

Tactile Pleasures and Female Subjectivity in Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings*

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Abstract: This paper analyzes Kate Chopin's novella *A Pair of Silk Stockings* using a dual perspective of sensory criticism and haptic aesthetics to shift the attention from the usual readings based on themes of consumerism and mother-daughter conflict. The paper proposes that the use of a sensorial lens to investigate the experiences of women in Kate Chopin's literature would enable us to gain a more detailed appreciation of the nature of female subjectivity as portrayed in her writing. Using the concept of embodied perception in a detailed analysis of tactile encounters experienced by the character Mrs. Sommers, this paper attempts to illustrate how tactile pleasures enable her brief moments of embodied agency where she transcends her designated social roles.

Keywords: Kate Chopin; *A Pair of Silk Stockings*; Haptic aesthetics; Sensory criticism; Female subjectivity

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Kate Chopin is recognized as a significant literary voice of late nineteenth-century America, especially in relation to the period's consideration of female sexuality and independence in terms of its socio-cultural constructs. In this respect, the author's short stories written during the 1890s capture the complexities of women's existence in the period when their personal and private desires were subordinated to the demands of the social conventions. One of the most commonly included pieces among Chopin's works is *A Pair of Silk Stockings* (1897), which features a woman named Mrs. Sommers who unexpectedly receives fifteen dollars and decides to spend the money on herself rather than her household.

The story may appear to offer a straightforward account of one day in the life of a woman who is shopping at a store, but it actually contains an extensive discussion about the fleeting character of female subjectivities, material desires, and agency. In the context of an emerging consumerism, the story describes the course of events that occur after Mrs. Sommers purchases herself silk stockings, gloves, and boots, some magazines, enjoys lunch and a film, and eventually goes back to her family duties. The author carefully depicts feelings that accompany putting on luxurious things like silk, leather, and clothes that fit well,

which allows revealing that what the woman experiences in the process of shopping is not just related to the enjoyment and satisfaction of the consumer.

1.2. Research objectives and significance

This study analyzes the work by means of a sensory criticism and tactile aesthetics in an effort to uncover the way in which tactile experience serves as a tool of expressing and claiming one's feminine agency at least momentarily. Instead of reading Mrs. Sommers' shopping trip in terms of consumerism or her departure from maternity, the present research aims to analyze in what ways her interactions with various surfaces and substances help in acquiring some forms of embodied knowledge and resistance.

This study goes on to claim that the intricate description of the sensory experiences in Chopin, and particularly the ones connected with the sense of touch, gives a better context for the analysis of the problems of female independence in the context of an oppressive society. This paper emphasizes the significance of embodied experience as a part of feminist criticism.

The significance of this research method is that it will not only help in uncovering the unnoticed features of the narrative styles of Chopin, but also encourage broad debates regarding the issue of gender, material culture, and sensory culture in the American literature of the 19th century.

1.3. Literature review

The historical interpretation of *A Pair of Silk Stockings* has been undertaken in two main interpretive approaches, namely consumer culture theory and maternal conflict studies. Consumer culture theorists propose that the consumerism of Mrs. Sommers is a metaphor of the complex relationship between women and emerging market culture. According to Seidel, the figure described by Chopin can be seen as the image of a contemporary woman consumer who stands between her desire and responsibility, which enables addressing significant concerns regarding women entering into the sphere of commercial life ^[1]. Likewise, Beer and Nolan depicted the story as a demonstration of the seductive nature of consumer items and question whether they are actually liberating any woman ^[2].

In contrast, maternal conflict studies have also served to examine the narrative. According to Skaggs, Mrs. Sommers has a way of acting that can be interpreted as a rejection of the concept of martyrdom of self in the interest of children ^[3]. In line with that direction, Toth asserted that the story written by Chopin reveals the psychological effects of mothers' duties, and the few instances where women place their needs before those of other people ^[4].

