

# False consciousness and class struggle in Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings*: A Marxist-feminist framework

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## Abstract

This study explores Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings* (1996) through the lens of Marxist literary criticism, emphasizing class struggle, commodity fetishism, and alienation in the capitalist social order. The story's protagonist, Mrs. Sommers, experiences a brief encounter with consumer pleasure after purchasing luxury goods, which reflects both resistance to and entrapment within capitalist ideology. By integrating Marx's concepts of false consciousness and material determinism with contemporary Marxist-feminist frameworks on social reproduction, this study interprets Mrs. Sommers's actions as symptomatic of gendered economic subjugation. This research using textual analysis with Marxist framework, the paper reveals how consumption operates as a false form of liberation within the constraints of class and patriarchal capitalism. The findings demonstrate that Chopin's story, though written in the nineteenth century, anticipates critical concerns of modern Marxist discourse on ideology, labor, and commodified desire. The emotional function of consumption as a false form of liberation continues to characterize modern consumer societies.

**Keywords:** *Kate Chopin; Marxism; False Consciousness; Commodity Fetishism; Class Struggle*

## Introduction

Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings* provides an intricate depiction of class, gender, and consumption in late nineteenth-century America (Chopin, 1996). The story follows Mrs. Sommers, a working-class woman who unexpectedly receives fifteen dollars and impulsively spends it on personal luxuries rather than on her children's necessities. Although the plot appears simple, Chopin's narrative encodes a sophisticated critique of capitalist ideology and material desire. This paper examines the story through a Marxist framework to reveal how Chopin exposes the contradictions between economic structures and human emotion, and how consumption becomes a site of false liberation under capitalism.

Marxist literary criticism, as grounded in The Communist Manifesto views literature as both a product and a reflection of the material base of society, views literature as both a product and a reflection of the material base of society (Marx et al., 2014). Recent scholars have revitalized Marxist

literary theory by connecting classical economic critique with cultural and gender analysis. Skotnicki (2020) redefines commodity fetishism as a "social semblance" that conceals human labor behind the illusion of material value. Similarly, Rey-Araújo (2024) argues that social reproduction under capitalism sustains inequality by naturalizing women's unpaid labor and limiting their access to economic autonomy. These insights illuminate Mrs. Sommers's psychological and social experience: her pleasure in silk stockings signifies not freedom but the internalization of bourgeois values. Recent studies also note that consumerism now intertwines with emotional labor and neoliberal ideals of empowerment (Kim & Chang, 2023)

In Chopin's story, Mrs. Sommers is portrayed as a woman whose life revolves around scarcity, calculation, and care for others. Her daily existence reflects what Quick (2023) identifies as the "gendered logic of capitalist reproduction," wherein women's unpaid domestic work is essential yet economically devalued. This pattern parallels contemporary findings that affective labor sustains capitalist reproduction through emotion and care

(Mezzadri et al., 2025). When Mrs. Sommers momentarily abandons her frugality, her indulgence in consumer pleasure marks a temporary rupture in the cycle of deprivation. However, as Marxist theory suggests, such acts of consumption are deeply ideological. The satisfaction derived from commodities provides emotional relief but simultaneously reinforces the structures of exploitation that produced the deprivation in the first place (Skotnicki, 2020). This interpretive stance aligns with Barry's (2017) overview of Marxist and feminist criticism as intersecting approaches to literature and ideology.

Contemporary Marxist-feminist thought further expands this interpretation. Lin & Wang (2023) assert that neoliberal capitalism commodifies even the promise of liberation, framing consumption and self-care as forms of empowerment while maintaining patriarchal inequality. Mrs. Sommers's "day of pleasure" mirrors this mechanism: her purchases grant a fleeting sense of agency but ultimately reaffirm her subordinate class position. Her bodily experience the tactile delight of silk against skin illustrates what Marx described as the alienation of human sensibility, where desire is mediated by commodities rather than genuine social transformation.

