

Interpreting the Self-Awakening in A Pair of Silk Stockings from a Beauvoir Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Kate Chopin is a distinguished literary figure of the late 19th century, renowned for her profound feminist literary works. Among them, *A Pair of Silk Stockings* stands out as one of her most celebrated short stories. It narrates the tale of Mrs. Sommers, who unexpectedly comes into a small sum of money and embarks on a series of luxurious expenditures, exploring personal desires and self-identity. Chopin delves into the conflicts between family responsibilities and personal aspirations that women of the late 19th century faced, as well as how societal expectations of female roles triggered their deep-seated troubles and struggles. This paper aims to evaluate Mrs. Sommers' psychological journey using the feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, especially the concepts of "the Other," "self-deception," and "women's socialization," to determine whether she achieves genuine self-awakening or remains in a state of being "awakened but not enlightened." By examining the constraints of family and socialization, internal desires versus self-deception, societal positioning and "the Other," along with the awakening of consciousness and the return to reality, this article tries to reveal the complex psychological states and social contradictions Mrs. Sommers navigates between her personal desires and societal expectations. With such a new theoretical perspective, it elucidates the relationship between the protagonist's internal conflicts, identity, and behavioral choices, while further illustrating the living conditions, consumer culture, women's self-realization, and their socio-cultural background at the end of the 19th century.

Keywords: Kate Chopin, Simone de Beauvoir, feminist theory, self-deception, the Other

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1. Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, Kate Chopin emerged as a luminary in the domain of feminist literature, crafting an indelible legacy with her exceptional literary prowess (Wang & Chen 2017). Her narratives incisively navigate the complexities faced by women, audaciously confronting the entrenched gender norms and societal expectations of her time. This bold interrogation of the status quo has established a robust groundwork for the evolution of feminist literature. Among her oeuvre, the short story *A Pair of Silk Stockings* has garnered widespread acclaim, celebrated as a quintessential piece of American literature spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The narrative orbits around Mrs. Sommers, who, upon receiving an unexpected windfall, ventures into a spree of luxury, thereby navigating through the realms of personal gratification, self-identification, and the allure of opulence.

This paper seeks to unravel Mrs. Sommers' psychological journey within the novel, aiming to discern whether she attains genuine self-awakening (Liu 2003) or lingers in a liminal state of being "awakened but not enlightened" (Zhou 2020). To this end, the study will harness the feminist theories articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, notably "self-deception" and "the Other", as lenses to scrutinize Mrs. Sommers' actions. This analysis meticulously evaluates the friction between her individual actions and the societal paradigms, thus introducing a novel theoretical perspective to this discourse. By adopting this analytical framework, the paper endeavors not merely to augment the discourse on feminist literature but also to elucidate the intricate interplay between the protagonist's personal identity and her choices. Concurrently, the content would also extend to the dilemmas entwined with family obligations and personal ambitions that women grappled with at the terminus of the 19th century, alongside an examination of how societal impositions and expectations concerning female roles catalyze their profound adversities and conflicts.

2. Overview of Kate Chopin and Her Work

Kate Chopin's career and personal experiences significantly shaped her writing style and choice of themes. Faced with the early death of her husband, Chopin had to shoulder the burden of raising six children alone and managing the cotton business left by her late husband. These experiences prompted her to deeply explore women's self-awareness, identity rights, and social roles. Her representative works, such as *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, *At Fault*, and *The Awakening*, are characterized by their sharp and bold strokes that portray female characters, probing into their inner worlds, and examining their reflections on self-identity, sexual desires, and their roles in society and family. *The Awakening*, in particular, despite facing harsh criticism at the time of its publication, was re-evaluated and gained significant attention in the 1950s and 1970s, and is now considered an

important text in feminist literature. Chopin's works are not only of high literary value but also have profound significance in exploring female roles, gender equality, and social norms.

