

A Pair of Silk Stockings

1- 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.

2- “A Pair of Silk Stockings” time and place:

The story takes place in an unnamed city—a city large enough to have a department store, a fashionable restaurant, a theatre, and a cable car—probably in the early 1890s.

3- Characters:

Mrs. Sommers:

Mrs. Sommers is the main character of the short story and the narrator’s focus. She is a character which changes throughout the story, her development being triggered by a very trivial thing, namely a pair of stockings. However, the real reason and motivation behind her selfish shopping spree lays deeper in the psychology of the woman, who is, in fact, disappointed with her life.

Outer characterization

Mrs. Sommers is first depicted physically as being “little” which may refer to both her stature and her age. She is probably a young mother, even if she has several children - “the boys and Janie and Mag”.

Inner characterization

Mrs. Sommers’ inner characterization is made both directly by the narrator, who has access to the woman’s thoughts and perspective, but also indirectly through the way the woman acts.

Initially, Mrs. Sommers is depicted as gaining a “feeling of importance” after coming into the possession of a sum of money. However, she is also judicious and economical, trying to find the best possible way to spend her money and invest in necessary, practical things:

Episodic Characters

The story features several episodic characters, three shop sellers, a waiter and a woman sitting next to Mrs. Sommers in the theatre. They are only briefly sketched from the main character’s point of view.

4- Themes:

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.

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.

Women’s desire for self-fulfillment

Using several symbolic elements related to shopping, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” explores the theme of women’s desire for self-fulfillment at the end of the nineteenth century. During that

period, women's liberation movements were still very timid, and traditional roles were still dominant.

Desire for luxury

The desire for luxury is the dominant theme within the big meta-theme of women's self-fulfillment. In the short story, Mrs. Sommers' desires are triggered by accidentally touching a pair of silk stockings, which exert an ecstatic attraction on her, reminding her of better days in her life, when she had no financial concerns.

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.

Importance of appearance: In *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, the theme of appearance plays a significant role in highlighting both personal identity and societal expectations. When Mrs. Sommers puts on the luxurious stockings and new clothes, she begins to feel transformed, not only physically but emotionally. Her enhanced appearance gives her a temporary sense of confidence, dignity, and belonging in a world that usually overlooks women like her. The way others treat her during her afternoon of indulgence reflects how outward appearance influences social status and self-worth. Through her attire, she is able to escape her usual life and experience the illusion of inclusion in a higher social class. This brief transformation underscores how appearance can shape one's experience in society, even if only for a short time. Ultimately, the story critiques how much value society places on external image, especially for women.

5- Realism in "Pair of Silk Stockings":

Everyday Subject Matter

The story centers around Mrs. Sommers, a modest woman who unexpectedly receives fifteen dollars. Her decisions on how to spend the money focus on simple, everyday experiences like shopping and eating.

Psychological Depth

The story explores Mrs. Sommers' inner conflict between selflessness and self-care. Realism emphasizes her emotional and psychological responses rather than presenting her actions as right or wrong.

Class and Social Status

The story highlights the economic constraints Mrs. Sommers faces and how a brief indulgence allows her to feel a sense of dignity and freedom. Her class limits her options and shapes her identity.

Lack of Resolution

The ending is ambiguous. Mrs. Sommers' story closes without a clear outcome, reflecting the Realist tendency to avoid moralizing or neat conclusions.

Style and Language

Chopin's prose is simple and direct, yet rich in sensory detail. Through free indirect discourse, readers experience Mrs. Sommers' thoughts without a first-person narrator. The luxurious imagery of the silk stockings reflects her temporary escape and longing for pleasure.

Feminist Dimension

Though not explicitly a feminist text, the story reflects a woman's desire for personal agency. Mrs. Sommers' choice to indulge, even briefly, offers a subtle critique of the social expectations placed on women.

.Individualism: The story follows Mrs. Sommers, a woman who briefly steps outside of her identity as a self-sacrificing mother to indulge in personal pleasures and self-care. Her impulsive purchase of the silk stockings marks a moment where she prioritizes **herself**—her comfort, her desires, and her identity as an individual—over her usual role as a caretaker.

Here's how individualism appears in the story:

- **Assertion of Personal Desire:** Mrs. Sommers momentarily acts on her own wishes, rather than those of her family. This reflects an inner individualism that resists being defined solely by her role as a mother.
- **A Break from Social Expectations:** The story critiques the rigid roles assigned to women in the late 19th century. By enjoying luxuries meant for herself, Mrs. Sommers challenges the expectations of self-denial and duty that society places on women.
- **Momentary Emancipation:** While her return to reality is inevitable, her day of indulgence is a small act of rebellion—a brief but poignant experience of personal freedom and individual choice.

Social and psychological realism

- Imagine living in opulence for your entire childhood, and then living in poverty for the rest of your life. It would be unthinkable strange, and you would not know how to maintain a balanced life. The short story "A Pair of Silk Stockings" by Kate Chopin tells of a widow named Mrs. Sommers who has lived very comfortably as a child but

in poverty as she grew up. This is an example of realism. This story displays two types of realism: social realism and psychological realism.

- **Social realism** is displayed throughout the entire story. Social realism has to do with society's problems and the individual's life struggles, such as economic difficulties. Mrs. Sommers' life is a perfect example of this: she grows up wealthy, but as an adult, she is poor and widowed. It is human nature to desire money and if someone were poor and suddenly got money, they would want to spend it. When Mrs. Sommers finds fifteen dollars, she remembers her childhood and just wants to live one day like she did as she was growing up.
- She decides to go on a shopping spree like any normal person would if they were in the same predicament as her. Right after Mrs. Sommers finds the money, Chopin writes, "She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret." This quote explains modern day poverty. For someone who is poor, it is very hard to manage the small amount of money that they have. Usually, the way in which people become bankrupt is by recklessly spending their money. This quote shows the thought that she put into spending the money she got. The problem that Mrs.
- Sommers suffers is a typical modern day issue. Another type of realism that is displayed in this story is **psychological realism**. Psychological realism is realism that is displayed through the mind of protagonist of the story. In this case, the protagonist is Mrs. Sommers. This story is omniscient. For example, in the beginning of the story, Chopin writes everything that Mrs. Sommers is thinking. During her shopping spree, she only spends the money for herself when she should have spent it for her entire family. Also, after her shopping spree, she really does not want to go home and wants the day to go on forever. She goes into the cable car in order to get home. She goes into the cable car and "a man with keen eyes, who sat opposite her, seemed to like the study of her small pale face. It puzzled him to decipher what he saw there. In truth, he saw nothing-unless he were wizard enough to detect a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on forever." Here, Kate Chopin delves into Mrs. Sommer's mind. Mrs. Sommer does not want the day to end.
- She loves the fact that she can spend money on whatever she wants. Mrs. Sommer's mindset is a mindset that any person would have. In conclusion, this story combines both social and psychological realism. It describes Mrs. Sommer's personal experience of what a typical modern day person would do, which is psychological. It also focuses on economic and social problems that arise with her. A poor human would naturally want to spend money as soon as they got it, which is exactly what happened to Mrs. Sommers. The challenge is to think about what would be the smartest decision.