It goes without saying that both interpretive perspectives offer important insights into gender roles and economic challenges described in the story. Nevertheless, neither of them considers sensory experiences significant in constructing a narrative. The study of sensory experience allows us to know more about how people sense and cognize reality via bodily sensation. Classen stated that sensory experience is influenced by multiple social and historical elements and contests the hierarchy wherein vision is prioritized above other modes of perception ^[5]. Besides, Howes also claimed that it would be useful to consider the notion of sensory culture as it helps to reveal the different elements of social experience that were not observed earlier ^[6].

Theories that concern haptic aesthetics and embodied perception are appropriate perspectives with which to examine the story of Chopin. An example is that in the essay on *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Marks offered a discussion of what touch means and knows, where she states that touch has the ability to produce a wide variety of modalities of knowing other than traditional and conventional narratives

in the culture of people ^[7]. Building upon the concept of Merleau-Ponty presented in his *Phenomenology of Perception* ^[8], Marks suggested that touch sense generates knowledge that is opposed to any purely intellectual knowledge.

In this regard, this theoretical framework implies that the physical contact between Mrs. Sommers and fabrics like silk and leather may not just be the decisions of a buyer but can also be examples of how she is violating her social positions via physical sensations.

More recent scholarship has continued to broaden critical approaches to the story. Shen's narratological study ^[9] identifies a "naturalistic covert progression" beneath the surface plot of *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, arguing that Chopin layers environmental and bodily awareness as an undercurrent that enriches the story's thematic complexity beyond what either feminist or consumerist readings alone can account for. Erica Fretwell's *Sensory Experiments* situates Chopin within the broader nineteenth-century American context of psychophysics, demonstrating how the science of sensory experience shaped understandings of feeling, gender, and subjectivity in ways directly relevant to Mrs. Sommers' tactile encounters ^[10]. These studies confirm that a sensory-centered reading of Chopin is both timely and academically well-grounded.

2. Theoretical framework

This paper adopts a multi-disciplinary approach, encompassing sensory studies, haptic aesthetics, and phenomenology of the body in order to interpret the significance of Mrs. Sommers' tactile sensations in Chopin's story. In particular, this paper draws heavily on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, who offers a radical challenge to the mind-body dualism posited by René Descartes. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is inseparable from bodily experience; "the body is our general medium for having a world" ^[8]. This point is crucial when attempting to understand the value of Mrs. Sommers' physical interactions with diverse textures as experiences. Indeed, touch for Merleau-Ponty is a means of gaining knowledge through bodily experience. As such, it indicates that touch may serve as the mode of understanding and agency.

Marks' idea of "haptic aesthetics" offers a further refinement of the analysis of touch within cultural representations. As she argued, the perception of visuality is traditionally associated with optics whereas touch involves "the eye functioning like an organ of touch" ^[7]. In other words, visual perception may involve the same processes that are involved in touching the world. This theory seems highly relevant in the analysis of Chopin's narrative strategy, which allows the reader to experience Mrs. Sommers' tactile experiences thanks to the author's detailed descriptions of sensory impressions.

In general, the research on sensory studies performed by scholars like Constance Classen and David Howes provides a helpful historical and cultural context in the analysis of Mrs. Sommers' experiences with respect to the nineteenth-century view of touch and female feelings. In fact, Classen noted that touch was commonly used to gender the senses and it was traditionally linked to the female experience. As explained by Classen, the connection between touch and femininity can be empowering and also oppressive ^[5]. Considering the historical context of the story written by Chopin, the researcher can better comprehend the meaning of Mrs. Sommers' tactile experiences for both the characters and the readers.

