar themes to those in "A Pair of Silk Stockings," but the public largely rejected the book because its portrayal of female sexuality was deemed offensive. There are parallels between Chopin's writing and that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who published the semi-autobiographical short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" in 1892. In this early feminist story, Gilman challenges the belief that husbands should make decisions about their wives' bodies, health and medical treatments.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Pair of Silk Stockings"
- **When Written:** 1896
- **Where Written:** St. Louis, Missouri
- **When Published:** 1897 in *Vogue Magazine*
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short story, realism, modern feminist literature
- **Setting:** An unnamed town or city (one big enough to contain a large department store and a theater), probably somewhere in Louisiana, where Chopin set many of her stories.
- **Climax:** After a chance encounter with a luxurious pair of silk stockings, Mrs. Sommers begins to make rash purchases for herself, spending almost her entire fifteen dollars on clothes, magazines, and an indulgent lunch.
- **Antagonist:** The sexist societal expectations of working-class

women

- **Point of View:** Third person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Mentors and Matriarchs.** From the age of five, after her father's death, Chopin was raised solely by women. The women in her family and her devoted "mammy" (the slave nurse whom her father had bought when he was alive, despite growing condemnation of slavery) both shaped her personality and character, while the nuns at her school and her tutor, Madame Charleville, spearheaded her education.

**Writing as Therapy.** Chopin struggled with depression after her husband and mother died. It was her obstetrician, Dr. Frederick Kolbenheyer, who encouraged her to start writing, suggesting that it might be therapeutic for her.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Mrs. Sommers is surprised and excited by the small windfall in her possession. The question of how to spend the money—a whopping fifteen dollars—absorbs her entirely. In the early hours of the morning, Mrs. Sommers decides that the money should be allocated towards much-needed clothes for her children, Janie, Mag, and the boys, and she meticulously and methodically draws up a mental shopping list. The very idea of seeing her children in fresh and fashionable clothing makes Mrs. Sommers so eager for her shopping trip the next day, that she lies awake all night in restless anticipation.

However, when she arrives at the department store the next day, Mrs. Sommers is unable to begin her "shopping bout" because she is too fatigued. Completely devoted to the needs of her children and household, Mrs. Sommers had spent the morning catering to everybody else, forgetting to "eat any luncheon" at all. As she gathers her strength at an empty counter in the shop, Mrs. Sommers finds herself admiring a discounted "line of silk hosiery." Mrs. Sommers loves a bargain, and although the silk stockings are still far too expensive and extravagant for a poor, ordinary woman like her, she is quite tempted by their elegant and delicate texture. After inspecting them a little while longer, Mrs. Sommers declares to the shop assistant that she will buy a black pair.

This first purchase is a catalyst to the spending spree that follows. Disappointed by how "lost" her stockings seemed in "the depths of her shabby old-shopping bag," Mrs. Sommers is drawn away from the bargain counter and instead towards the elevator. Once upstairs, unable to wait until she gets home to enjoy her new lavish purchase, Mrs. Sommers removes her old cotton stockings and puts on her silk ones. Able for the first time, perhaps in years, to renounce her domestic responsibilities and forget her familial errands, Mrs. Sommers

is overcome by an unfamiliar yet pleasing sensation.

Mrs. Sommers continues in her pursuit of satisfaction and moves towards the shoe department. Here she delights in the authority she is able to exert over the judgmental clerk, bossing him around until she finds the perfect pair of new boots. Shortly after, Mrs. Sommers makes a stop at the glove counter, where she is fitted with a beautiful pair of "kids." Subsequently, she pauses at a stall to buy two expensive magazines, which remind her of the "pleasant things" she had been accustomed to before her marriage.

The new purchases empower Mrs. Sommers with a feeling of importance and "a sense of belonging," which she is desperate for. As she walks down the street, she carries her magazines proudly and lifts her skirt in order to reveal the fashionable shoes beneath. Mrs. Sommers does not seem to feel any remorse for spending the money, which had been previously dedicated to her children, on indulgent purchases for herself. In fact, the children do not seem to cross her mind once throughout the course of the afternoon.

Having worked up a real hunger during her shopping extravaganza, Mrs. Sommers approaches a restaurant hesitantly, worried that her inferior class position will prevent her from entering such an upscale establishment. Once inside, Mrs. Sommers is able to relax as orders a rich and lavish lunch of oysters, lamb chop, wine, dessert, and coffee.

Finally, with just a few coins left, Mrs. Sommers visits the theater. She watches a magnificent play alongside the "brilliantly dressed women" who attend such events solely to show off and be seen in the latest fashions. The "gaudy" women accept Mrs. Sommers as one of their own, presumably because her new clothes conceal her true identity and class status, and she enjoys her time with them. At the play's close, Mrs. Sommers feels as if her "dream" has ended. Traveling home in a cable car, Mrs. Sommers silently harbors a "poignant wish" for her journey to go on forever and ever.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Mrs. Sommers** – Mrs. Sommers, the protagonist and only major character in the story, is an impoverished, industrious young woman. Although her poor neighbors dwell on the fact that Mrs. Sommers was once richer and more fortunate (before her marriage to Mr. Sommers), she is no snob and is not afraid of hard work. In fact, she is so busy completing her daily household duties that she has no time at all "to devote to the past." In the story's opening, dutiful Mrs. Sommers is characterized solely by her identity as a mother and wife, but after gaining a small windfall of fifteen dollars, she begins to make decisions for herself. Escaping from her familial obligations for one afternoon, Chopin's heroine is able to

prioritize her own desires and to pursue her quest for personal fulfillment. Succumbing to the tempting delights of consumerism, Mrs. Sommers indulges in new clothing (including the eponymous **pair of silk stockings**), an extravagant lunch, and a trip to the theater, activities that give her a feeling of importance and belonging. While Mrs. Sommers's shopping spree symbolizes a personal triumph over the patriarchal expectations that require her to exhaust herself in order to embody the characteristics of an ideal nineteenth-century woman, it also seems to reveal the futile nature of her rebellion. Mrs. Sommers has experienced a taste of freedom, happiness, and pleasure, but having spent the entirety of the fifteen dollars on herself, she must return home to the drudgery of her mundane domestic routine.