A Pair of Silk Stockings, penned by Kate Chopin in 1897, unfurls the tale of Mrs. Sommers, a woman of modest means, who finds herself the unexpected beneficiary of fifteen dollars, leading her down a path of "indulgent" expenditure. Initially resolved to allocate this sum towards her children's attire, her encounter with a pair of silk stockings in a store inadvertently awakens her latent yearnings for self-gratification. Consequently, she diverts the funds towards personal luxuries, acquiring silk stockings, new footwear, gloves, and upscale magazines for herself. This spending spree culminates in a sumptuous lunch at a fine dining establishment and an evening at the theater. These fleeting moments of opulence afford Mrs. Sommers a temporary respite from her quotidian struggles as a financially strapped mother, only for her to confront the inevitability of returning to her domestic realities.

In late 19th-century American society, women were cast in roles of compliance and virtue, with the expectation to prioritize the needs of their family and children above their own. Huang's (2019) *From Submission to Rebellion: Women's Awakening in "Trifles"* examines the emergence of women's self-awareness through the lens of three women's submissiveness and their resistance against male authority in the iconic feminist piece, *Trifles*. This underscores that despite severe social pressures and a deeply ingrained sense of duty, the quest for individual fulfillment and desires persists, awaiting a suitable moment for expression. Chopin adeptly captures the societal expectations levied upon women of that era and portrays Mrs. Sommers' awakening. Adhering initially to societal norms of self-sacrifice and total dedication to familial duties, Mrs. Sommers encounters an unexpected shift with the acquisition of a small sum of money. Opting to purchase silk stockings for herself, this act becomes a symbolic departure from solely conforming to external expectations towards recognizing her personal needs and desires. This gesture signifies the onset of her self-reflective journey, marking a gradual awareness of the tension and internal conflict between her societal roles and personal aspirations.

Numerous scholars have examined the awakening of women's self-awareness in the 19th century from a consumerism perspective, suggesting that Mrs. Sommers experiences an expansion of desire and a spiritual awakening during her consumption process (Zeng 2021). The advent of consumer culture at the end of the 19th century, though brief for Mrs. Sommers, provided her an avenue to momentarily break free from the confines of everyday life. This engagement in consumer behavior not only addressed her material needs but also facilitated a release at a spiritual level. Nonetheless, some scholars contend that this scenario also illustrates the impact and constraints of consumer culture on individuals (Cheng 2005), indicating that while consumption does offer a measure of satisfaction and joy, it fails to meet deeper individual needs for spiritual fulfillment and emotional well-being in the long term (Yang 2009), nor can it alter one's fundamental life circumstances. Zhou (2020) investigates the connection between Mrs. Sommers' consumer actions and her identity perception, considering it from the angle of body and subject identity construction. Zhou notes that Mrs. Sommers' efforts to construct her self-identity by fulfilling physical desires are ultimately limited by the societal norms and patriarchal systems of the 19th century, hindering her ability to achieve genuine self-recognition. Additionally, through narrative analysis and cultural comparison, scholars have studied the various paths and results of women's pursuit of self-fulfillment in *A Pair of Silk Stockings* and other texts, shedding light on the complex process of women's self-awakening in differing cultural contexts.

In conclusion, the collective research of these scholars offers a comprehensive insight into the nuanced socio-cultural themes embedded in Chopin's narratives, encompassing areas like consumerism, feminism, body and subject identity construction, along with narrative and cultural comparative analyses. This body of work enriches our comprehension of the lives of 19th-century women, the consumer culture of their time, their journeys towards self-realization, and the socio-cultural milieu that shaped their experiences. Furthermore, these studies lay a robust theoretical groundwork for this paper, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the living conditions of women in the 19th century and a detailed examination of the conflict between familial duties and personal ambitions that the female protagonist navigates.

3. Beauvoir and Her Feminist Concepts

Simone de Beauvoir (Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir), a distinguished French writer, existentialist philosopher, political activist, and feminist thinker, whose theories have had a profound impact on existentialism, feminism, and feminist theory. In her landmark work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir deeply analyzes the oppressed status of women and introduces groundbreaking insights. This book has become a core document of the feminist movement, making a significant contribution to the global discourse on women's issues.