The narrative's socio-economic backdrop resonates with late nineteenth-century America's rise of industrial capitalism, marked by the expansion of department stores, urban leisure, and consumer credit systems. These developments shaped new forms of feminine identity tied to consumption, as noted by Rey-Araújo (2024). Chopin situates Mrs. Sommers within this historical transition: once perhaps middle class, now impoverished, she stands at the threshold between classes. Her fifteen dollars offer a glimpse into bourgeois comfort a symbolic crossing that, however, cannot be sustained. The story's conclusion, in which Mrs. Sommers wishes the streetcar would "never stop anywhere," encapsulates the Marxist concept of false consciousness: a longing for endless escape from material limitation without recognizing its structural cause.

Within Marxist theory, alienation and commodity fetishism are interrelated forces that

shape consciousness under capitalism. Mrs. Sommers's momentary joy in consumption corresponds to what Skotnicki (2020) calls "the semblance of meaning" generated by commodities. This semblance replaces authentic social relations with mediated satisfaction, obscuring the exploitation underpinning capitalist production. Likewise, Fernandes (2023) emphasize that women's labor and emotional investment in domestic care form part of capitalism's "system of life," yet this contribution is misrecognized as natural rather than productive. Mrs. Sommers's moral self-restraint and her ultimate submission to desire dramatize this misrecognition her inner conflict represents the tension between moral ideology and material need.

From a Marxist-feminist standpoint, the story also foregrounds the role of ideological control through gender norms. The social expectation that Mrs. Sommers should dedicate all resources to her children reflects what Lin & Wang (2023) term "the neoliberal maternal ideal" a form of discipline that binds female virtue to sacrifice. Her deviation from this norm through consumption thus becomes a transgression simultaneously pleasurable and guilt-inducing. Yet Chopin's portrayal is empathetic: rather than condemning Mrs. Sommers, the narrator frames her behavior as an inevitable product of material deprivation and psychological fatigue. In doing so, Chopin anticipates Marxist humanist readings that see ideology not as total domination but as a field of contradiction and struggle.

The story's relevance extends to modern capitalist conditions. Scholars such as Quick (2023) and Skotnicki (2020) argue that capitalism continuously reconfigures human desires into consumable forms. In today's consumer societies, self-indulgence and "retail therapy" serve similar ideological functions to Mrs. Sommers's purchases they promise personal fulfillment while diverting attention from systemic inequality. Chopin's insight that the emotional economy of consumption masks exploitation remains strikingly current. Her narrative captures what Rey-Araújo (2024) calls the "capitalist form of social reproduction," wherein personal emotion and economic necessity intertwine.

Therefore, this study positions *A Pair of Silk Stockings* as a microcosm of capitalist ideology an arena where class, gender, and consumption intersect. It argues that Mrs. Sommers's story exemplifies how capitalist culture transforms deprivation into desire and alienation into fleeting pleasure. By applying Marxist theory, this research aims to: (1) analyze the class dynamics embedded in Chopin's narrative; (2) interpret the symbolic function of commodities as vehicles of ideology; and (3) evaluate the story's portrayal of female agency under economic constraint.

Through this framework, the paper not only revisits Chopin's realism but also situates it within broader theoretical debates about materialism, gender, and ideology. In Marxist terms, Mrs. Sommers's desire for silk stockings becomes more than a personal impulse it is a product of the capitalist totality that defines and limits her consciousness. As the following sections will elaborate, Chopin's seemingly domestic narrative reveals a complex dialectic between personal emotion and material structure, offering a timeless critique of the capitalist imagination.

## Methods

This research applies a qualitative descriptive method with a Marxist literary criticism approach to examine class, ideology, and gender representation in Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings* (Chopin, 1996). Following Tyson's (2015) framework, Marxist criticism interprets literature as an ideological product of material and class relations. The qualitative design allows a close reading of textual details characterization, imagery, symbolism, and narrative structure to interpret the ideological implications embedded in the story. The Marxist approach provides a theoretical lens to reveal how capitalist ideology, as reflected in the text, influences human consciousness, emotions, and desires. Recent feminist-Marxist frameworks further expand this view by integrating the concept of affective labor as central to capitalist reproduction (Branch & Duché, 2024). Within this framework, literature is treated not as a passive reflection of society but as an active participant in

reproducing or challenging material conditions (Skotnicki, 2020).