**Mr. Sommers** – Mr. Sommers is an invisible force throughout the story. The reader never meets Mrs. Sommers's husband, and it is unclear whether he is dead or alive, but he is a strong patriarchal symbol in Mrs. Sommers's story. It is clear that Mr. Sommers is of a lower class ranking to Mrs. Sommers because she has experienced a social and financial demotion since her marriage to him, a situation that their neighbors gossip about ceaselessly. Although Mrs. Sommers doesn't like to dwell on her past, it is apparent that this has brought her some unhappiness. Mrs. Sommers's life is unmistakably and materially bound up in her (inferior) position as wife to Mr. Sommers. This is exemplified through the recurrent use of "Mrs. Sommers"; her first name is never revealed and so, even in her own story, her identity and subjectivity continue to be subsumed by her relation to a man.

**Janie, Mag, and the Boys** – Janie, Mag and the boys are Mr. Sommers and Mrs. Sommers's children. They are mentioned only at the beginning of the story when Mrs. Sommers lies awake at night, meticulously planning how to spend her fifteen dollars. Initially, she is set on using her small windfall to buy much-needed clothing for her children. Notably, it's unclear whether her desire to purchase new items for the children is motivated by devotion for them, or by the prospect of saving herself time from darning and mending their old clothes. Either way, the story begins by placing the children at the center of Mrs. Sommers's world. As the story unfolds, however, Mrs. Sommers's commitment to her children seems to be forgotten as she spends the money allotted to them on expensive items for herself. At the end of the story, Mrs. Sommers longs for her journey to continue forever, presumably even if this means that she never returns home to her children.

**The Clerk** – The clerk in the shoe department meets Mrs. Sommers shortly after she has bought and put on her new **stockings**. He is bewildered by the juxtaposition between the luxurious silk stockings and the rest of Mrs. Sommers's shabby clothes. The clerk symbolizes a sort of puritanical judgment; although he is probably working class too, he is surprised to see a poor woman like Mrs. Sommers making seemingly imprudent

and frivolous purchases. Mrs. Sommers, however, is not dissuaded by the clerk, and continues browsing in a demanding and fussy manner, explaining that she doesn't mind paying extra for the perfect pair of boots. Mrs. Sommers enjoys the buying power afforded to her by the dollars in her purse and the authority that it gives her over the clerk.

**The Man on the Cable Car** – The stranger on the cable car appears right at the story's close, as Mrs. Sommers is traveling home from her shopping day. The man has "keen eyes" as he watches Mrs. Sommers carefully. The narrator describes how he observes her, trying to work out who she is, and presumably, why a working class woman like Mrs. Sommers has so many expensive things about her person. Ultimately, he is unable to make sense of what he sees. Through this, Chopin challenges the notion that women are all predictable, fickle, and one-dimensional creatures, instead endowing her complex female characters with rich inner psyches impervious to the scrutiny of men.

**The Shop Assistant** – The shop assistant, described as a "young girl," helps Mrs. Sommers find a pair of black **silk stockings** in the right size. Mrs. Sommers feels like a princess when the assistant asks if she would like to inspect the silk stockings, just as she feels like royalty when she tips the waiter later that day.

**The Waiter** – The waiter in the upscale restaurant is attentive to Mrs. Sommers, making her feel welcome and comfortable in a space that was previously barred to her because of her poverty. When Mrs. Sommers leaves the waiter a cash tip at the end of her meal, his bow makes her feel exceptionally special, like a "princess of royal blood."

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**The Neighbors** – The neighbors are mentioned only in passing when the narrator describes how they chatter and gossip about Mrs. Sommers's life before her marriage. It is implied that she enjoyed more wealth or a superior class status before marrying Mr. Sommers, who is evidently from a lower-class background.



## THEMES

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## WOMEN AND GENDER ROLES

Kate Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings" tells the story of Mrs. Sommers, a poor woman charged as the sole caretaker of her four children who experiences a sensuous awakening when shopping for her

family. Published in 1897—a time when ideal womanhood was often synonymous with motherhood, resulting in the widespread belief that women must take full responsibility for childcare and housework—Chopin’s story explores the boundaries of traditional gender roles. While nineteenth-century social norms dictated that women embody purity and piousness, serving their husbands faithfully but harboring no ambitions or desires of their own, Mrs. Sommers gives in to temptation with almost reckless abandon—indulging in her femininity, succumbing to her desires, and escaping the arduous confines of her household for the day. Through the excitement, pleasure and satisfaction that Mrs. Sommers enjoys in the story, Chopin illustrates the pleasure and fulfilment women can experience when freed from the confines of marriage and motherhood.

Upon finding herself the “unexpected possessor of fifteen dollars,” Mrs. Sommers’s thoughts immediately turn toward how she can use this windfall to support her family—quickly establishing the primacy of the role of motherhood in her life. She methodically lays out a plan for the distribution of the funds between her children. Paying an extra “dollar or two” for Janie’s shoes “would ensure their lasting an appreciable time longer than they usually did,” while buying new “shirt waists” means she won’t have to patch up the old ones. She adds two pairs of stockings a piece to her mental list—enthusiastically noting “what darning that would save for a while!”—as well as a pretty gown for Mag and caps for all four children. Mrs. Sommers is “excited” by “the vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives,” at once implying the family’s relative poverty and her desire to come across as a capable caretaker. Her focus on how these purchases will ease her workload, meanwhile, implies that Mrs. Sommers does not exactly revel in having her days devoted to menial tasks like darning stockings and patching shirts.

Such domestic labor has clearly taken its toll on Mrs. Sommers. Having forgotten to eat lunch in the chaos of “getting the children fed and the place righted,” she is weak, faint, and fatigued when seating herself at an empty counter in a clothing store “to gather her strength and courage” before beginning her shopping. Mrs. Sommers is a depleted woman, but she finds strength when seduced by **a pair of silk stockings**. While sitting at the counter, Mrs. Sommers absent-mindedly encounters “something very soothing and pleasant to touch.” As if rousing her from sleep or numbness, the silk stockings appeal to her senses and seduce her into an imprudent purchase. As the stockings “glisten” and “glide serpent-like through her fingers,” the unmistakable allusion to the Bible’s creation story positions the stockings as a sinful temptation. However, the question of buying the silk stockings is not a consequential moral dilemma, but rather a pitiful reminder of the constraints placed upon poor women like Mrs. Sommers, who are obliged to devote their ever-depleting

resources—both financial and emotional—to others. Presented with this temptation, “two hectic blotches” appear immediately upon Mrs. Sommers’ previously pale cheeks. This redness might represent sin, whereby Mrs. Sommers’s now sullied paleness symbolises the corruption of her pure and pious womanhood. On the other hand, her blush might signify a rush of desire—a new and exciting sensation that Mrs. Sommers eventually embraces. The implicit suggestions of female sexuality throughout descriptions of the shopping spree present it as a moment of sensual awakening for Mrs. Sommers. Ultimately, Mrs. Sommers’s dwindling energy is almost immediately replenished through this experience, bringing color to her cheeks and a spring to her step—underscoring the story’s insistence that women are capable of more, and indeed require more, than traditional feminine domesticity.