Beauvoir's concept of "the Other" challenges conventional beliefs, suggesting that feminine traits are not an inherent biological destiny but rather the outcome of societal and cultural constructions. Within this paradigm, women are frequently perceived as "the Other": by men, creating a dichotomy that reinforces the roots of gender inequality both theoretically and institutionally. Additionally, Beauvoir introduces the notion of "self-deception:

as a psychological response in women towards gender roles, wherein women may resort to self-consoling behaviors as a means of mental reprieve. This act of seeking comfort, through an excessive alignment with either one's given circumstances ("facticity") or potentialities ("transcendence"), can lead to a disregard for the underlying issues of gender inequality, culminating in a misinterpretation of their own situation. Furthermore, Beauvoir underscores the significance of socialization in shaping women's behaviors and thoughts, driven by an array of societal values, norms, and expectations. She contends that authentic female self-identification transcends mere adherence to femininity as defined by a patriarchal society; it is founded on acknowledging the liberty of self-definition. Beauvoir's insights offer fresh lenses through which to examine Mrs. Sommers' behaviors and evolving thoughts in *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, illuminating the novel's portrayal of the protagonist's social standing, evolving needs, and the influence of societal and cultural forces on women's roles and actions. Consequently, this enhances our grasp of Mrs. Sommers' journey towards self-awareness, offering a deeper appreciation of her character development and the thematic essence of the story.

4. Mrs. Sommers' Inner Experience and Self-awareness

4.1. Women's Socialization and Family Constraints

In late 19th-century America, even as the feminist movement has gained momentum, many women still remained shackled by traditional economic and educational limitations. Society upheld that women should embody virtues such as piety, chastity, submissiveness, and dedication to homemaking—an essentialist stance asserting that certain groups are predestined to possess specific qualities (Haslam *et al.* 2000). Yet, Beauvoir critically challenges this essentialism, arguing that categorizing humans based strictly on supposed inherent traits, like gender, confines and limits the potential of gender roles. She advocates for individuals to be seen beyond predetermined essences, encouraging self-definition through autonomous choice and awareness (Zhang & Lüe 2011). During this era, numerous female authors articulate a call for women to transcend the conventional confines of being wives and mothers, urging them towards self-awareness and emancipation. Mrs. Sommers' narrative echoes this sentiment; marriage has ingrained in her the reflex of putting her family's needs above her own, progressively diminishing her aspirations for personal freedom and self-expression, ultimately rendering her a martyr to familial and matrimonial expectations (Arnăutu 2014).

At the outset of the narrative, Mrs. Sommers' unexpected acquisition of \$15 signifies more than just a windfall; it heralds a shift in her circumstances, laying the groundwork for her journey of self-discovery and asserting her agency. This serendipitous sum imbues Mrs. Sommers with a newfound sense of significance ("a feeling of importance") catalyzing an internal transformation. She perceives this money not merely as a financial boon but as her contribution to the familial welfare. Beauvoir's theories shed light on how society molds individuals via familial roles, with a pronounced tilt towards anchoring women in domestic and marital spheres. This conditioning nudges women to prioritize familial responsibilities as their life's epicenter. In this instance, Mrs. Sommers embodies the quintessential product of such socialization, her deliberations over the \$15 mirroring a deep-rooted sense of duty and meticulousness. Her so engrossed contemplation on its utilization underscores her unwavering dedication to her family's needs, to the extent of neglecting her own sustenance. Initially resolved to allocate this unexpected fund towards her children's clothing, Mrs. Sommers' decision highlights her maternal self-sacrifice and altruism. Yet, this perspective of altruism is often skewed by male-dominated views, rendering women's contributions within the family less visible. Despite their exhaustive endeavors for the betterment of the family, women frequently find themselves sidelined in decision-making processes, a testament to the entrenched gender disparities within the family structure. This paradigm limits women's explorations beyond domestic confines, further entrenching their subordinate status in gender dynamics.

Within the narrative, Mrs. Sommers' marriage fails to elevate her material circumstances; rather, her standard of living experiences a downturn. Confronted with the fading of these "better days," she harbors no bitterness, steadfastly pouring herself into familial obligations ("She herself indulged in no such morbid retrospection"), mirroring the entrenched norms of female socialization. The narrative characterizes reminiscence of bygone times as "morbid," suggesting that within the societal framework of that era, a woman's yearning for the past was deemed unhealthy or deviant. This portrayal elucidates the patriarchal expectations placed on women: they are to devote themselves entirely to domestic roles. Mrs. Sommers finds herself trapped by the immutable nature of her circumstances, her dissatisfaction magnified by the realization that longing for the past offers no solace or escape. Despite eschewing nostalgia, she is compelled to confront the harsh realities of her existence and a diminishing sense of self.