Finally, feminist materialism is also one of the theories that can be applied in this research, implying the application of the works of the theorists who explore how the connection between women and objects might be a form of resistance. With such a point of view it would be able to determine if Mrs. Sommers applies the aforementioned objects not only as a means of consumption but also as a way of resisting the conventional

gender norms. Ostman's recent monograph on Chopin underscores the importance of embodied pleasure and autonomy as recurring preoccupations in the fiction, arguing that Chopin consistently placed women's physical and emotional experience at the center of her literary vision ^[11]. Fox's study of social commentary in women's short fiction further situates Chopin's narrative strategies within a tradition in which domestic constraint and individual desire are rendered through carefully framed moments of everyday life ^[12]. Taken together, these frameworks explain the role of the senses in Chopin in regards to women and provide the theoretical scaffolding for the present analysis.

3. From tactile awakening to social constraint in *A Pair of Silk Stockings*

3.1. The silk stockings as a sensory trigger

The moment when Mrs. Sommers comes across the silk stockings represents a crucial transition from rational analysis of the economy to sensorial experience. Indeed, Chopin describes the transition from the logical perception of items to their sensorial perception with the help of tactile imagery. As Mrs. Sommers claims, "...she grew aware that her hand had encountered something very soothing... she went on feeling the soft, sheeny luxurious things—with both hands now," the stockings themselves become not merely an object for discussion but an item of tactile sensation, as indicated by the words "soft, sheeny" ^[13].

The adjectives highlight the extraordinary quality of touch which cannot be linked to any discomfort or absolute smoothness but rather to some other quality, which is even more delicate. To touch the stockings is an action that is very different than the usual way of touching other objects. According to the author, Mrs. Sommers hates touching anything that could remind her about her role as a provider and caregiver in the family, especially those activities that include darning and mending stockings. Consequently, in the instance under discussion, touch doesn't have any utility whatsoever, but it is used merely for aesthetic reasons.

This moment is important not only because it is a material wish. Silk stockings are like the sensorial prompts, things that induce a more extensive awakening of the physical world. The description by Chopin emphasizes how such physical engagement leads Mrs. Sommers out of the conceptual concerns of duty and economy into the tangible physical sensibility. The stockings have revived her consciousness regarding her body as something other than an implement of domestic work, but rather as a place where she can experience pleasure and have the freedom to act.

This awakening through touch sets the foundation for what follows in the story. The silk stockings are not simply luxury items that Mrs. Sommers normally cannot afford; they are the entry point into another mode of being, in which the sensory becomes a form of knowledge. The tactile experience with silk begins a process of embodied self-discovery that will be carried through her subsequent purchases and experiences throughout the afternoon.

3.2. Constructing the haptic self

The tactile consciousness of Mrs. Sommers awakens with the silk stockings and she starts building something that can be described as a haptic self, an identity generated by intentional sensory experiences that take over her socially imposed roles momentarily. And with every following purchase, an attempt is made to explore how the objects feel on her body, which means that she uses the sense of touch to exercise power and create a new subjectivity.

The gloves play a very significant role in this haptic self-construction. Chopin comments on the fact that Mrs. Sommers selects the gloves with some deliberation, noting that they fit her perfectly, which emphasizes the thoroughness of her decision and the correspondence of the object with the body^[13]. The gloves convert her hands as the instruments of domesticity, such as darning, mending, and scrubbing, into things of aesthetic attention. Enjoying the beauty of her hands in the new gloves is an act of indulgence in a form of bodily self-regard very different in tone to her typical self-effacement as a mother and housekeeper.

This self-fashioning continues in the boots. That the story dwells on the fact that they fit her and felt good when worn indicates that Mrs. Sommers is attempting to recreate her connection with physical space and movement with these objects^[13]. Walking through life is no longer a rushed and directed step-by-step task for her to accomplish, like running an errand, but a source of joy and not a mere means of transport. They permit another type of bodily presence in the public space.

On the dining table, her food extends the haptic reconstruction that occurred in the clothes to the sense of taste and inner bodily sensations. The enjoyment of eating without thinking about the cost or the efficiency of the meal is another form of embodied agency^[13], which is called the nice and tasty bite. In this case, Mrs. Sommers identifies herself, albeit briefly, through the ability of her body to experience pleasure.