One might expect Mrs. Sommers to be punished for her greed—for her to become an allegory warning against the dangers of sinful and selfish women—but no such twist ensues. Chopin describes the scenes that follow with an abundance of sensuous language, undermining nineteenth-century expectations of womanly piousness by presenting Mrs. Sommers’s shopping as an act of self-fulfilment, rather than as a fall from grace. Mrs. Sommers remains loyal to her newly awakened desires and hungrily continues her search for “satisfaction.” Taking “a rest” from all that is “laborious and fatiguing,” Mrs. Sommers “abandoned herself” to an “impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility.” The pleasure-seeking continues when Mrs. Sommers ventures out of the shop, where, rather than met with the ridicule she had expected, she blends in seamlessly with the “well-dressed multitude.” In the restaurant, no one suspects her of belonging to an inferior social class, and in the theater, she is warmly accepted by a group of “brilliantly dressed women,” who share their candy with her. The theater scene becomes a metaphor for Mrs. Sommers’s self-fulfilment. Her experiences have awakened long-buried feelings of desire, freeing her from normal subservience to domestic duties, if just for an afternoon, and placing her center-stage in her own narrative.

Mrs. Sommers seems to be rewarded (she is granted a small fortune, after all) for being dutiful and loyal to her family. What she discovers, however, is far more thrilling than motherhood. Through the excitement and satisfaction that Mrs. Sommers enjoys in the story, Chopin explores feminine pleasure at a time when women’s desires were not widely acknowledged, never mind encouraged. At the story’s close, Mrs. Sommers—fed, replenished, and freshly clothed—begins her return home in the cable car. After her day’s adventures, she longs for her journey to “go on and on with her forever,” revealing her desire to remain free from the confines of domesticity, and to live a more independent, sensuous life.



## CONSUMERISM AND ESCAPISM

The 1890s brought with them the rise of modern American consumer culture; the Industrial Revolution had caused substantial growth in production and commerce, and it continued to transform the economy in the United States. Chopin's 1897 short story is fittingly littered with references to this modern consumerism; the reader learns early on that Mrs. Sommers is a veritable shopper, adept at finding bargains and one "who could stand for hours" in order to buy a "desired object that was selling below cost." As the concept of shopping shifted from a functional necessity to a leisure activity, consumer identity was also increasingly tied to notions of femininity—a notion reflected in everything from the glossy magazines Mrs. Sommers buys to the "gaudy" outfits worn by superficial women in the theater. The story can be read as a direct response to the birth of a capitalist America that promised women an escape from their mundane domestic lives through the thrill of shopping. Chopin reveals, however, the trivial and deceptive nature of consumerism, which is ultimately an inadequate form of escape, and a misplaced endeavor for Mrs. Sommers.

Throughout the story, Mrs. Sommers uses consumerism to avoid the mundanity of everyday life. From the moment she gains the fifteen dollars, she is "absorbed" by the opportunity of spending it. The very prospect of shopping sends her into "a dreamy state," which occupies her for "a day or two." Chopin then uses the department store—where Mrs. Sommers's shopping adventure begins—as a symbol of American consumer culture, and its promise that fashion and consumption can buy happiness, respect, and social esteem. At the glove stand, both Mrs. Sommers and the shop assistant "los[e] themselves" while admiring the gloves, squarely positioning consumerism as a brand of escapism. Similarly, Mrs. Sommers breaks into smile when imagining herself as a princess, "asked to inspect a tiara of diamonds." The store represents a sort of dreamland, not only for Mrs. Sommers, but for all the women there, to indulge in a very capitalist construction of femininity, allowing them to assume new fantasy identities, far removed from the reality of their lives. Chopin uses the department store to expose the manipulative allure of a consumer culture that renders practical women like Mrs. Sommers trivial, infantile, and almost ridiculous.

Indeed, consumerism is ultimately an inadequate and unfulfilling form of escapism. For Mrs. Sommers, each purchase is followed by disappointment, and the brief amnesia bought with every purchase becomes more and more fleeting. After buying the **silk stockings**, for example, Mrs. Sommers worries that the little package "seemed lost in the depths of her shabby old shopping-bag." Then, after her moment of contemplation at the glove stand, she realizes that "there were other places where money might be spent." Similarly, after buying the magazines, Mrs. Sommers becomes aware that "she was very

hungry," and continues her spending spree in pursuit of lunch. With each purchase, the sentences pertaining to her dissatisfaction become shorter and shorter, reflecting how Mrs. Sommers moves more and more frantically from each purchase to the next, desperate to keep her fantasy alive. After her shopping trip, Mrs. Sommers is "very hungry." Her "cravings" here are both literal and figurative, as she cannot resist the urge to continue spending and indulging. The reader is aware that Mrs. Sommers's rate of spending is totally unsustainable, and that the lifestyle she yearns for will always be out of reach. Chopin reveals the transitory nature of the joy that consumerism can buy.

Despite her brief but happy sojourn, Mrs. Sommers's life is not materially changed or improved by the story's close—consumerism has only offered the illusion of freedom. After Mrs. Sommers has enjoyed shopping, luncheon, and a trip to the theater, the narrator describes how "the play was over, the music ceased, the crowd filed out. It was like a dream ended." No matter how much she wishes for the contrary, Mrs. Sommers must return home to her normal life, accepting the empty feeling that marks the end to her adventure. The end of the story represents the superficiality of consumerism, as Mrs. Sommers leaves with a "powerful longing" for more. Paradoxically, despite her indulgent exercise in escapism, she is less satisfied than ever before. The fifteen dollars in Mrs. Sommers's purse were not substantial enough to free her from the drudgery of everyday life, or lessen her hardships in any lasting way. The story implies that she will continue to be poor, exhausted, and busy providing for her children.

While Mrs. Sommers is delighted, seduced, and manipulated by the consumption of mass-produced goods, her escapism is short lived, her future is devoid of any real improvements, and she is left dreading the inevitable return to her normal life. She is certainly an example of rebellion against the selflessness expected of nineteenth-century women and mothers, but Chopin ensures that Mrs. Sommers's small rebellion is ultimately futile, as she remains unable to escape the drudgery of her everyday life or the limitations of her social class. Consumerism, then, acts merely as a distraction, perhaps to prevent women like Mrs. Sommers engaging in more vigorous forms of rebellion against the multiple social structures that serve to oppress them.