4.2. The Tendency towards Self-Deception and the Exploration of Inner Desires

In *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, Mrs. Sommers' journey reflects the universal quest for personal fulfillment and the liberation of suppressed desires. The titular silk stockings stand not just as a garment but as a potent symbol of femininity and the pursuit of one's own desires. Mrs. Sommers' "persistence and determination" in acquiring what she desires from the store serves as a metaphor for women's broader pursuit of personal aspirations.

Additionally, Chopin's choice of the word "clutch" to depict Mrs. Sommers' grasp on the coveted item conveys her profound connection to these desires and her longing for inner satisfaction. Drawing on Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the narrative hints at the propensity of women to succumb to self-deception, a tendency rooted in physiological and emotional characteristics. This self-deception, anchored in a fatalistic acceptance of their lot, prevents women from recognizing their actual circumstances or pursuing change (Gu 2023). The luxury that the silk stockings represent for Mrs. Sommers, and their association with female beauty and elegance, exposes a conflict between her aspirational self and the realities of her life, leading her into a trap of self-deception. Her engagement in consumerism, rather than addressing her underlying issues of financial hardship, mundane existence, and low self-esteem through proactive change, emerges as a temporary retreat from her predicament. Her actions, described as driven by a "mechanical impulse," suggest a response more instinctive than deliberate, revealing a deep-seated yearning to prioritize her needs, an endeavor she perceives as self-indulgence rather than an act of self-care. This narrative illustrates the theory that consumption can serve as a fleeting diversion, a means to momentarily escape one's existence and self, in an attempt to fill an emotional void (Stein 2004).

In the narrative, Chopin vividly captures Mrs. Sommers' foray into personal indulgence through the acquisition of silk stockings. She notes, "There were any number of eights-and-a-half. In fact, there were more of that size than any other." This detail subtly highlights Mrs. Sommers' unfamiliarity with such personal luxuries, hinting at a novelty in her experience. Her described "hectic" complexion betrays a mix of nervousness and anticipation, signifying her seldom-experienced privilege of self-pampering, marked by discomfort and timidity uncharacteristic of her usual demeanor. Furthermore, her meticulous examination of the stockings, observing them "very long and closely," alongside her feigned scrutiny of their texture, reveals a deep-seated appreciation and a reluctance to part with the item. This showcases her vanity and heightened self-awareness. Additionally, the act of placing the stockings into her "shabby and old" shopping bag, while lamenting, "What a very small parcel it is!" mirrors her internal conflict and reliance on these items, illustrating a veiled self-deception. Interestingly, this behavior extends beyond mere escape; it serves as a rationalization of her circumstances through consumerism, thereby avoiding a confrontation with her reality. The transformation Mrs. Sommers experiences upon wearing the new stockings—a fleeting sense of luxury and elegance—offers a temporary respite from her internal turmoil and discontent. This episode is a poignant reflection of her engagement in self-deception and her yearning for a semblance of grandeur. It highlights her quest for material pleasure while also touching upon a deeper search for self-identity and fulfillment. Although this interlude does not rectify her underlying struggles or resolve her existential quandaries, it lays bare the intricate emotional landscape and societal pressures that women navigate in their quest for autonomy and self-expression.

4.3. *The Other's Perspective and Consumer Behavior*

Mrs. Sommers' brief indulgence in consumer behavior symbolizes her quest for personal significance and autonomy. Beauvoir contends that within the confines of marriage, women often acquiesce to a "fate" imposed by a male-dominated society, thus becoming objects or "the Other." Such conditions hinder their ability to attain individual worth beyond enhancing their skills, compelling them to adhere to the expectations of men. In *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, Mrs. Sommers' life is characterized as "laborious" and "fatiguing" her existence consumed by the demands of family and marriage. Despite her diligent efforts, she is bound by societal chains, her ability to alter her "fate" seemingly out of reach. This portrayal spotlights the struggle faced by women to navigate societal pressures while striving for self-determination and freedom.

