



Research Paper

Discipline and Desire: A Panoptic Reading of Kate Chopin's *A Pair of Silk Stockings*

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Abstract

Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism, as introduced in *Discipline and Punish*, presents a model of disciplinary power wherein individuals internalize surveillance and thereby regulate their own behavior. Though originally applied to institutional settings such as prisons, panopticism also permeates everyday life through social norms, particularly in gendered and economic contexts. Kate Chopin's short story *A Pair of Silk Stockings* (1897) offers a compelling literary site for exploring how panoptic mechanisms operate in the lives of women constrained by societal expectations. This essay examines how Chopin's narrative encapsulates the internalized surveillance of gender roles, the disciplinary functions of consumerism, and the illusion of autonomy. Through the character of Mrs. Sommers, Chopin dramatizes a momentary disruption of social conditioning and the subsequent reassertion of disciplinary norms. By using Foucauldian theory to read the text, this essay reveals how power functions silently yet forcefully in shaping women's behavior, desires, and self-conception in the domestic sphere of late nineteenth-century America.

Key Words: Panopticism, Surveillance, Social control, Femininity, Power and Agency, Domestic Ideology.

Received 15 June., 2025; Revised 27 June., 2025; Accepted 29 June., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

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I. Introduction

The late nineteenth century was marked by significant transformations in both the structure of social power and the roles assigned to women. In this period, the rise of industrial capitalism, urban consumer culture, and middle-class domestic ideology created new sites of discipline and control—especially for women. Kate Chopin, a pioneering figure in American literature, often explored the constrained lives of women in patriarchal society, using subtle narrative strategies to critique their lack of autonomy. One of her lesser known but thematically rich stories, *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, provides an incisive portrayal of a woman momentarily resisting the roles assigned to her by society, only to be eventually reabsorbed into them. Michel Foucault's concept of panopticism, first developed in his seminal work *Discipline and Punish* (1975), offers a productive lens through which to read this story. Panopticism, characterized by self-regulation under the presumption of being constantly observed, helps elucidate how Mrs. Sommers, the story's protagonist, navigates the disciplinary regimes of gender, motherhood, and consumerism. This essay argues that *A Pair of Silk Stockings* is a literary manifestation of panoptic power, where the protagonist's brief indulgence in selfhood is both enabled and circumscribed by the very structures she seemingly escapes.

Panopticism and the Internalization of Surveillance:

Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism derives from Jeremy Bentham's architectural design for the Panopticon—a prison where inmates are always visible to an unseen guard. Foucault extrapolates this idea into a general theory of power in modern societies: through the possibility of constant observation, individuals internalize disciplinary norms and thus become agents of their own regulation. "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself" (Foucault, 1977). Crucially, power in this model is not enforced through direct coercion but through subtle internalization.

In *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, the protagonist Mrs. Sommers exemplifies this internalization. At the story's outset, she is wholly occupied with the well-being of her children. Her initial plans for a small unexpected windfall—a sum of fifteen dollars—are structured entirely around practicality and maternal responsibility: new shoes, fabric for dresses, and school accessories. These intentions are not imposed on her by a husband or an authority figure, but emerge from her ingrained belief in her maternal role. This is the first indicator of panoptic influence. Mrs. Sommers does not require external surveillance to act according to societal expectations; she has internalized the role of the self-sacrificing mother so thoroughly that she instinctively disciplines her desires in favor of her children's needs.

This self-regulation aligns precisely with Foucault's notion of modern power: "The perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary" (Foucault, 1977). Mrs. Sommers disciplines herself without any apparent force being applied. The mechanisms of gender ideology have worked so effectively that she believes her self-denial is a choice, rather than a compulsion enforced by an invisible social apparatus.

The Department Store as Panoptic Space

The turning point in the story occurs when Mrs. Sommers buys a pair of silk stockings on impulse. This act of indulgence marks a rupture in the pattern of disciplined behavior. Yet the setting in which this act takes place—a department store—can also be read through the lens of panopticism. Foucault's theory accommodates not only carceral spaces but also the mechanisms of surveillance embedded in institutions of everyday life. In the case of the department store, the disciplinary gaze is diffused across displays, mirrors, advertisements, and social expectations.

As Mrs. Sommers slips the silk stockings over her hand, she experiences a sensory pleasure that momentarily displaces her utilitarian mindset. The narrative shifts from external control to internal sensation: "A feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude." This "well-dressed multitude" functions as a form of social surveillance; Mrs. Sommers is not only indulging in luxury but is also becoming visible in a new way. Her status and identity are altered by what she wears, and her inclusion in this imagined community of elegant women is mediated through consumption.

