

ANALYSIS

“The Storm” (1898)

Kate Chopin

(1850-1904)

“Sex is never comic in Kate Chopin’s writings. In ‘The Storm’ it is so elated and ‘happy,’ so full of joy that we are reminded of the *Song of Solomon*, which it parallels also in its use of the lily and the pomegranate. The story leaves aside all suspense of plot; while Clarisse in ‘At the Cadian Ball’ plays with Alcee before she catches him, Calixta shows her no ‘guile or trickery.’ The author concentrates instead on the delights of [sex]. There is nothing to hide in this naked pleasure, she seems to say as she discards the bird and the idealized representation... Surpassing that ‘courage...of our perceptions’ which Henry James had observed in the Frenchman, Mrs. Chopin turned to the matter at hand without circumlocutions. Particularly the love-making scene is an example of her courage to treat the forbidden and of her stylistic daring in describing it with the unreserved directness and supreme authenticity of truth.

Sex in this story is a force as strong, inevitable, and natural as the Louisiana storm which ignites it. Given the opportunity, imperative Eros will, for better or for worse, take a hand in the shaping of our lives. This lends a serious undertone to the tale even though it is lightly told. Kate Chopin neither ridicules nor condemns Alcee and his two women. She is a detached observer who nowhere raises a moral finger, not even where Alcee tries to make his wife stay away so that the affair he seems to plan can have free play. We might even say that the author suggests that the effects of his visit are beneficial to all: Bobinot and Bibi gain as Calixta becomes more amiable; Clarisse feels a greater sense of freedom, and the two lovers are for the first time fully sexually awakened. But the conclusion that ‘every one was happy’ is of course ambiguous. Mrs. Chopin may refuse to sit in judgment on morals, but she covers only one day and one storm and does not exclude the possibility of later misery. The emphasis is on the momentary joy of the amoral cosmic force, but the story’s all-pervasive use of primordial symbolism strengthens the undertone of the serious, timeless aspect of Eros.

‘The Storm’ is about the tension between the male and the female, the assertive and the receptive principles. The immobile land is threatened by the active river; the fields are exposed to rain and wind, as they are to the lightning which strikes through the intermediary of the tall trees. There is a constant play on the actions of opening or closing: Calixta unfastens ‘her white sacque at the throat’ as she begins to shut the house; after riding in at the gate, Alcee tries to stay outside on the gallery, but is forced in by the storm; the rain threatens ‘to break an entrance and deluge them’; the heroine tries to keep the water out, and she is also afraid that the levee will give way. When we first see her, she is sewing—a popular metaphor of sexual intercourse. In connection with Alcee we are presented with such male symbols as the horse and the plow; another perfectly natural, yet very suggestive detail is the fact that the one piece of garment which he helps save from the rain is the trousers of the man whose privileges he shortly usurps. As for Calixta, her mouth is ‘a fountain of delight’ and her flesh ‘a creamy lily’ that is influenced by the sun.

The story’s diction is mostly fresh and honest; for example, Calixta is allowed to show ‘sensuous desire.’ But occasionally we find an excessive, old-fashioned, or stale phrase, such as ‘creamy lily,’ ‘well nigh,’ or ‘lips to be tasted.’ Alcee’s rather formal remark: ‘Let us hope, Calixta, that Bobinot’s got sense enough to come in out of a cyclone,’ may be functional, however, as an expression of how he tries to contain himself; and if we find a romantic ring in ‘swoon,’ we must add that D. H. Lawrence used the term, too, in connection with the same fundamental drives which, as Mrs. Chopin expresses it here, ‘contribute... to the undying life of the world.’

Though the story in one sense if Calixta’s (she is nearly all the time in the foreground), it seems, with its Whitmanesque pervasive erotic atmosphere, dedicated to nature’s underlying urge rather than to any person. All details are suggestive of this central impulse. There is complete correspondence between theme, on the one hand, and setting, plot, and character, on the other. The elements of this piece are inextricably

fused as the tale moves relentlessly forward, in one sustained, effortless sweep, toward the inescapable outcome of the cyclone. With a minimum of characterization this highly effective story gives a convincing picture of the figures—at once representative and individual—who are influenced by the storm. The tone greatly contributes to the artistic impact: detached and un sentimental, yet warm...

Artistically, 'The Storm' is a first-rate story. It is important also for its daring. The frankness about sex of such books as *Madame Bovary* and *Nana* was of course slowly having an impact even on American fiction. But with this tale, Kate Chopin not only outdistanced her compatriots, but also went a step beyond the Frenchmen. That her description of physical union is more open than theirs is a relatively minor point in this connection; what is important is its 'happy,' 'healthy' quality.

Flaubert, who once owned that he had been obsessed by the word 'adultery,' makes Emma Bovary's amatory exploits into a frantic flight from dreariness; Zola sees those of *Nana* as the vile expressions of a degenerating heroine. Kate Chopin was not interested in the immoral in itself, but in life as it comes, in what she saw as natural—or certainly inevitable—expressions of universal Eros, inside or outside of marriage. She focuses here on sexuality as such, and to her, it is neither frantic nor base, but as 'healthy' and beautiful as life itself. That 'happy sex' should somehow be 'indecent'—the answer Mary McCarthy gave when asked why she had described sex as 'unhappy' in *The Group*—would be a completely foreign idea to the author of this story. In 'The Storm,' there is exuberance and a cosmic joy and mystery as Alcee and Calixta become one with another and with elemental nature. With its organic quality, its erotic elation, and its frankness, the story almost makes its author an early D. H. Lawrence.

Andre Malraux has observed of Lawrence that he thought it more important to be a man than to be an individual. For Kate Chopin, the individuality of her heroines was more important than their femaleness. But to be a woman writer in her time meant almost the same as Virginia Woolf has said it did for Charlotte Bronte, that is, to be unable to avoid the 'jerks' of a female 'at war with her lot.' When the author of *Jane Eyre* complains that 'women...suffer from too rigid a restraint,' it represents an indignation which prevents her from getting 'her genius expressed whole and entire,' Mrs. Woolf goes on. 'It is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex.... One must be woman-manly or man-womanly.' It is particularly fatal for a female 'in any way to speak consciously as a woman.... Anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death.... There must be freedom and there must be peace.'

There is of course a fundamental female protest in *The Awakening*. But though what could be called her feminist stories are so greatly important in Kate Chopin's [canon], they are rather few in number, and the rest of her writings show a detachment on the relationship between the sexes. The man-woman relationship of 'The Storm'—the most intimate possible—is a crucial touchstone for objectivity, and Kate Chopin, who now had, on the one hand, the protest of *The Awakening* off her mind, and, on the other, literary success within her reach, here gives the impression of having achieved true freedom and real peace.

She is not consciously speaking as a woman, but as an individual. Even her previous writings had been free from misandry and from suggestions of either sex being superior to the other. In the present story, there is no trace of the covert bitterness of 'Athenaise,' nor any complaint like Edna's that women learn so little of life. There is no antagonism or competition between Alcee and Calixta, no willful domination in his manner or subservience in hers, even though he is higher up in society than she. In short, Mrs. Chopin appears to have achieved that thing—comparatively rare even today: to become a woman author who could write on the two sexes with a large degree of detachment and objectivity."

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