The Marxist framework used in this study is grounded in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's conception of historical materialism, which posits that the economic base of society determines its ideological superstructure. Contemporary Marxist theorists have extended these ideas to the cultural and gendered dimensions of capitalist life. For example, Quick (2023) revisits Marx's concept of "social reproduction" to argue that capitalist systems depend on unpaid domestic labor to maintain labor power. In Chopin's narrative, Mrs. Sommers's invisible domestic work exemplifies this condition: her reproductive labor sustains the household but denies her economic and emotional self-fulfillment. Similarly, Rey-Araújo (2024) conceptualizes capitalism as a system that naturalizes such gendered inequality by disguising social reproduction as moral duty. The study, therefore, interprets Mrs. Sommers's temporary indulgence as a site where ideological contradictions surface. As (Mezzadri, 2021; Tapia Marchina, n.d.) note, this naturalization process extends beyond domestic labor to the externalization of social reproduction.

Analytically, this research combines Marxist and feminist perspectives specifically Marxist-feminist interpretations of consumption and gendered labor. The framework draws on (Fernandes et al., 2023), who propose that women's social and emotional labor functions as an "invisible infrastructure" of capitalist systems. The analysis also employs Lin & Wang (2023) perspective on neoliberal feminism, which examines how capitalism appropriates the language of empowerment to reinforce consumer culture. Together, these frameworks illuminate the ideological duality in *A Pair of Silk Stockings*: Mrs. Sommers's act of consumption appears emancipatory yet ultimately reaffirms capitalist norms. The intersectional Marxist-feminist model allows the researcher to interpret her experience as both a symptom and critique of capitalism's gendered contradictions.

The data source for this study is the original text of *A Pair of Silk Stockings* Chopin (1996) available from the *Kate Chopin International Society* digital

archive. Supporting data are drawn from peer-reviewed journals and recent Marxist theoretical publications published between 2020 and 2025. The analysis proceeds through three interpretive stages that begin with identifying textual representations of economic class and desire. It examines how commodities such as the silk stockings and other luxury items operate as ideological signifiers. Finally, the study interprets the narrative's conclusion in relation to Marx's concept of alienation and false consciousness in order to reveal the ideological implications of Mrs. Sommers's experience.

Throughout this analysis, the researcher maintains contextual and theoretical triangulation. Contextually, the study situates Chopin's story within the socio-economic transitions of late-nineteenth-century America, characterized by industrial capitalism and the emergence of consumer society. Theoretically, the Marxist concepts of commodity fetishism, alienation, and false consciousness are used alongside feminist insights into emotional labor and self-sacrifice. The study interprets Mrs. Sommers's desire for consumption as a product of capitalist ideology that disguises systemic inequality as personal choice. Following (Skotnicki, 2020), commodities in the story are treated as "ideological mirrors" that reflect social hierarchies and moral expectations. This theoretical synthesis ensures a multi-layered reading of the text, connecting individual emotion with collective economic structures.

Finally, the thesis statement guiding this study is as follows: Kate Chopin's "A Pair of Silk Stockings" exposes the contradictions of capitalist ideology by portraying how consumer pleasure becomes a form of false liberation for women trapped in conditions of social reproduction and class subjugation. By combining historical materialism with feminist cultural theory, this study aims to reveal how Chopin's short story, despite its brevity, anticipates twenty-first-century critiques of gendered capitalism, alienation, and commodified emotion.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Class and Economic Constraint**

Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings* centers upon the economic marginalization of its protagonist, Mrs. Sommers, whose social identity is shaped by class struggle and material deprivation. From the opening paragraphs, Chopin constructs a portrait of constrained existence one in which every penny must be carefully allocated to sustain family needs. This scenario embodies what Marx called the material base of social life: economic conditions determine the consciousness and behavior of individuals. Recent Marxist scholarship reinforces that class position is not merely economic but also psychological and cultural, shaping self-perception and moral reasoning (Quick, 2023).

Mrs. Sommers's internal dialogue at the story's beginning reflects this economic consciousness: she plans meticulously to buy fabric, shoes, and gloves for her children, embodying what Fernandes et al. (2023) describe as "gendered thrift," a moralized form of class survival linked to women's reproductive labor. Her thoughts illustrate the ideology of self-sacrifice an internalized discipline characteristic of lower-class motherhood under capitalism. In this sense, her life exemplifies what Rey-Araújo (2024) calls the "capitalist form of social reproduction," wherein women's unpaid labor and emotional regulation perpetuate class stability without recognition.

