At the 'Cadian Ball

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE CHOPIN

Kate Chopin was born and raised in a Roman Catholic family of Irish and French descent. At age five, her family sent her to study at Sacred Heart Academy, where she learned various life skills, such as handling money, and became an avid reader. She suffered many losses during the American Civil War, including the death of her great-grandmother. In 1870, she married Oscar Chopin and settled in New Orleans, where she had six children in the next nine years. In 1879, the family relocated to Cloutierville, as Oscar's cotton brokerage had failed, and found work in managing several small plantations and a general store. The Creoles of Cloutierville formed the inspiration for Kate's later writing. After the death of Oscar in 1882, Kate moved back to St. Louis, her birthplace, where she began writing as a way to stave off her depression from the deaths of her husband and mother. She became quite successful, but never made much money from writing, and had to depend on investments and her mother's inheritance to support her. She died at age 54 from a brain hemorrhage.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"At the 'Cadian Ball" takes place after the end of the 19th century in the American South, where the culture tended to be more conservative than in the Northern United States or in Europe. Although the Civil War had already concluded, racism was still prevalent. Readers can see this in the fact that only white people are allowed at the 'Cadian ball, and in the fact that Alcée owns a black servant whom he, in effect, treats as a black slave. The late-19th century was also a time where women's suffrage was gaining increasing momentum. While women's suffrage is not explicitly present in the story, readers can perceive through Calixta's refusal to conform to feminine standards that such feminist topics did weigh on Chopin's mind.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"At the 'Cadian Ball" explores the lives of young Creoles and Acadians in Louisiana. It is the prequel to her famous short story "The Storm," and details why Alcée and Calixta came to marry other people. Readers can detect strands of feminism and naturalism in the story. Chopin's exploration of upsetting the traditional standards of feminine decorum makes her the forerunner of later female writers from the American South, such as Zora Neale Hurston, author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Flannery O'Connor, author of iconic shorts stories like "A Good Man is Hard to Find." Her use of naturalistic elements finds its generic origin in the naturalist manifesto, "The Experimental Novel," and various works of Émile Zola. It is important to note that American Naturalism is somewhat different, theoretically speaking, from European Naturalism, incorporating more Romantic elements, though there is no critical consensus as to the definition of the genre. Other American Naturalist writers include Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*), Jack London (*The Call of the Wild*), and Stephen Crane (*The Red Badge of Courage*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** At the 'Cadian Ball
- **When Written:** July 15-17, 1892
- **Where Written:** St. Louis, Missouri
- **When Published:** October 22, 1892
- **Literary Period:** American Realism and Naturalism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Late-19th century Louisiana
- **Climax:** Clarisse arrives at the 'Cadian ball.
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Colloquial Language. Throughout the story, each character speaks differently based on their status in society. Upper-class characters like Alcée and Clarisse speak most like the narrator, using proper grammar. Chopin uses only the occasional contraction to denote the shadow of a Southern accent. The language of less wealthy characters like Bobinôt and Calixta carry many more such contractions and often feature grammatical errors. Lastly, the servant class, with characters like Bruce, uses language that features, in addition to colloquial grammar, many idiomatic phrases.s

PLOT SUMMARY

"At the 'Cadian Ball" follows the lives of two young men, Bobinôt and Alcée, and two young women, Calixta and Clarisse, in Louisiana during the late 19th century. Bobinôt is an Acadian farmer who is desperately in love with an unruly but beautiful young woman in his community, Calixta. As his affections are unreciprocated, he decides to refrain from attending the upcoming ball, though he knows Calixta will be there. However, after hearing that Alcée, a handsome young Creole planter, will be attending the ball, Bobinôt becomes worried that Alcée will seduce Calixta and decides to go as well.

The story then shifts to Alcée, who lives on a plantation with his mother, Madame Laballière, and her beautiful goddaughter,

Clarisse. Alcée confessed his love to Clarisse a few days prior to the story's present in an outburst of passion, and a scandalized Clarisse rejected him. Right after the rejection, a **cyclone** destroys the 900 acres of rice crops that Alcée planted. These two unfortunate events lead a despairing Alcée to attend the ball, in hopes of relieving his frustrations. Alcée leaves his plantation for the ball around midnight, with the help of his black manservant, Bruce. Clarisse incidentally witnesses Alcée's departure and calls out to Bruce from the gallery to ask where Alcée went. After asking many times, she finally learns from a reluctant Bruce that Alcée went to the ball. Scandalized and disturbed, she returns to the house. At the ball, Alcée's presence causes quite the stir: men admire him for showing his face after losing his crops to the cyclone and women admire him for his good looks, charm and wealth.