When Mrs. Sommers yields to her appreciation of aesthetics and ventures into a shoe store, the label "fastidious" not only highlights her quest for beauty and self-image but also casts her as the Other, subject to the discerning eyes of society. Moreover, this characterization sets her apart from the traditional expectation that women should prioritize family and daily responsibilities over their own desires. Women, often held to societal beauty standards, find Mrs. Sommers' meticulous approach to selecting shoes reflective of this pressure. Her keen interest in the texture and aesthetics of the stockings and shoes, alongside her specific standards for personal attire, inadvertently positions her for objectification. Conversely, conventional norms suggest that women's primary focus should be on family and home, relegating their personal appearance to a secondary concern. This dynamic becomes evident as Mrs. Sommers momentarily overlooks the existence of her feet and ankles, symbolizing her habitual prioritization of familial needs over her own. Her disregard for price, deviating from her characteristic prudence, reveals how the allure of consumer indulgence temporarily obscures her customary lifestyle. In this moment of personal indulgence, Mrs. Sommers faces the immense responsibilities she bears for her family, along with a profound longing for autonomy and validation of her worth, marking a fleeting departure from her conventional roles. Furthermore, the depiction of glove prices as "preposterous and unreasonable" not only highlights her financial constraints but also reflects the reality that her marital union has not resulted in financial or emotional prosperity. Instead, it has contributed to a diminishment of her identity, spotlighting the quandary faced by married women—a scenario poignantly highlighted by Beauvoir—caught between the shackles of societal expectations and the pursuit of individual fulfillment.

“A woman is not born, but made” (Beauvoir 1998). The encounter with the single woman in the restaurant, whom Chopin describes as “a pretty, pleasant young creature,” emphasizes her autonomy as an individual. This portrayal resonates with Beauvoir’s philosophy that a woman’s essence and awareness should transcend marital definitions, being instead cultivated through her unique experiences and decisions. This character serves as a mirror, offering a stark contrast that illuminates the profound effects of marital commitments on a woman’s sense of self and independence. Mrs. Sommers, witnessing the young woman’s carefree demeanor, may experience a mixture of admiration and nostalgia, perhaps perceiving in her a vestige of her own youthful, unburdened self. This moment of introspection suggests that marriage has, to some extent, eclipsed Mrs. Sommers’ individuality, hinting at an emerging consciousness and a quest for self-rediscovery. It spotlights the internal struggle between her current obligations and her yearnings for the freedom and identity she once knew, showcasing her journey towards reawakening her sense of self amidst the complexities of her life’s roles.

Therefore, her near instinctive purchase of costly magazines starkly deviates from her accustomed frugality, further accentuating her burgeoning self-awareness and evolution in personal consciousness. Additionally, Mrs. Sommers embraces a newfound boldness to “show off,” seizing the chance to recast her identity beyond the confines of familial and marital roles, as a being with autonomous thoughts and aspirations. Her deliberate act of “lifting her skirts at the crossings” symbolizes a courageous step towards visibility and self-expression, shedding the invisibility she once maintained. This period in Mrs. Sommers’ life marks a fleeting yet pivotal phase of self-discovery and transformation, wherein her endeavors transcend mere material gratification, venturing into the realm of personal identity and self-worth affirmation. Such a shift epitomizes her efforts to emancipate herself from the societal impositions on women, striving towards a redefined sense of self.

4.4. Consciousness Awakening and Return to Reality

Upon exiting the department store, Mrs. Sommers emerges transformed, shedding the anonymity of the woman who first stepped in. The acquisition of the stockings and shoes does more than alter her outward appearance; it kindles a sense of self-assurance and charisma within her. This shift transcends the superficial, signaling a deeper realization of her self-value and aspirations for an enriched life. Her hunger transcends basic need, symbolizing a quest for a higher standard of living, with her decision to dine in a high-end restaurant mirroring a newfound appreciation for her worth and the exploration of potential for a more fulfilling existence.