## SOCIAL CLASS AND BELONGING

In Kate Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings," Mrs. Sommers is given the almost impossible task of navigating America's nineteenth-century

Puritanism—and the moral judgement it cast over poor, lower class women like her—as well as the increasing social pressures placed on women to succumb to the demands of a booming consumer culture. Chopin uses her protagonist to explore the superficial elitism of an American class structure that asserted

double moral standards—on the one hand encouraging extravagant spending (for the sake of a strong economy), and on the other expecting working-class women to live pure, selfless, and modest lives. Mrs. Sommers embodies America's moral and social paradoxes through her position as an outsider; she neither belongs with her working-class neighbors, who sense and discuss her difference from them, nor to the luxurious middle- and upper-class world she longs for. In this context, Mrs. Sommers's self-worth is inextricably tied to outward appearances, which Chopin seems to reject as shallow and reductive.

To some extent, Mrs. Sommers is empowered by the fifteen dollars in her possession; the money boosts her confidence and transforms her from a state of passivity—"found herself the unexpected possessor"—to a woman in active pursuit of her own desires. In the story's opening, Mrs. Sommers derives pleasure from the way the money "stuffed and bulged" in her purse. Readers learn that the possession of the fifteen dollars "gave her a feeling of importance such as she had not enjoyed for years," suggesting that Mrs. Sommers's self-worth is linked closely to her financial status. Mrs. Sommers delights in the promise of exercising her new spending power, an experience that is not wholly unfamiliar to her, but one she has not had the luxury of enjoying in recent years. When the shop assistant in the store invites Mrs. Sommers to examine **a pair of silk stockings**, "[Mrs. Sommers] smiled, just as if she had been asked to inspect a tiara of diamonds with the ultimate view of purchasing it." The regal connotations illustrate how pleased and proud she feels to have been perceived as someone who could afford such "luxurious things." Indeed, after her rash shopping spree, Mrs. Sommers "lifted her skirts at the crossings" in order to show off her new shoes and stockings. Her purchases "had given her a feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude." Mrs. Sommers's indulgences have given the previously exhausted woman a new lease of life, transformed her posture and improved her "bearing." Perhaps her indulgences have been shallow and materialistic, but after her stoicism in the face of poverty, the implication is that Mrs. Sommers deserves her afternoon of luxury, certainly more than the other women in the story, who engage in such leisure activities just to show off their wealth.

Dressed predominantly in her modest, shabby clothes, Mrs. Sommers still risks rejection from "the well-dressed multitude" she so desperately wants to be accepted by. As a working-class woman, Mrs. Sommers is expected to behave selflessly and modestly, entirely devoted to her household duties and to her family obligations. In the context of American Puritanism, her indulgent purchases could be construed not only as irresponsible, but also as highly immoral. This moral judgement—or at least the fear of it—manifests itself in the dread Mrs. Sommers harbors of others noticing that she doesn't belong in their social set. In the restaurant, for example,

"she feared" that her "appearance" might create "surprise," presumably one that might result in her being rejected or outcast by her social superiors, who are positioned as the arbiters of style, class, and belonging. By highlighting the double moral standard that allows wealthy women to indulge in fashion, pampering, and excess, while judging a poor woman's character for the very same behavior, Chopin exposes the class inequality and social disenfranchisement experienced by working-class women.

Through the fact that the purchase of just a few elegant and luxurious items can buy Mrs. Sommers social acceptance, Chopin highlights the superficial and shallow elitism of the middle class. Through her new purchases, Mrs. Sommers gains a social capital that allows her to enter spaces previously restricted to her. Initially she worries that people will dismiss her, laugh at her, or prevent her from entering their upscale restaurants and theaters. Mrs. Sommers is pleasantly surprised, then, when her presence in these middle-class establishments causes no alarm. Her new stockings, shoes, gloves, and magazines make her feel more confident, but they also change people's perceptions of her. However, when Mrs. Sommers encounters the "gaudy" women in the theater, it becomes clear that Chopin condemns this superficiality. Visiting the theater solely to show off, the women are shallow, trivial, and one-dimensional. They share their candy with Mrs. Sommers, not because they actually care for her, but because they perceive her as belonging to their social set. Without her new clothes, Mrs. Sommers would have likely been rejected by these very same women. The comfort of acceptance that she finds among the "quiet ladies and gentlemen" has been misguided; money has given Mrs. Sommers a particular kind of self-worth—one tied to the approval of others—but it is devoid of any real value or meaning. Ultimately Chopin renders nineteenth-century class distinctions completely ridiculous, as it is obvious that Mrs. Sommers was once both wealthier and more socially important than she is now, and despite her changing outward appearance, is the same person she always has been.

"A Pair of Silk Stockings" is a damning indictment on the state of social class in America. The more fortunate echelons of society will continue to participate in mass consumption, buying things they do not need, simply to "display" their wealth, while poor, hard-working women like Mrs. Sommers remain marginalized, positioned firmly on the outside, looking in.



## SUBVERTING THE MALE GAZE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The male gaze refers to the act of presenting women from a masculine perspective, a patriarchal form of representation that has dominated literary and artistic works throughout history. Due to the hostile public reception of women writers throughout the early nineteenth-century, it

was not uncommon for them to publish their works under male pseudonyms. By the end of the century, however, writers like Kate Chopin were being openly published (although not without some outrage), and they were able to challenge traditional portrayals of women through their writing. While “A Pair of Silk Stockings” might appear to be a silly little tale about a silly little woman doing her shopping, Chopin’s story—about one woman’s pursuit of freedom and fulfillment—is a bold assertion about women’s need for agency, free from the scrutiny of men.

Despite the curious presence of male characters in “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” who watch, observe, and monitor Mrs. Sommers and her behavior, the story is unmistakably dedicated to her and her subjectivity alone. The only named male character is Mr. Sommers, whom the reader never actually meets, and the three other men in the story—the clerk, the waiter, and the man on the cable car—remain unnamed. While placed firmly in the center of her own narrative, through small acts of self-assurance, Mrs. Sommers is able to avert the male gaze and subvert the expectations of the men around her.

