Rising Feminist “Storms”:
Female Sexuality and Desire in Kate Chopin’s “The Storm”

In Kate Chopin's time traditional patriarchal notions about women and sexuality deemed sexual passion a negligible, even improper, aspect of women's lives. Yet Chopin boldly addresses a woman's sexual desire in her short story "The Storm." This story shockingly details a torrid extramarital sexual encounter between Calixta and Alcée in the midst of a raging storm. While this story line could have been presented in a traditional light, perhaps as a lesson about the evils of uninhibited female sexuality, Chopin maintains a non-judgmental stance by refraining from moralizing about the sanctity of marriage or impropriety of Calixta's actions. In failing to condemn and even condoning Calixta's actions, as well as acknowledging the existence and depth of sexual desire in women, Chopin imbues "The Storm" with a strong feminist tone and calls the very institution of marriage into question.

The mere presence of Calixta's sexual desire and certainly its marked intensity make this story revolutionary in its feminist statement about female sexuality. Chopin uses the conceit of a thunderstorm to describe the development, peak, and ebbing of passion in the encounter between Calixta and Alcée. At first, Calixta is unaware of the approaching storm, just as her sexual desire might be on an unconscious level; yet, as the storm approaches, Calixta grows warm and damp with perspiration. Chopin deliberately
juxtaposes these two events when she writes that Calixta, "felt very warm . . . she unfastened her white saque at the throat. It began to grow dark and suddenly realizing the situation she got up and hurriedly went about closing windows and doors" (282). The gathering storm serves as a metaphor for Calixta's growing ardor, suggesting that both the tension in the air and the libidinous tension within Calixta are beginning to manifest themselves in a physical sense. The brief description of the brewing storm and the close, humid heat emanating from and surrounding Calixta establish an almost palpable sensuality early in the story.

This conceit of the storm continues throughout much of the story with the storm's crescendo symbolizing a climax in Calixta and Alcée's sexual encounter. At first, the obvious desire between the pair is sublimated into a nervous tension, and the effort to restrain their physical longing for the sake of social mores is paramount. Calixta exclaims, "If this keeps up, Dieu sait if the levees goin' to stan' it," which is symbolically indicative of the growing force of their passion and the weakening of their resistance before that passion. A blinding bolt of lightning breaks the lovers' nervous tension, much as it splits through the air and strikes the chinaberry tree. This violent crash precipitates Calixta and Alcée's first embrace and kiss, and the affair that ensues vividly matches the progress of the raging storm. The storm reaches a crescendo, which Calixta views as a delightful counterpart to their passionate love-making, for, "they did not heed the crashing torrents, and the roar of the elements made her laugh as she lay in his arms" (284). To make the parallel between the storm and Alcée and Calixta's affair particularly evident, Chopin consistently uses this conceit until the end of the encounter, for the thunder fades away during Calixta and Alcée's drowsy reverie following the climax, and
the sun begins to shine as Alcée departs. Chopin's extended metaphor does not serve merely to couch this passionate sexual experience in euphemistic terms that might appeal more to the audience of the time; rather, this conceit reinforces in a lyrical and artful manner the intensity of Calixta and Alcée's love-making. Interspersed in this somewhat coded description of the encounter are quite explicit details about Calixta's body and the sexual experience. Chopin writes for instance, "Now--well, now--her lips seemed in a manner free to be tasted, as well as her round, white throat and her whiter breasts" (284). The candidness of Chopin's language is revolutionary in its own right, for in her time sex was considered outside of the woman's sphere of knowledge or concern. Chopin's words paint a sensual and even titillating scene, and this shocking honesty is a remarkable feminist statement. In being boldly candid about sexual relationships, especially those outside the sanctity of marriage, Chopin appropriates the traditionally male domain of sexual desire. In doing so she affirms the validity of female sexuality and makes an important statement about women's right to know and appreciate their bodies, experience physical pleasure, and celebrate these experiences in honest writings and dialogues.

Not only is Chopin's narrative sexually explicit, but it is also entirely unashamed and unapologetic. The narrator makes no judgment about Calixta's encounter; there is no sense of shame or guilt on Calixta's part for what was considered in Chopin's time a rather monumental sin. Chopin even refuses to make the encounter more acceptable by providing excuses for Calixta's behavior--she does not have an unhappy marriage or an abiding love for Alcée. From the beginning of the story the reader gets a sense of Bobinot's devotion to Calixta, so there is no brutish husband to excuse Calixta's wayward act. Furthermore, Chopin refrains from sentimentalizing about the affair, for Calixta and
Alcée are not star-crossed lovers actualizing their true love for each other. Instead, this is a purely physical experience. Yet, the author's tone and Calixta's thoughts and actions remain entirely unapologetic. Calixta exhibits no proper, ladylike remorse for her actions, nor does she have an excuse sanctioned by society. This expression of sexual passion does not become a moralizing tale about the value or inherentness of female virtue. Thus, Chopin presents a bold, new idea; namely that women experience desire and should be allowed to act upon that desire with selfish intent, just as men have been allowed to do throughout.