Eventually, Alcée and Calixta escape to the gallery for a rendezvous, and flirtation ensues. Bobinôt tries to find Calixta but fails. Alcée witnesses this and asks Calixta if she will marry Bobinôt and she replies with a noncommittal answer. The two continue to flirt on the gallery and Calixta continues to fall for Alcée's charms until a servant interrupts and informs Alcée of a visitor. Alcée brusquely dismisses the servant and continues to flirt with Calixta. Then, Clarisse appears, startling Alcée, and asks him to come home while refusing to tell him what is wrong. He readily complies and heads home with Clarisse, forgetting Calixta and leaving her on the balcony. Bobinôt finds a dejected Calixta on the gallery and offers to walk her home, a proposal she accepts with indifference. On their way home, she halfheartedly tells Bobinôt that she is willing to marry him, and Bobinôt is elated.

The story then switches to Alcée and Clarisse. Alcée has not stopped asking Clarisse what is wrong. When they temporarily make a stop, she replies that she was afraid he might go to Assumption, where he would be with Calixta. After some prompting from Alcée, she finally admits that she loves him. Alcée, thrilled, forgets all about Calixta and the cyclone, and the two continue home together. In the distance, they hear shots ringing out, signaling the end of the ball.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Calixta – Calixta is a young, unmarried woman who is part of an Acadian community in Louisiana. She is the love interest of Bobinôt, an Acadian farmer, and also briefly enjoys the attention of Alcée Laballière, a Creole planter. Calixta is very attractive. Indeed, Bobinôt describes her as having "the bluest, the drowsiest, most tantalizing" eyes and a "voice like a rich contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan." Calixta is also a somewhat scandalous figure in Acadian society, though she is generally accepted. Her lack of verbal restraint renders her rather distasteful to the older, more conservative members of the community such as Madame Suzonne. However, society generally excuses her impropriety, attributing it to her Spanish blood. For most of the story, Calixta does not reciprocate Bobinôt's feelings, viewing him as more of a fallback. Readers can see this during her rendezvous with Alcée on the gallery. When Alcée asks Calixta if she will marry Bobinôt, Calixta responds with "I don't say no, me." Initially, Calixta seems much more interested in Alcée: during their rendezvous, her "senses were reeling; and they well nigh left her when she felt Alcée's lips brush her ear like the touch of a rose." However, after Alcée abandons her on the gallery for Clarisse, Calixta becomes disillusioned enough with Alcée to accept Bobinôt's proposal later in the night. Calixta presumably matures from the abandonment, and realizes that unlike Alcée, Bobinôt would never abandon her and would offer her his undivided attention, making him a more suitable partner for marriage.

Alcée Laballière – Alcée Laballière is a young, rich, and handsome Creole planter. He loves Clarisse, his mother Madame Laballière's goddaughter, and is attracted to Calixta, a young Acadian woman from town. Towards the beginning of the story, readers learn that Alcée lost his crops in a **cyclone**, just days after being rejected by Clarisse. The cyclone was more a blow to his pride than his finances, as Alcée is from an established family: "the Laballières were rich [...] there were resources our East, and more again in the city." Still, an upset Alcée, "in a mood for ugly things," decides to go to the ball to relieve frustrations. Alcée's good looks and social standing, as well as his recent misfortune, make him the center of attention at the ball among both men and women: the men "could not help but admire his 'nerve' after such a misfortune befalling him" and the young women walked past him, looking into his eyes with their own that were "big, dark, soft, as those of the young heifers standing out in the cool prairie grass." At the ball, Alcée fixes his intentions on Calixta, and appears to be intent on seducing her and perhaps involving her in, what would be considered a scandalous love affair in the late-19th century. His plan is derailed after Clarisse shows up to the ball and asks him to come home. Through his eager assent to Clarisse's request and abandonment of Calixta, readers can gather that while Alcée is attracted to Calixta, he is in love with Clarisse. At the end of the story, Clarisse reciprocates his affections and Alcée, overjoyed, forgets about the cyclone and Calixta: "The one, only, great reality in the world was Clarisse standing before him, telling him that she loved him."