Mrs. Sommers challenges men’s initial perceptions of her and refuses to succumb to their judgement. Men act as voyeurs in the story, present only to judge Mrs. Sommers and act as a reminder that she is only a visitor in the male-dominated public sphere, passing through to complete her errands, but ultimately doomed to return home, where she belongs. Mrs. Sommers’s first encounter with a man is with that of the clerk in the shoe department. He is unable to “make her out” when he sees her shabby shoes with her elegant **pair of silk stockings**. While this confrontation is brief, it is clearly distinct from that of the female assistant, who shares a moment of admiration with Mrs. Sommers. Here, the clerk stands in as a symbol of patriarchal control as his judgement threatens to ruin Mrs. Sommers’s outing. However, refusing to be discouraged, Mrs. Sommers continues her shop in a “fastidious” manner. Mrs. Sommers instructs the “young fellow who served her,” thus undermining the gendered power dynamic and taking control of the situation for herself. Similarly, while traveling home on the cable car, “a man with keen eyes” literally surveils her. This instance of the male gaze risks rendering Mrs. Sommers an object under his watch, but in fact, he is unable to “decipher what he saw.” Again, Mrs. Sommers wields the power here because her true identity remains unclear to the voyeur. Even while inhabiting the public sphere, Mrs. Sommers maintains a degree of privacy and of agency.

Mrs. Sommers is not motivated by male approval, and she rejects society’s expectations of her. Although it is not clear if Mr. Sommers is still alive or not, given the social position of lower-class women at the time, it is certainly Mrs. Sommers’s responsibility to take care of her children’s clothes, before adorning herself in fashionable items. That she fails to accomplish this task illustrates that she has, at least to some

degree, rejected her marital obligations. While occupying the private realm, her thoughts are wholly wedded to her familial responsibilities, but once she passes into the public sphere, she gains the confidence and self-assurance needed to dedicate the afternoon to herself. Indeed, while she does choose items that are traditionally beautiful and feminine, it is unlikely that any of her purchases are carried out in search of male approval, since her husband is not mentioned once during the shopping spree. Rather, Mrs. Sommers’s purchases are for herself and for the feeling of confidence she gains through them. Mrs. Sommers undermines the patriarchal Victorian doctrine of “separate spheres” when she neglects her womanly duties and instead moves through a male-dominated public space wholly undeterred by men’s disapproval.

However, despite her small rebellions and subversions, the male gaze—and indeed male dominance—remains omnipresent in Mrs. Sommers’s world. Mrs. Sommers’s name—inherited from her husband—dictates her class position in society. The reader learns early on in the text that Mrs. Sommers had enjoyed a higher social standing before “she had ever thought of being Mrs. Sommers.” Despite dedicating the day to herself and her own needs and wants, Mrs. Sommers’s first name is never revealed, reminding the reader that she remains defined by her husband’s class position, her marital status, and, in turn, her marital obligations. Mrs. Sommers’s sojourn into the “male sphere” might represent the growing freedoms women experienced in the late nineteenth-century, but the fact that she has to return home at the story’s close, with no material improvement to her life, serves as a reminder that women were still largely restricted by traditional gender roles. The omnipresence of the male gaze—evident in the story through the men who literally watch Mrs. Sommers as she goes about her business—reveals the pervasiveness of patriarchal control within women’s lives.

Although Mrs. Sommers is described as “little” three times throughout the text—an adjective used to depict her as weak, feminine, and timid—through small acts of defiance, she is able to challenge others’ perceptions of her. By commanding the male clerk, bewildering the cable car voyeur, and ignoring her familial duties, Mrs. Sommers tries to avert the male gaze and reject society’s expectations of her. In a way, the actions of Mrs. Sommers, who ventures out into the public sphere and takes control of her own story for perhaps the first time in her life, mirrors that of Chopin herself, who had to endure the harsh ridicule of public life, in an unequivocally male dominated industry, in order to pursue her own ambitions. The fact that Mrs. Sommers has to eschew men’s judgment and suspicion in the first place, however, illustrates the extent to which nineteenth-century women were restricted in society.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS

The beautiful and delicate pair of silk stockings that Mrs. Sommers finds while shopping carry several levels of symbolic significance. In one sense, the stockings symbolize Mrs. Sommers's repressed desires—the desire to feel beautiful, the desire to belong, and the desire to escape her miserable and mundane existence. Mrs. Sommers often envies “the well-dressed multitude” from a distance, longing for the luxury she was accustomed to before her marriage. The purchase of the stockings is her first step towards reclaiming the lifestyle she has lost, and gaining self-assurance once more. Before her shopping trip, Mrs. Sommers is a depleted woman, worn-out from tending selflessly and tirelessly to her family. The silk stockings (and the purchases that follow) replenish her femininity. Her womanhood is disentangled from her role as a mother, for perhaps the very first time in years, and she is able to enjoy indulging in all things feminine, pretty, and womanly. Further, the silk stockings represent an awakening of repressed female sexuality. Mrs. Sommers's sexual desire is implied repeatedly in relation to the silk stockings, which are described with sensuous language. Through her heroine, Chopin reveals the subjugation experienced by nineteenth-century women, who were paradoxically expected to be pure, pious, and virtuous, while simultaneously subservient to their husband's every sexual want. The silk stockings present Mrs. Sommers with the opportunity to pursue her own desires, rather than those of society or her husband, and value her happiness and pleasure with the highest importance.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* published in 1976.

## A Pair of Silk Stockings Quotes

☞ It seemed to her a very large amount of money, and the way in which it stuffed and bulged her worn old *porte-monnaie* gave her a feeling of importance such as she had not enjoyed for years.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 262

## Explanation and Analysis

At the opening of “A Pair of Silk Stockings,” Mrs. Sommers acquires fifteen dollars. No explanation is given as to how she earned or received the small windfall, but it is apparent that for impoverished Mrs. Sommers, the money is a pleasant surprise. Fifteen dollars was not a huge sum, even in the 1890s, but for humble Mrs. Sommers, it becomes a source of pride and self-worth. The juxtaposition between the fifteen dollars and her shabby coin purse presents the money as a shining treasure, completely out of place in the poor woman's bag. The fact that Mrs. Sommers had enjoyed the “feeling of importance” years before suggests that she may have been accustomed to wealth in the past. Readers learn later that this is in fact the case, and that Mrs. Sommers experienced a demotion in social status when marrying her husband.

The use of the French *porte-monnaie* reflects Kate Chopin's bilingual background, born to her Irish father and French mother in St. Louis, Missouri. Chopin often used French phrases or expressions in her fiction, probably as a way of more accurately capturing the dialect of the people and communities she wanted to represent. She spent much of her adult life in Natchitoches, a largely French-speaking region in Louisiana.