Throughout "The Storm" Chopin emphasizes this inversion of traditional gender roles, specifically in terms of sexuality. She removes the familiar language of dominance and submission from the male and female roles in this encounter. Calixta is a willing participant in the sexual relationship, rather than an innocent victimized maiden. Yet, there is an air of innocence about Calixta and this encounter, for it emerges as a celebration of her body and self and a shameless indulgence for her own pleasure. Frequently, Calixta laughs aloud in the story, expressing a playful sense of delight rather than a somber tone of shame and sin. There is an egalitarian quality to this brief engagement, for Calixta is neither deceived nor overpowered. Both she and Alcée initiate and enjoy the experience with no sense of being plagued by guilty consciences afterward.

Chopin plays with this equalizing of gender roles in the diction and symbolic language in her description of this affair. For example, she writes, "The generous abundance of her passion . . . was like a white flame which penetrated and found response in depths of his own sensuous nature that had never yet been reached" (284). Interestingly, Chopin uses the word "penetration" to describe Calixta's actions, though
penetration and the sense of power and control allied with it, are typically associated with
male sexuality. Calixta, however, is the active force in this instance. It is quite remarkable
for the woman to be active in this manner, rather than acted upon in any facet of society
or human experience, and even more so in the realm of sexual relationships. Chopin's
feminist sympathies are thus apparent in Calixta's assumption of traditionally male power
and control.

Not only does Chopin question traditional gender roles and challenge the
repression of female sexuality, she even dares to undermine the institution of marriage.
She writes of Calixta during her sexual encounter with Alcée: "Her firm elastic flesh that
was knowing for the first time its birthright, was like a creamy lily that the sun invites to
contribute its breath and perfume to the undying life of the world" (284). This statement
suggests that Calixta's conjugal life with her husband is less than satisfactory;
Furthermore, in being sexually unsatisfied Calixta is deprived of something inherently
important to her. "Birthright" is a powerful word indicating that women's bodies are as
capable and desiring of physical pleasure as men's are. This is far different from the
traditional idea that the woman's body was the repository for male sexual desire, and that
sex had an entirely procreative purpose for women. These expectations about sex in
marriage are obviously disadvantageous to women, for under these restrictions they
cannot actualize the pleasure that is their "birthright." If Calixta is thus unsatisfied in her
marriage but enjoys this exciting and fulfilling encounter outside of marriage, what is
Chopin saying about marriage itself? Perhaps it is an unnatural arrangement, and one
which limits women's opportunities for fulfillment, not only sexually but implicitly in
other facets of life as well.
That marriage might be an unnatural, forced arrangement is apparent in the final three sections of "The Storm" in which Alcée and Calixta interact with their spouses following the affair. Calixta interacts with Bobinot without shame and there is no obvious interruption in their familial happiness. Indeed, Bobinot and Bibi are happily surprised by Calixta's pleasant demeanor. Perhaps, then, lifelong monogamous sexual relationships are not necessarily the recipe for happiness between partners in relationships. This is also apparent in the letters between Alcée and his wife Clarisse. Alcée encourages Clarisse to stay away, and Clarisse is more than happy to do so. Chopin writes of Clarisse that "the first free breath since her marriage seemed to restore the pleasant liberty of her maiden days. Devoted as she was to her husband, their intimate conjugal life was something which she was more than willing to forego for a while" (286). Freedom and happiness lie, for Clarisse, in escape from marriage. The intensity and expectations of a marital relationship seem to oppress her, for she even breathes more easily away from her husband. Certainly, she cares for her husband, but Chopin is not suggesting that romantic relationships between men and women be entirely abandoned. Rather, she is calling for the rethinking or even abandonment of an institution that has traditionally cultivated patriarchal notions of gender roles, denied women their sexuality, and oppressed them.

Sandra M. Gilbert calls "The Storm" "so revolutionary in its implications that its author never attempted to publish it in her lifetime" (17). The ideas Chopin expresses in this story would certainly have seemed outrageous to her contemporary society and would have been grounds for an almost universal condemnation of Chopin and her work. She daringly celebrates female sexuality and uses this celebration as a feminist assertion about women's equal potentialities and rights to express themselves and experience
pleasure. That "everyone was happy" when the storm passed suggests that revolutionizing traditional concepts of gender and marriage will change everyone's, especially women's, lives for the better.
Works Cited