All sensory experiences combined allow people to utilize their bodies to form their individual sense of agency by means of their focused efforts on experiencing bodily sensations and enjoyable experiences. Mrs. Sommers is a character who perceives the world through her direct physical sensations and makes decisions based on them rather than conforming to the requirements of her social role or community norms.

3.3. The temporality of haptic freedom

The temporary nature of Mrs. Sommers's sensory awakening reflects a strong division between the physical world and the social structures that limit the female liberty in the 19th century. She obtains tactile sensations by touching the silk leather and high-grade material, which allows her to feel self-realization as these tactile feelings are not part of the household responsibilities that should always be carried out.

Merleau-Ponty establishes through his study of embodied perception that people experience sensory perception during present-time situations, which generate what he defines as "motor intentionality" that people use to connect with their surroundings without any conscious thought^[8]. Mrs. Sommers's afternoon activities embody this concept through her tactile experiences, which lead to her spontaneous decisions that develop without her planned approaches. The silk stockings invite touch in the present moment and the gloves require users to check their fit and feel from the present moment and the restaurant meal serves to satisfy current hunger rather than future need. The sensory experience of time depends on how human bodies operate physically instead of following social requirements.

This bodily experience of time, which individuals feel in their bodies, is an immediate contradiction to what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the structured time that regulates household work since it demands that parents provide a sustained and repeated duration of time necessary to manage childcare, domestic responsibilities, and financial responsibilities^[14]. The social structure that regulates the usual way of life of Mrs. Sommers makes her act in such a way that may benefit her in the future, as she needs to fix her clothes that are supposed to be durable and save money that will be useful when she encounters any emergency, and abandon her present happiness to enable her family to benefit in the future. The narrative illustrates its strength by a careful analysis of her brief hiatus, which is only one afternoon, as it indicates the degree of sensory liberty that people can actually have at such times.

Chopin constructs an obvious time conflict through narrative structure. With the development of the plot, the story no longer stays in the immediate physical sensory experience, but is gradually pulled back into the upcoming family time and maternal responsibility. Especially at the end, Mrs. Sommers reluctantly takes the cable car home. This action not only means the return of space, but also symbolizes her re-entering the social responsibility-oriented daily order from the current moment centered on body perception.

It is worth noting that Mrs. Sommers always appears as an active tactile subject in the first half of the story. Whether touching stockings, trying on gloves, or enjoying food, she actively explores desire and pleasure through her body's perception, and her body gains short-term autonomy and initiative in the process. However, at the end of the cable car scene, she gradually lost this initiative. She no longer actively touches the world, but is mechanically 'transported' back to the family space by the cable car, and the body is also re-transformed from the subject of perception and desire to the object of social norms.

This shift from "active touch" to "passive movement" actually reveals the vulnerability of female subjectivity. Although tactile experience has briefly helped Mrs. Sommers transcend established social identities such as mother and wife, and re-perceive existence as "self," the generation of this subjectivity has never been truly free from the constraints of patriarchal social structure. The cable car finally brings her back to her family responsibilities, which also symbolizes the re-establishment of social norms' control over women's bodies. Therefore, Chopin does not romanticize tactile pleasure into complete liberation, but reveals the transient and unstable nature of women's physical freedom in the real social order.

The short duration of Mrs. Sommers's freedom demonstrates how the nineteenth-century social order restricted women's ability to control their own lives through physical presence.

3.4. Social constraints on sensory liberation

The narrative summarizes that Mrs. Sommers gains actual control via her power to feel objects and derive sensory pleasure. Her physical emancipation from constraints leads to brief emancipation, which does not cause a lasting transformation. The necessity of fulfilling her domestic functions demonstrates that sensory sensations are an opportunity for women to get out of their imposed gender positions. The circumstances of these constraints do not change due to the sensory experiences.