☞ For a day or two she walked about apparently in a dreamy state, but really absorbed in speculation and calculation. She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 262

## Explanation and Analysis

Upon acquiring the fifteen dollars, Mrs. Sommers is immediately consumed with the task of deciding how to spend the money. Curiously, despite her careful planning, she never reflects on the possibility of saving the money. This quote reveals the extent to which Mrs. Sommers is misunderstood, a notion that is reflected throughout the rest of the story. She appears to walk around in a dream-like

state—a romantic and fanciful woman preoccupied with shopping—but in reality, she is deliberate and meticulous. This undermines nineteenth-century gender stereotypes that assumed men were rational and reasonable, while women were silly, frivolous, and emotional. Chopin foreshadows Mrs. Sommers's later digression from her original plan when she alludes to the careful measures that Mrs. Sommers must take in order to avoid later regrets. However, it is not implied anywhere later in the story that Mrs. Sommers does actually regret her splurge, suggesting that she is permitted the rare opportunity to take a break from her usual diligence to enjoy a guilt-free afternoon of selfish indulgence.

☞ The neighbors sometimes talked of certain “better days” that little Mrs. Sommers had known before she had ever thought of being Mrs. Sommers. She herself indulged in no such morbid retrospection. She had no time—no second of time to devote to the past.

**Related Characters:** The Neighbors , Mr. Sommers, Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 262

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote, near the beginning of the story, suggests that Mrs. Sommers had experienced wealth and a higher-class status before her marriage, probably in her childhood. Despite her neighbors' rumoring and gossip, Mrs. Sommers stoically faces her present challenges without dwelling on the past. For Mrs. Sommers, to do so would be to indulge in “morbid retrospection.” That is, to acknowledge the realities of her present situation would be unproductive, but also a dreadful reminder of what she has lost. Mrs. Sommers cannot afford frivolous distractions because is wholly consumed by her domestic duties.

☞ A vision of the future like some dim, gaunt monster sometimes appalled her, but luckily to-morrow never comes.

**Related Characters:** The Neighbors , Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 262

### Explanation and Analysis

Following the description of her gossiping neighbors, readers learn briefly of Mrs. Sommers's innermost fears. Mrs. Sommers's future is bleak; she is poor, exhausted, and destined for a difficult life serving her family. In this simile, the future takes the form of an appalling and haggard monster, perhaps representing a life of hunger or starvation for her and her destitute family. For this reason, Mrs. Sommers tries to suppress her worries about the future instead focusing her energy on getting through each day. Usually the phrase “to-morrow never comes” conveys a message about harnessing the present, because if tasks are constantly put off for tomorrow, they will inevitably not get done (when “tomorrow” arrives, it will be “today”). Here this expression is inverted—for Mrs. Sommers, it is fortunate that the “dim, gaunt monster” never arrives to reckon with her. The monster is a manifestation of her fears, and so long as she keeps herself busy, she keeps her dread at bay.

☞ She went on feeling the soft, sheeny luxurious things—with both hands now, holding them up to see them glisten, and to feel them glide serpent-like through her fingers.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 263

### Explanation and Analysis

This moment is the climax of Chopin's short story; exhausted, hungry and depleted, Mrs. Sommers happens upon an expensive and luxurious pair of silk stockings. Unleashing her long-buried desires, the fortuitous encounter is the catalyst for Mrs. Sommers's afternoon of consumption and indulgence. The imagery here compares the stockings to a serpent. Like Satan in the Bible's creation story, which too takes the form of a serpent, the stockings represent a sinful temptation placed in Mrs. Sommers's path in order to test her loyalty and devotion. Rather than betraying God, however, Mrs. Sommers's disloyalty is to those patriarchal expectations that restrict her life to one of devotion to her domestic tasks. Chopin seems to encourage Mrs. Sommers's digression, presenting it as a sexual awakening that the depleted woman both needs and

deserves. The passage is saturated with rich, sensuous language: “soft,” “sheeny,” “luxurious,” “glisten,” “glide.” The sibilance reflects the hiss of figurative serpent that successfully lures and seduces Mrs. Sommers until she gives in to the delightful prospect of tending to herself for once.

●● She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 264

### Explanation and Analysis

After purchasing the stockings, Mrs. Sommers feels another rush of longing and a desperate need to sustain the feeling of pleasure that she is experiencing. The stockings have not only aroused her desires, but have also awakened the old Mrs. Sommers—an identity that perished with her marriage to Mr. Sommers. The “mechanical impulse” that guides her is presented as a natural process, one that is usually superseded by her meticulous reasoning faculties but is now able to function freely. This places Mrs. Sommers in a position safe from blame because it is not her rational, thinking brain that is controlling her actions, but an unchecked inner mechanism that frees Mrs. Sommers from the confines of her ordinary life. She feels self-worth, she is liberated from “responsibility,” and she has the confidence to make decisions for herself. The abandon she feels symbolizes emancipation from the figurative domestic shackles that restrict her daily life. Of course, Mrs. Sommers is not truly liberated; she is merely lured by the deceitful promises of consumerism to enjoy a delightful but expensive afternoon of self-indulgence.

●● Her foot and ankle looked very pretty. She could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself.

**Related Characters:** The Clerk, Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 264

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Sommers finds a quiet spot in the store to put on her new stockings, just minutes after buying them. She moves towards the shoe department, where the combination of her expensive stockings and her shabby clothes confuses the clerk working there. When she looks down at her foot, freshly clad in leather boots and the silk stockings, she is unable to recognize her own body. Mrs. Sommers, normally depleted in both energy and femininity, has such low self-worth that she cannot believe that *she* is capable of looking “pretty.” She experiences dissociation with her body, admiring her foot and ankle without acknowledging her own beauty. It is likely that Chopin wanted to shed light on the extent to which women are reduced to their bodies and valued for their appearances above all else. Mrs. Sommers has low self-worth precisely because she doesn’t like the way she looks. Later on, her entire bearing improves when she walks down the street in her new clothes, suggesting that they have boosted her confidence. Chopin reveals, however, the shallow and transitory nature of this supposed empowerment because Mrs. Sommers never finds a secure sense of belonging; instead, she gains a type of self-confidence wholly dependent on the approval of others.

●● She was hungry.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 265

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Sommers realizes that she is hungry when she eventually leaves the department store. Indeed, she began her shopping trip faint and famished and has still not eaten. However, her hunger here also refers to her newly awakened and insatiable appetite for more—more spending, more indulgence, more consumption. Chopin illustrates the dissatisfying nature of American consumer culture when revealing how Mrs. Sommers’s “cravings” grow, rather than lessen, as her shopping spree unfolds. Each delightful purchase is followed by a feeling of emptiness or dissatisfaction that can only be replaced by yet more purchases. Mrs. Sommers will never find happiness through shopping because what she really desires is belonging, agency, and freedom.