Bobinôt – Bobinôt is an Acadian farmer who is desperately in love with Calixta. Certain descriptions in the story indicate that he appears to be rather coarse and awkward: he is "dull-looking and clumsy," and at the ball, Calixta compares him to "Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog." However, Bobinôt is good-natured. He takes Calixta's insult in stride and even laughs along with the

others at his expense. Bobinôt did not initially intend to go to the ball. However, after hearing that Alcée was to be in attendance, he changes his mind and decides to go to protect Calixta, as "a drink or two could put the devil in [Alcée's] head [...] a gleam from Calixta's eyes, a flash of her ankle, a twirl of her skirts could do the same." Bobinôt is the character who endures the least change in the story in terms of romantic interest: he loves Calixta from beginning to end. Fortunately for Bobinôt, Calixta reluctantly accepts his advances at the end of the story, and he is elated.

Clarisse – Clarisse is a beautiful, young Creole woman—"dainty as a lily; hardy as a sunflower; slim, tall, graceful, like one of the reeds that grew in the marsh." She is the goddaughter of Madame Laballière and the love interest of Alcée. Clarisse serves as a foil to Calixta: while the latter is an unrestrained "little Spanish vixen," Clarisse is a tall and refined lady. Clarisse initially rejects Alcée's advances not from lack of romantic feeling, but from a sense of propriety. Alcée's "hot, blistering love-words" are simply too much for a lady to bear. Clarisse has a strong sense of decorum that readers can see through her disapproval for Alcée's going to the ball: "The 'Cadian ball [...] Humph! *Par exemple!* Nice conduc' for a Laballière." Clarisse considers those attending the ball to be of a lower social station. Alcée's presence at the ball drives Clarisse to accept his advances at the end of the story, out of fear that he might redirect his interest to Calixta.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bruce – Bruce is Alcée's "old negro" manservant. He is the one who informs Clarisse that Alcée went to the ball.

Fronie – Fronie is a young woman in the Acadian community who is close friends with Calixta. She and Calixta once fought about a lover, but the two are now reconciled.

Ozéina – Ozéina is a young woman in the Acadian community. The story hints that she is in love with Bobinôt and "would marry him to-morrow."

Madame Suzonne – Madame Suzonne is an older woman in the Acadian community who disapproves of Calixta and her lack of restraint.

Madame Laballière – Madame Laballière is Alcée's mother and Clarisse's godmother.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE VS. ATTRACTION

In "At the 'Cadian Ball," Kate Chopin draws a clear distinction between love and attraction. In the story, attraction generally takes the form of flirtation while love takes the form of devotion. Bobinôt's feelings and behavior towards Calixta exemplify love; although she pays no attention to him throughout most of the story, Bobinôt remains smitten and delights in any recognition Calixta shows him. On the other hand, Alcée Laballiére shows how this kind of love differs from simple attraction. Alcée is *attracted* to Calixta, as seen by their flirtatious interaction on the gallery bench. However, Alcée *loves* Clarisse: as soon as she shows up at the ball and asks Alcée to come home, he complies and no longer thinks of Calixta. Through these two men and their behavior at the ball, Chopin demonstrates that attraction is merely a superficial, momentary feeling, while love requires fidelity, responsibility, and practical gestures of devotion.

Chopin dedicates the introduction of "At the 'Cadian Ball" to Bobinôt's love for Calixta, and this love remains unchanging throughout the story. Towards the beginning of the story, readers learn that Bobinôt did not initially intend to go to the ball. Nevertheless, he decides to go after hearing that Alcée will be in attendance: "A drink or two could put the devil in [Alcée's] head [...] a gleam from Calixta's eyes, a flash of her ankle, a twirl of her skirts could do the same." Through Bobinôt's ultimate decision to attend the ball, he demonstrates that he feels a sense of responsibility when it comes to Calixta—he feels the need to protect her from flirtatious people like Alcée, even if attending will be unpleasant for Bobinôt himself. At the ball, Calixta makes a cruel jest at the expense of Bobinôt: "Hé, Bobinôt! *Mais* w'at 's the matta? W'at you standin' planté là like ole Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog, you?" Calixta's taunt generates "a clamor of laughter at his expense." However, instead of feeling anger or humiliation, Bobinôt joins in the laughter "good-naturedly," feeling that "it was better to receive even such notice as that from Calixta than none at all." Furthermore, despite this taunt, Bobinôt remains on guard for Calixta. When she disappears with Alcée to the gallery, Bobinôt goes to look for her, "peering uneasily and searchingly into the darkness." Through this, readers can see Bobinôt's unwavering sense of responsibility when it comes to his beloved. After the ball, Bobinôt walks Calixta home despite her continued rudeness to him. When she accepts his feelings with a flippant "well, if you want [to marry me], yet, I don't care, me," Bobinôt's face shines with "the glow of a sudden and overwhelming happiness." She refuses his request for a kiss, but he is perfectly satisfied. Despite Calixta's impertinence, Bobinôt remains steadfast in his devotion and is willing to marry her. In this way, Bobinôt exemplifies unwavering love in the story.