This metamorphosis from a figure of maternal and marital devotion to one who acknowledges her own worth and individual needs epitomizes the awakening of female consciousness. Beauvoir observes that women, conditioned from youth to conform to societal expectations of obedience, chastity, and domesticity, often forsake their personal ambitions (Beauvoir 1998). Yet, an unforeseen boon catalyzes Mrs. Sommers’ epiphany. Adorned in new stockings and boots, she radiates confidence and allure, daring to savor a moment of luxury in an upscale eatery. This episode heralds a burgeoning self-awareness and a thirst for happiness, as she starts to perceive her intrinsic value and aspirations for equality and liberty. Embarking on a journey of happiness and self-discovery, Mrs. Sommers embodies a remarkable independence, her experiences in the restaurant and theater epitomizing life’s ephemeral joys and the pursuit of personal freedom, juxtaposed against the backdrop of familial obligations.

As the narrative concludes with “The play was over, the music ceased, the crowd filed out”, Mrs. Sommers awakens as if from a splendid dream, not with a sense of dread but with an enlightened recognition of her self-worth and pursuit of joy. Though confronted with the unchanged reality of her life’s challenges, her perspective has shifted; she is now imbued with the desire and resolve to alter her destiny.

However, the novel also illustrates the contradictions between women’s awakening of consciousness and their actual conditions through Mrs. Sommers’ experiences. Despite her transient moments of self-discovery and joy, her real environment—a setting that expects her to sacrifice her personal pursuits to meet the needs of others—remains unchanged. At the end of the story, a perceptive man appears, yet he fails to recognize what he sees or guess why Mrs. Sommers is saddened. This might suggest that women at the time dared not express their inner feelings, and men failed to understand the awakening of women’s self-awareness, thus remaining oblivious to the true thoughts of women. Beauvoir’s depiction of women as “the Other” is embodied in Mrs. Sommers’ situation, where the awakening of the female inner world is disconnected from male expectations and perceptions. Yet, the story also mentions Mrs. Sommers’ strong desire: she wishes the streetcar would never stop, to keep moving forward forever. The streetcar symbolizes the journey of self-consciousness and the pursuit of freedom. Chopin describes this desire as “poignant,” implying the slim chance of realizing this wish under a patriarchal society, even carrying a hint of helplessness and disappointment. Despite her inner awakening, Mrs. Sommers remains in the position of the Other, constrained by societal structures and gender roles, with the reality’s restrictions still present. Though she awakens internally, she continues to face familial and financial pressures. She has no escape from reality; she needs to continue bearing family responsibilities and still relies on her husband’s financial support. In this situation, she might make efforts to improve her life. She could opt for employment or entrepreneurship; she might seek to enhance her skills through education and training, seek

social support, obtain financial aid... However, despite possibly making an effort, she still needs to overcome obstacles, and might experience setbacks and failures. But the inner awakening and pursuit of freedom will serve as her motivation to persevere. Mrs. Sommers' story, though inspirational, hints at the complex relationship between consciousness awakening and reality, as well as the challenges and predicaments women face in their quest for self-realization.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theories—especially the concepts of “the Other,” “self-deception,” and “women's socialization”—delved into Mrs. Sommers' psychological journey in Kate Chopin's short story *A Pair of Silk Stockings*. Employing this analytical framework, the investigation carefully explored the dimensions of family constraints and women's socialization, inner desires and self-deception, social positioning, and the concept of “the Other,” as well as the awakening of consciousness and the return to reality. By analyzing Mrs. Sommers' consumer behavior and psychological transformation, namely how she navigates between constrained social roles and personal aspirations to find self-worth and fulfillment, the paper revealed the complex psychological state and social contradictions she faces when struggling between personal desires and societal expectations. It also offers us a fresh perspective to interpret and reflect on the conditions of women at the end of the 19th century, as well as the restrictions and impacts of traditional gender roles in contemporary society. Mrs. Sommers' experience showcases how women seek the awakening of self-consciousness and the pursuit of personal freedom under the confines of traditional family roles. Her story is not only a personal saga but also reflects the transformation and challenges of female identity within the broader social and cultural context.

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