●● The play was over, the music ceased, the crowd filed out. It was like a dream ended.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 266

### Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Sommers's final purchase is a trip to the theater. The play becomes a microcosm for Mrs. Sommers's life and her place in society because she is subject to the scrutiny of the shallow women in the audience, who ultimately accept her into their social set just because she is well dressed, but maintain the power to reject Mrs. Sommers, should her performance not be convincing enough. The end of the play symbolizes the end of Mrs. Sommers's adventure. It becomes obvious that through the course of the day, not just the duration of the play, disbelief has been suspended for Mrs. Sommers in order for her to live out her fantasy. As the stage curtains fall, Mrs. Sommers's "dream" also comes to an end; it is time for her to return to her normal, mundane life without the fifteen dollars she began the day with.

●● [...] a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever.

**Related Characters:** The Man on the Cable Car, Mrs. Sommers

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 266

### Explanation and Analysis

During her journey home, Mrs. Sommers is observed by a man "with keen eyes" who tries to determine what kind of woman she is. The narrator reveals that he is unable to decipher anything about Mrs. Sommers—who wears a peculiar combination of extravagant and shabby clothing—a woman preoccupied with a secret wish to avoid her return home. Mrs. Sommers longs for her journey in the cable car to "go on and on with her forever" because she desperately wants her day of luxury and self-fulfillment to continue. She fears the return to her domestic chores, and perhaps the repercussions she will face from her husband for her imprudent spending. Perhaps she feels guilty for failing to buy the much-needed items for her children, or perhaps she is only concerned with the project of keeping her fantasy alive a little while longer. Either way, the message of Chopin's story is clear: women are restricted within the oppressive confines of the domestic sphere and deserve more joy, purpose, and gratification in their lives.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## A PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS

For reasons not revealed, Mrs. Sommers finds herself in possession of fifteen dollars. For poor, “little Mrs. Sommers,” this seems like a large sum of money, and she enjoys the delightful “feeling of importance” that it grants her—a feeling that “she ha[s] not enjoyed for years.”

Mrs. Sommers is completely consumed by the question of how to spend her small windfall. “She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret”; instead, she wants to spend her money wisely and lies awake at night making “calculat[ion]s.” Eventually, she settles upon her final shopping list, devoted entirely to items for her children, Janie, Mag, and the boys. She plans to find enough bargains to stretch the fifteen dollars as far as she can, enabling her to buy a gown, new shoes, shirt waists, stockings, caps and sailor-hats, all for her children. Mrs. Sommers is excited by the idea of saving herself some darning, patching, and mending, and she delights at the thought of seeing her children adorned in quality clothes for “once in their lives.”

The neighbors like to gossip about Mrs. Sommers’s past—back when she enjoyed “better days,” prior to getting married to Mr. Sommers. Mrs. Sommers, however, does not like to think of the past, or indeed of the future, and instead dedicates all her time and energy to completing her duties as best she can.

*The opening reveals that Mrs. Sommers is of central importance to this story. There is no account of place or time, or even an explanation of where she got the money—instead, the story is squarely focused on her thoughts and feelings. At first glance, Mrs. Sommers seems shallow, as she is preoccupied with money and self-importance. However, the admission that she is a woman of little means who has not felt significant or meaningful for many years paints her as a sympathetic character.*



*Mrs. Sommers seems like a modest and sensible woman; she is dedicated to her family and longs to provide the best for her children. She is clearly quite stretched by her chores and duties because she is thrilled by the idea of reducing her workload a little. Accomplished in all the feminine skills necessary for the successful running of a household, and selflessly committed to the needs of her family above her own, Mrs. Sommers perfectly embodies the late nineteenth-century social vision of working-class domesticity.*



*Mrs. Sommers’s distaste for thinking about the past suggests that she doesn’t want to think about the loss that she has endured. By suggesting that Mrs. Sommers has had to sacrifice the access she once had to a plush life, Chopin highlights the precariousness of women’s lives in the late nineteenth-century. Women rarely inherited family wealth, and were often pressured into unhappy marriages in order to secure their futures.*



Mrs. Sommers is usually a skillful and tenacious shopper, able to “elbow her way” through stores and find the best sales. Today, however, she is faint when she arrives at the department store to begin her shopping trip. During the busy morning of chores and caring for her children, she has forgotten to eat, leaving her feeble and fatigued. Regardless, she attempts “to gather strength and courage to charge through an eager multitude that was besieging breast-works of shirting and figured lawn.”

As she braces herself to begin shopping, Mrs. Sommers accidentally brushes her hand against **a pair of silk stockings**. Although the stockings are on sale (marked down from \$2.50 to \$1.98), they are still beyond Mrs. Sommers’s strict budget. However, as she feels the stockings “glide serpent-like through her fingers,” two “hectic blotches” rise to her cheeks, and she quickly purchases a black pair of stockings in her size from the shop assistant.

Instead of visiting the “bargain counter,” Mrs. Sommers promptly goes to the dressing room to put on her new **silk stockings**. As she does so, she experiences a strange, exciting sensation. For the first time, perhaps in years, she escapes from the burden of thinking, planning, or serving others. Instead of “reasoning with herself” or trying to discern why she had decided to buy the stockings, she simply swaps her old cotton stockings for her beautiful new ones and then relaxes in a cushioned chair, enjoying the feeling of silk on her skin.

*The beginning of the shopping trip reveals the extent to which married life is taking its toll on Mrs. Sommers. She is a depleted woman, exhausted by the emotional and physical demands of motherhood and family life. Meanwhile, the militarized language likens Mrs. Sommers and her forthcoming shopping trip to a soldier preparing for battle. Mrs. Sommers approaches bargain hunting as if it were an exhausting fight; it requires methodical planning, strategy, and great mental and physical strength. For poor women like Mrs. Sommers, budget constraints make these extreme measures necessary.*



*This climactic moment symbolizes an important shift in Mrs. Sommers as she begins to escape from the confines of her ordinary life. This turning point also marks a sort of sensual awakening of Mrs. Sommers’s innermost desires. Despite her better judgment, she cannot resist the beauty of the stockings and eventually gives into temptation. The simile here, likening the stockings to a serpent, is a stark allusion to the account of original sin in the Bible’s creation story, whereby a serpent entices Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in Eden. Unlike Eve, however, who is punished and shamed for her deviance, Chopin seems to reward Mrs. Sommers by presenting the stockings as the key to unlocking her long-repressed desires. Modest, humble, virtuous Mrs. Sommers experiences an exciting rush of desire, embodied by the feverish blush adorning her cheeks. The sensuous language surrounding the stockings connotes female sexuality, a concept that nineteenth-century society rejected as offensive and immoral. By permitting Mrs. Sommers to give into temptation, Chopin counters this prevalent belief and suggests that women can –and should– embrace pleasure and value their own wants and needs above those of their husbands.*