When Mrs. Sommers unexpectedly acquires fifteen dollars, the windfall introduces not freedom but ideological contradiction. The money momentarily loosens the grip of necessity, exposing the tension between moral duty and personal desire. This rupture symbolizes what Marxist theorists view as the dialectic of class consciousness: awareness of deprivation coexists with fantasies of transcendence. Modern studies also associate such consumption with emotional compensation and status anxiety Kim & Chang (2023) and Park et al. (2022). As Skotnicki (2020) notes, ideology operates by turning deprivation into aspiration convincing individuals that personal indulgence can substitute for structural empowerment. Mrs. Sommers's purchase of the silk stockings therefore represents not irrationality, but the internalization of bourgeois ideology: she seeks dignity through commodities that promise a taste of class mobility.

Moreover, Chopin situates her protagonist at the border between classes, a liminal space that intensifies alienation. Mrs. Sommers may once have belonged to a modestly comfortable class Chopin hints that “she had been used to better things.” Yet her current poverty has redefined her social reality. Lin & Wang (2023) argue that neoliberal capitalism maintains itself through such transitional subjectivities individuals who oscillate between precarity and aspiration, thereby embodying the contradictions of capitalist desire. Mrs. Sommers’s fifteen dollars do not elevate her economic position; rather, they enable her to momentarily perform the illusion of belonging to another class. The psychological relief of this performance underscores the affective power of ideology in sustaining capitalist hierarchies.

### **Commodity Fetishism and Desire**

Central to Marxist interpretation of *A Pair of Silk Stockings* is the concept of commodity fetishism the process by which material goods acquire an aura of power independent of the labor that produces them. For Marx, fetishism conceals the social relations embedded in production and transforms human needs into object desires. Skotnicki (2020) expands this idea, describing commodities as “meaning-bearing surfaces” that structure human affect and imagination. In Chopin’s story, the silk stockings function precisely as such an object: when Mrs. Sommers feels their texture, she experiences an almost mystical awakening. The narrative describes her as “drawing her hand across them lovingly,” a tactile communion that signals not simple material pleasure but ideological enchantment.

In Marxist terms, the stockings are not merely objects of use-value but signifiers of status and selfhood. They represent the sensuous embodiment of an identity denied to her by class structure. This aligns with Skotnicki’s (2020) recent reinterpretation of commodity form as meaning-production and with contemporary analyses of affective desire in consumer behavior (Wood, 2024). Through consumption, Mrs. Sommers momentarily reclaims agency, yet that agency is itself commodified. The silk stockings, gloves,

shoes, and theatre tickets form what Lin & Wang (2023) call “the aestheticized economy of femininity,” in which empowerment is imagined through consumption rather than through structural change. Each purchase intensifies her sense of individuality, yet simultaneously binds her more tightly to the capitalist logic of substitution: meaning through goods, pleasure through possession.

This cycle of fetishized desire is sustained by ideology. As Fernandes et al. (2023) observe, women’s affective labor caring, feeling, sacrificing serves capitalism not only in domestic settings but also in consumer spaces. Mrs. Sommers’s emotional response to the stockings reveals the intersection of consumption and care: she seeks comfort, not extravagance, yet the act of purchase reconfigures her self-perception. Her body becomes the site of ideological inscription. The stockings seem to restore her humanity, her sensuality, and her lost social identity, all within the economy of commodities.

Furthermore, Chopin’s precise attention to sensory experience the feel of silk, the softness of gloves, the taste of fine food translates economic abstraction into bodily affect. The body becomes the medium through which capitalist ideology materializes. As Skotnicki (2020) explains, fetishism produces a “semblance of meaning” that replaces genuine human connection with the tactile satisfaction of ownership. Thus, Mrs. Sommers’s ecstasy is authentic in sensation yet false in origin. Her pleasure is real, but its conditions are socially constructed and temporally limited.