Yet this newfound identity is constructed within a commercial framework that dictates specific standards of femininity and appearance. The gaze of the marketplace—composed of clerks, advertisements, and other shoppers—is a modern iteration of the panoptic eye. Mrs. Sommers' behavior conforms to the expectations of this space, where femininity is performed through purchasing power. The store doesn't simply offer her goods; it disciplines her through the lure of ideal womanhood, defined in consumerist terms.

Performance of Femininity and the Illusion of Agency

While Mrs. Sommers' indulgence appears to be a moment of agency and self-expression, it is crucial to interrogate the nature of that freedom. Foucault's theory suggests that modern power is most effective when it appears to allow freedom. Panoptic power does not suppress desire; rather, it channels desire into socially acceptable forms. Mrs. Sommers' behavior in the restaurant, her choice of a refined meal, her enjoyment of a theatre performance, all point to a cultivated form of femininity that is heavily class-coded and structured by commercial norms.

In this context, her consumption is not radical or liberatory; it is a simulation of bourgeois womanhood. She is not inventing a new identity but momentarily inhabiting a pre-existing template of femininity offered by capitalist society. This template is only accessible through financial means, which she does not normally possess. Thus, her pleasure is both real and illusory—it provides momentary escape from her daily life, but also reinforces the very class and gender boundaries she wishes to transcend.

This paradox aligns with Foucault's idea that modern power "produces" individuals—it shapes who they are and how they behave. Mrs. Sommers is produced by the twin forces of domestic ideology and consumer capitalism. Her apparent freedom is conditioned by her internalization of these norms, which continue to exert control even in her acts of defiance.

Temporal Liberation and the Inevitability of Return

The climax of the story is not a dramatic reversal but a subtle, poignant conclusion. After her spree, Mrs. Sommers boards a cable car and wishes the ride would never end. This desire reflects an acute awareness that the day's pleasures are temporary and that she must soon return to her circumscribed role. The cable car becomes a symbolic space suspended between two realities: the fleeting identity she adopted and the disciplinary structures awaiting her return.

Her wish that the ride never ends is a tacit acknowledgment of the inevitability of re-discipline. The same panoptic forces that once encouraged self-sacrifice now reassert themselves through guilt, responsibility, and the practical limits of her socioeconomic condition. She cannot sustain the illusion of autonomy because she lacks the material and structural support to maintain it.

Chopin's decision to end the story without a clear resolution emphasizes the silent but unrelenting nature of disciplinary power. There is no confrontation, no explicit punishment, only the slow reabsorption of the self into the routines of gendered labor and maternal selflessness. The story's quiet ending mirrors the subtlety of panopticism—it does not need to announce its presence to be effective.

Comparative Contexts and Feminist Implications

While Foucault did not extensively explore gender in his analysis of panopticism, feminist theorists such as Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo have extended his framework to examine how women's bodies and behaviors are regulated by patriarchal norms. Bartky writes, "The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Bartky, 1990). In *A Pair of Silk Stockings*, Mrs. Sommers is disciplined not by any single figure, but by a diffuse set of expectations enforced through culture, economy, and ideology.

This reading challenges interpretations of the story that emphasize Mrs. Sommers' agency. While her actions may seem to defy convention, they ultimately reveal how deeply ingrained social codes can be, even in moments of apparent rebellion. Chopin's narrative is not simply a tale of self-indulgence but a subtle critique of the limited frameworks within which women could seek fulfillment.

Moreover, the intersection of gender and class is crucial. Mrs. Sommers' inability to sustain her new identity is rooted not just in her gender but in her economic precarity. Her brief escape is made possible by an unexpected windfall, emphasizing how access to freedom is unequally distributed. The story thereby aligns with Foucault's assertion that power operates through social hierarchies, differentiating bodies and capacities along lines of class, gender, and productivity.

II. Conclusion

A Pair of Silk Stockings is a deceptively simple story that reveals profound truths about power, identity, and discipline. Through the lens of Foucault's panopticism, it becomes clear that Mrs. Sommers is not merely a mother indulging in luxury, but a subject navigating a complex system of surveillance, self-regulation, and social conditioning. Her brief escape into a consumerist fantasy is both enabled and constrained by the very structures she momentarily resists. The story illustrates how modern power does not operate through force but through internalized norms that shape desires, behaviors, and identities. Chopin's narrative thus serves as a literary case study of how panoptic power functions in the everyday lives of women, especially those caught between economic hardship and cultural ideals of femininity. In doing so, it remains a powerful critique of the invisible yet omnipresent forces that continue to define the limits of freedom.

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