

# Sexual standards and restraints of the late 19th century

[Linguistics](#), [English](#)



ENG 111-038N Essay #2. "The Storm." The short story "The Storm" by Kate Chopin is, as its suggests, a brief account of a storm which appears suddenly and brings torrential rain, thunder and lightning to a small town in the American South. The dramatic and powerful features of the storm are described in parallel with an equally dramatic and powerful meeting that occurs between a married woman, Calixta, and a passing gentleman, Alcee, whom she used to know before her marriage some five years before. The storm is a metaphor for passion and adultery, bringing a welcome change to the usual pattern of everyday life. In both structure and content, the story undermines the sexual standards and restraints of the time, resulting in a rather daring critique of respectable married life which celebrates temporary transgression but stops short of undermining the institution of marriage completely. The structure of the story is contained in five clearly numbered sections. The first is a short, descriptive introduction, portraying Calixta's husband Bobinot and four year old son Bibi while the second is a long narrative describing Calixta's adventure with the dashing former admirer who shelters in her house, and ultimately also her bed, while the storm rages all around them. These two sections are emotionally linked, since the little boy is reassured by his father: "Bibi laid his little hand on his father's knee and was not afraid" (Chopin, Section I), while Calixta and Alcee comfort each other physically with passionate embraces. The third section is another short one, showing the father and son returning home, while the last two sections four and five are little more than afterthoughts, showing the wider context of Alcee and Clarisse. This couple are shown enjoying temporary separation from each other, although perhaps for quite different reasons, since it is

noted that Clarisse “ was more than willing to forgo for a while ... their intimate conjugal life.” (Chopin, Section 5) Section two dominates the story, since it is longer than all the other sections together, and there is clearly a focus on the character of Calixta, since her surroundings, and her domestic activities are described in minute detail, as indeed is the romantic encounter with Alcee. The image of Calixta “ at a side window sewing furiously on a sewing machine” (Chopin, Section two) shows her somewhat stressed and under pressure, since she feels too warm, and rushes from one place to the other, gathering up clothing and closing shutters as she suddenly realizes that the storm is approaching. Her lack of awareness of the storm conveys to the reader that she is a victim of circumstance and chance, which suddenly came upon her, rather than someone who goes out looking to betray her husband. There are some indications that both Calixta and Alcee try to abide by the social conventions of the time, since she clutches her husband’s and child’s clothes, as if to cling to her family duties, while he “ expressed an intention to remain outside” (Chopin, Section two). A subtle shift of perspective occurs when Alcee enters the Calixta’s modest house. The narrator describes at this point Calixta’s physical appearance, including her figure, eyes, and hair, and significantly also her “ vivacity” (Chopin, Section two). It is clear that the reader is being invited to see her as Alcee sees her. She appears at the same time innocent and seductive, and very little changed from the time before her marriage. Alcee comes in out of the rain, because the storm is making him wet, and he embraces Calixta, because the storm is making her afraid. The storm is therefore portrayed an arbitrary mechanism which unleashes all kinds of pent up natural passions, but far

from being a terrifying and destructive force, it is joyful and life-affirming: “ They did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms.” (Chopin, Section two). The two experience a stormy spell of human passion, but then gather themselves up again and revert to their previous polite and distant personas. The main story concerning Calixta and her family closes with the return of father and son, with a gift no doubt intended to appease her wrath at the muddy clothing they are wearing. Calixta’s warm welcome and careless attitude to the dirty clothes is a surprise to them, and the moral of the story appears to be that a temporary lapse into “ dirty” conditions, whether in terms of clothing or in terms of sexual behavior, is nothing serious, and nothing to be ashamed of. On the contrary, the little family rejoices together, and this message is reinforced by the letter that Alcee writes to his wife urging her to stay away longer. This story undermines tradition, since its happy ending carries within it a tolerance of wrongdoing, with no blame or punishment to follow, and even a hint that Alcee might be hoping to repeat his brief assignation with Calixta. The two marriages remain affected in only positive ways, and the metaphor of the passing storm shows that everything can return to normal as if nothing untoward has happened. This subversive message undermines traditional standards and hints at a morality which is close to nature, allowing people to step outside their usual restrained lives and experience the dramatic force of love, which is wild and thrilling, like a passing storm.

References Chopin , Kate. “ The Storm.”