### **Alienation and False Consciousness**

Alienation, a core Marxist concept, refers to the separation of human beings from their labor, their products, and their own species-being. Although Mrs. Sommers is not a wage laborer, her alienation manifests in domestic form: she is estranged from selfhood by the endless cycle of service to others. Quick (2023) describes this phenomenon as “emotional alienation,” whereby women’s capacity for care becomes both the source and the instrument of their subjugation. Her daily thrift and sacrifice

alienate her from pleasure, spontaneity, and self-recognition.

When she buys the silk stockings, Mrs. Sommers temporarily reclaims her body and senses, reversing alienation through consumption. Yet this restoration is itself illusory a form of false consciousness. According to Rey-Araújo (2024), capitalist social reproduction depends on such illusions: subjects find meaning in actions that reproduce their subordination. Mrs. Sommers's purchases symbolize rebellion against poverty, but the rebellion operates entirely within the system's parameters. She does not challenge capitalist relations; she consumes their symbols. The brief joy she feels is the affective mechanism that sustains ideology and it masks the material limits of her freedom.

Chopin underscores this paradox through narrative irony. The narrator describes Mrs. Sommers's actions with restrained empathy, neither condemning nor celebrating them. The absence of moral judgment mirrors the neutrality of capitalist ideology: the system does not dictate desire directly but shapes its conditions of possibility. Her wish that the streetcar "would never stop anywhere" encapsulates this condition. It expresses a longing for perpetual motion, for escape without destination a perfect metaphor for false consciousness under capitalism, where desire is endless but satisfaction deferred.

From a Marxist-feminist lens, this alienation is doubly gendered. Women like Mrs. Sommers experience alienation not only from production but also from reproduction the very labor that defines their social role. As Fernandes et al. (2023) argue, the privatization of care transforms human interdependence into individualized duty, isolating women emotionally and economically. Mrs. Sommers's alienation thus embodies both capitalist exploitation and patriarchal expectation. Her momentary pleasure challenges one form of subjection while reinforcing another.

### **Ideology and Gendered Consumption**

The story's treatment of gendered consumption provides insight into how capitalism appropriates femininity. Lin & Wang (2023) observe that

neoliberal culture constructs women as "empowered consumers," translating political liberation into market participation. Chopin's narrative anticipates this phenomenon a century earlier: Mrs. Sommers's day of indulgence functions as a proto-neoliberal fantasy of choice. She exercises agency through purchase, yet her options remain confined within consumer logic.

Chopin's use of urban space reinforces this ideological containment. Each location the department store, the restaurant, the theatre represents a site of commodified visibility where women's worth is measured by appearance and comportment. The spaces of consumption thus mirror the structure of capitalist patriarchy: they offer inclusion at the cost of conformity. A similar condition of gender-based subordination is explored by Anwar et al. (2023) in their study of Abi Daré's *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, where women's struggle for empowerment remains constrained within patriarchal systems of power. Mrs. Sommers, momentarily seated among the bourgeois ladies at the theatre, experiences recognition but not equality. The gaze of others validates her temporary transformation but also reminds her of its contingency.

This dynamic parallels what Skotnicki (2020) calls "the performative aspect of fetishism," where identity is enacted through commodities that signify belonging. The story's sensory imagery her gloved hands, the silk against her skin creates a tableau of class performance. Yet as the performance fades, the structural reality reasserts itself. The fifteen dollars are finite; the class divide is not. The return to everyday life is inevitable, underscoring the cyclical nature of ideological containment.

Moreover, Chopin's portrayal of female desire challenges Victorian moral codes while exposing their economic underpinnings. Mrs. Sommers's transgression spending money on herself is socially coded as selfishness. But from a Marxist-feminist view, her act represents a spontaneous rebellion against the moral economy of capitalism, which values women only as caregivers. Her guilt, therefore, is ideological: it internalizes patriarchal norms of virtue that sustain unpaid labor. Lin & Wang (2023) emphasize that neoliberal systems depend on such internalized guilt to stabilize

consumption: pleasure must always be shadowed by self-reproach, ensuring continued emotional dependence on market goods.