The sensory freedom of Mrs. Sommers in the afternoon is enabled with fifteen dollars and it means both choice and constraint. A feminist critic like Sandra Gilbert would explain that during most of the nineteenth century, women could use their economic agency only under exceptional conditions (e.g., they had an inheritance, gift, or windfall) as opposed to a structural economic self-sufficiency^[15]. Hence, Mrs. Sommers has a short period of empowerment through consumption, which is a manifestation of her weakness. The money appears to come to her almost magically, and the fleetingness of the funds indicates that real agency involves more material resources than just a momentary availability of money through sheer luck.

Also, the social background of the narrative will define in which way Mrs. Sommers' identity was developed within the context of motherhood and domesticity. Although she spends one afternoon on sensory liberation, her identity is still essentially based on her connection with others who are absent (i.e., her children), and the fact that she has temporarily put aside their requirements but has not forgotten them. The recurrent allusions to her typical pre-occupation with tangible needs in the narrative serve as a reminder to the reader that her freedom of touch is in opposition to a sense of obligation that can never be totally abandoned.

The meticulousness with which Chopin focuses on the spatial aspects of Mrs. Sommers' experience also highlights these constraints. Her sensory experiences are located in the public retail environments: department stores, restaurants, theater where they invite her into the role of consumer but do not offer any other space to working women outside of the home as mother and housekeeper. Even with these places of refuge, no one is an actual replacement of the intimate space, where her identity is preserved and will be preserved much more importantly in the future.

The story reveals what feminist theorist Iris Marion Young identifies as a fundamental conflict between bodily individual experience and structural social limitation^[16]. Although Mrs. Sommers is able to achieve some instances of haptic agency, such moments remain restricted by the boundaries of economic status, space, and time. Her turn to freeing herself via her senses reveals the possibility of other varieties of female subjectivities and the societal situations, which prevent these opportunities from being anything other than temporary phenomena. This tension brings to our minds that liberation does not exist in specific acts of embodiment of agency, but can be dependent on a larger system of social change that makes it possible and permanent.

4. Conclusion

The study has shown that Kate Chopin uses tactile perception and sensory experience as a means to create female subjectivity in *A Pair of Silk Stockings*. When Chopin has Mrs. Sommers experience touch in its most physical form, such as the texture of worn cotton, the luscious feel of silk, the snugness of the gloves, and the quality of the boots, she shows touch as more than just a physical feeling, it becomes a manifestation of agency and self-expression. Such haptic scenes put on hold the abstraction of time of motherhood obligation, and bring up a bodily present where the body of Mrs. Sommers is able to break out of its societally assigned functions. Nonetheless, in this sensory emancipation, there is also a tension highlighted by this paper: whereas touch temporarily alters the narrative of womanhood in the nineteenth century, freeing her of economic calculations and maternal responsibility, its authority is fleeting and limited structurally by accident (the fifteen-dollar windfall) and space (in public spaces where there is no alternative domestic identity). The silk stockings thus act as a trigger of embodied freedom and as a representation of its vulnerability in the prevailing social organization.

However, this study also argues that the sense of embodied agency experienced by Mrs. Sommers does not necessarily amount to genuine liberation from the social structures surrounding her. It is important to note that her bodily awakening is always tied to acts of consumption. The pleasures she experiences through the silk stockings, gloves, fine food, and the theatre are all made possible through consumer practices. Her renewed sense of self, therefore, does not emerge from a direct resistance to the existing social order, but rather from a temporarily permitted form of sensory satisfaction within the framework of consumption.

In this sense, consumption becomes not only the medium through which female subjectivity briefly emerges, but also the very structure that limits it. The intimate bodily desires and subjective consciousness of nineteenth-century women could often only find expression through acts of consumption, a fact that reveals the deeper predicament faced by women within capitalist and patriarchal society. Chopin thus does not simply present consumption as a path toward female liberation; instead, she exposes the fragile and temporary nature of women's bodily freedom within modern social structures.

By focusing on sensory experience as a central dimension of female subjectivity, this study offers a new perspective for Chopin studies. It adds a sensory-based interpretation to more traditional readings centered on consumerism and maternal conflict.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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