*Mrs. Sommers’s unorthodox behavior—of impatiently changing her stockings right then and there in the store—illustrates her newfound craving for self-gratification. In an extension of the serpent imagery connected with the silk stockings, here Mrs. Sommers peels off her old stockings, as if shedding the skin of her old identity. Her transformation is complete when she puts on her new silk stockings. The simple act of taking a moment to relax in a comfortable chair symbolizes how she is now motivated not by the needs and expectations of others, but by her own pleasure.*



Stuffing her old stockings in her bag, Mrs. Sommers makes a beeline for the shoe department. The clerk there is surprised by the combination of her luxurious **silk stockings** and otherwise shabby appearance, but Mrs. Sommers is in a good mood, and is immune to his judgment. She begins to instruct him in a “fastidious” manner, bossing him around until she finds the perfect pair of “polished, pointed-tipped boots.” When looking at her freshly clad feet, she finds it hard to believe that they are hers, but admires their beauty nonetheless. The boots are pricier than what she is usually willing to pay for shoes, but “she did not mind the difference [...] as long as she got what she desired.”

Mrs. Sommers then thinks of how long it’s been since she’s purchased new gloves, and promptly visits the glove counter to be fitted for a new pair. After, she wanders to a magazine stand down the block. She purchases two expensive magazines, “such as she had been accustomed to read in the days when she had been accustomed to other pleasant things.” Mrs. Sommers then carries her unwrapped magazines in her arms and hikes up her skirt as she crosses the street. Her purchases make her feel like she is a member of the “well-dressed multitude.”

Having not eaten since her bout of faintness earlier in the day, Mrs. Sommers feels incredibly hungry all of a sudden. Under normal circumstances, she would usually ignore her hunger until she got home and then scrape together a meal from what food she had on hand, “But the impulse that was guiding her would not suffer her to entertain any such thought.” She spots a restaurant that she has never entered, but often admired from the outside. She feels uncertain about entering the restaurant and fears the exclusion or ridicule she might face from the fashionable clientele inside, but her entrance goes unnoticed.

Once seated at her own table, Mrs. Sommers claims to “not want a profusion,” but nonetheless orders a fine feast. Following her oysters and lamp chop, she orders dessert, wine, and a coffee, all the while flipping idly through one of her new magazines. She finds the food and atmosphere to be “very agreeable” and enjoys the feeling of her **silk stockings** on her toes. When Mrs. Sommers leaves a tip for her attentive waiter, he bows to her as if she were some splendid member of the royal family.

*Mrs. Sommers enjoys a newfound sense of self-confidence as she exerts the authority afforded to her through her spending power over the clerk. However, the fact that she still finds it difficult to recognize her own beauty—having trouble believing that her fashionably clad feet truly belong to her—reveals her low self-worth. In this passage, Chopin interrogates the seductive appeal of consumerism, which promises women a certain brand of femininity, self-expression, and social esteem, if they can only keep up with the latest fashion trends.*



*The deceptive and dissatisfying nature of American consumerism is revealed when it becomes clear that Mrs. Sommers is not finding lasting happiness in her purchases. Instead, she has been lured into parting with her precious dollars by the fleeting thrill she receives with each purchase. Further, it becomes clear that Mrs. Sommers carries her magazines without wrappings and hikes up her skirt to reveal her boots and stockings so that everyone can see her luxurious purchases; this suggests that approval and acceptance are motivating factors behind her imprudent behavior. Note that she does not seek approval from men, but is rather more concerned with fitting in with fashionable women and, more broadly, the social class of the “well-dressed multitude.”*



*The image of Mrs. Sommers outside of the restaurant, looking in, is a poignant reminder of her position as an outsider. Mrs. Sommers longs to belong to the fashionable middle class but has not recently had the means—or the confidence—to enter their glamorous world. However, her external transformation, and the growing self-assurance it has brought her, culminates in her bold decision to enter the restaurant.*



*Mrs. Sommers’s excessive and leisurely lunch is a far cry from her ordinary, modest, and busy life, and she savors every moment of it. The allusion to the royal family suggests that Mrs. Sommers feels acknowledged and admired. However, her newfound social acceptance is conditional; as she orders dish after dish at the restaurant, readers are reminded that her budget must surely soon reach its limits, and that her performance is unsustainable.*



Mrs. Sommers has enough money for one last splurge. She spots a poster advertising a matinee and, succumbing to this latest “temptation,” she heads straight for the theater. Once inside, she is asked to take her seat beside a group of fashionable ladies, “who [have] gone there to kill time and eat candy and display their gaudy attire.” Among those in the audience, there is no one quite like Mrs. Sommers, who relishes every moment of the experience in a state of complete awe. An ostentatious woman dressed in “gaudy” clothes shares her candy with Mrs. Sommers as they chat, laugh, and weep together during the show.

As the play ends, Mrs. Sommers feels as if “a dream ended.” She files out of the theater and walks alone towards a cable car. A man watches Mrs. Sommers, observing her paleness, her figure, and her clothes. The man on the cable car is puzzled by Mrs. Sommers and is unable to draw any conclusions about her. Meanwhile, Mrs. Sommers longs desperately for the cable car to “go on and on with her forever” instead of pausing at its scheduled stops.

*Mrs. Sommers's new class signifiers—her magazines, clothes, and presence in the theater—have bought her social capital. It is clear that the well-dressed women have assumed that Mrs. Sommers belongs to their social set, but that her acceptance hangs precariously on her outer appearance and behavior. Chopin exposes the absurdity of American consumerism, and the superficiality of the social class system, when Mrs. Sommers (a poor, working-class nobody), is able to rub shoulders with the wealthy and fashionable without them realizing her true identity. Had this been an ordinary day for Mrs. Sommers, she would have presumably faced judgment and rejection from the very same woman who now shares her sweets with Mrs. Sommers. Although Mrs. Sommers enjoys her theater experience with the women, her sense of belonging is ultimately an illusion.*



*The cable car voyeur tries desperately to understand Mrs. Sommers, reducing her to her body and exterior appearance. Mrs. Sommers pays no notice of him, however, as she is far busier dreading her inevitable return home. She will shortly be required to resume her household duties and devote herself once more to her exhausting responsibilities, a life that is perhaps no longer enough for her after her day of luxury.*





## HOW TO CITE

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