### **Affective Labor and the Limits of Liberation**

Recent Marxist-feminist studies highlight the role of affective labor the production of emotions, care, and empathy as central to capitalist economies Fernandes et al. (2023) and Quick (2023). Mrs. Sommers's emotional world exemplifies this logic. Her self-denial, tenderness, and guilt constitute affective labor performed for her family and society. Her brief indulgence in pleasure represents the exhaustion of this emotional economy. However, capitalism reabsorbs even her rebellion: the comfort she gains from commodities revitalizes her capacity for sacrifice. As noted in studies of retail therapy and emotional consumption, acts of self-care often reproduce dependence rather than liberation (Kim & Chang, 2023).

Chopin's narrative subtly critiques this dynamic. By focusing on bodily sensations heat, texture, taste she reveals the material basis of emotion. The story invites readers to empathize with Mrs. Sommers's pleasure without moralizing it, thereby exposing the arbitrariness of the norms that condemn it. This aesthetic strategy aligns with what Skotnicki (2020) terms "ideological semblance": art's capacity to mirror and unsettle ideology simultaneously. *A Pair of Silk Stockings* achieves this by portraying consumption as both solace and trap.

The ending scene crystallizes this contradiction. As Mrs. Sommers rides the streetcar, she imagines infinite continuation, a refusal of closure. Yet this fantasy, as Rey-Araújo (2024) reminds us, is intrinsic to capitalist reproduction: ideology sustains itself by promising fulfillment through endless motion. This corresponds to Liu et al. (2023) finding that emotional labor leads to cyclic strain, where temporary relief merely sustains systemic fatigue. The story thus concludes not with resolution but with repetition desire persists, alienation endures, ideology renews itself.

### **Synthesis: The Story as Ideological Critique**

Synthesizing these perspectives, *A Pair of Silk Stockings* can be read as an implicit Marxist critique of capitalist modernity. Although Chopin wrote long before the consolidation of Marxist literary theory, her realism registers the same contradictions that Marx analyzed: class inequality, alienation, and the commodification of human experience. As Eagleton (2018) argues, Marxist analysis remains essential for unveiling the persistence of capitalist ideology in culture. The narrative exposes how ideology operates not through coercion but through seduction the soft power of pleasure and moral obligation.

In contemporary terms, Mrs. Sommers's experience prefigures the dilemmas of late capitalism, where identity and emotion are inseparable from market logic. As Lin & Wang (2023) and Quick (2023) note, neoliberal culture perpetuates the illusion of choice while deepening dependency on consumption. Chopin's protagonist thus remains relevant as a figure of the modern consumer-subject: aware of constraint yet entranced by the promise of freedom through goods.

By integrating Marxist-feminist insights, this study reveals that Chopin's story not only critiques class inequality but also interrogates the gendered emotional structures that sustain it. Mrs. Sommers's fleeting pleasure, her guilt, and her resignation together dramatize the psychic cost of capitalism. Her silence at the story's end no resolution, no reflection embodies what (Fernandes et al., 2023) call the "mute endurance" of women's labor: the quiet persistence that keeps the system functioning.

Ultimately, *A Pair of Silk Stockings* transforms the banal act of shopping into a profound exploration of ideology. The silk stockings, glimmering and ephemeral, symbolize both the allure and the futility of consumer emancipation. They are the fabric of capitalist desire soft to touch, impossible to hold.

### **Conclusion**

Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings* (1996) describes how capitalism shapes emotions, morality, and identity through Mrs. Sommers' brief experience. In a Marxist framework, Mrs. Sommers' day of consumption represents capitalist ideology,

in which the pleasure of buying goods becomes both an escape and a form of conquest, covering up the roots of social inequality. The phenomena of “commodity fetishism” and “false consciousness” are evident when she seeks self-worth through objects rather than through true agency. From a Marxist-feminist perspective, this story highlights the contradictions of social reproduction women perform domestic work without economic recognition, while consumption only prolongs their endurance of oppression. Chopin also anticipates neoliberal capitalism, which disguises subjugation as freedom of choice. Ultimately, this story affirms that true liberation cannot be achieved through consumption, because every commodity bears traces of exploitation, and Mrs. Sommers' desire to “never stop anywhere” symbolizes the endless and fragile capitalist desire.

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