Similar to Bobinôt, Alcée Laballière also demonstrates himself capable of being a steadfast lover, in his case to Clarisse. However, he also shows exemplifies a different kind of romantic

relationship: flirtation based purely on attraction. Readers can see Alcée's capacity for superficial flirtation from his interactions with Calixta at the ball. Devastated by **the cyclone** that destroyed his crops, Alcée goes to the ball most likely hoping to find simple distraction. Calixta, the belle of the ball, catches his eye and the two soon have a tryst on the balcony. The narrator notes that "they were acting like fools," playing a game with Calixta's jewelry as a front for physical affection. Alcée is also very smooth with his words: when a servant informs him about the arrival of a visitor, Alcée responds, "I wouldn't go out to the road to see the Angel Gabriel." However, when Clarisse comes to fetch him, he immediately leaves "without a word, without a glance back at [Calixta]." Indeed, the narrator relates that "he had forgotten he was leaving her there." Alcée makes no lasting gestures of devotion to Calixta—he merely uses sweet words and playful flirtation. Alcée's verbal dexterity when it comes to Calixta forms a striking contrast with his verbal clumsiness around Clarisse. The narrator describes his initial confession of love to Clarisse as " a volley of hot, blistering love-words into her face." Through Alcée's varying verbal capacities, the story suggests that the true indicator of love does not come from words, but rather from caring gestures like the ones Bobinôt makes toward Calixta. Indeed, when it comes to love, Alcée turns out to be a man of devotion. On their way home from the ball, Clarisse confesses her love to Alcée so that "he thought the face of the Universe was changed—like Bobinôt." Here, the story draws a parallel between Alcée's feelings towards Clarisse and Bobinôt's passionate devotion to Calixta, reiterating that Alcée's feelings for Clarisse can be none other than love. Indeed, Clarisse's confession leads him to forget not only Calixta, but also the cyclone that felt life-changing mere hours ago. Alcée views Clarisse as "the one, the only great reality in the world," implying that only she is worthy of his utmost devotion. The fact that he leaves the ball with her without a second thought underscores the idea that genuine love shows itself largely through actions, not words or empty flirtations.

Through the characters of Bobinôt and Alcée and the varying affections they feel for their romantic interests, Chopin demonstrates the difference between attraction and love. Attraction is a superficial, momentary, and forgettable moment of intimacy; Calixta and Alcée may talk and laugh "as lovers do," but that doesn't mean they really love each other. On the other hand, the story argues, love is a profound and lasting feeling that goes beyond words; it shows up in caring gestures and proven dedication over time.

DECORUM, IMPROPRIETY, AND FEMINISM

Chopin wrote "At the 'Cadian Ball" in 1892, during the end of the Victorian era, in which people placed high value on decorum and good manners. Individuals (especially women) of at least modest standing were generally expected to be mild-mannered and polite. Calixta is neither of these qualities; though a lady, she is unrestrained and sometimes rather rude. However, despite her impropriety, Calixta is popular and, for the most part, well-liked. Chopin is known for being a forerunner of 20th-century feminist writers in America; her works often deal with sensitive and daring women who defy social standards. Calixta is one such figure: she is an outspoken woman who refuses to adhere to the rules of society imposed by men and, still, she is accepted. Through Calixta, the story makes the feminist argument that a woman can succeed in her society without conforming to standards set by others.

Calixta exhibits "poor" behavior throughout the story. By contemporary standards, her behavior is nothing very notable, but the story makes it clear that by late 19th-century standards, her behavior is distasteful. The first demonstration of Calixta's impropriety takes the form of Bobinôt recalling an anecdote about the previous year's Assumption mass. Calixta and her friend Fronie got into a fight "about a lover," and Calixta "swore roundly in fine 'Cadian French and with true Spanish spirit, and slapped Fronie's face." During the late-19th century, society considered it rude for even men to swear in front of women. Thus, Calixta's verbal effrontery is quite shocking. Moreover, she physically attacks Fronie in public, again defying her society's ideas of how she should behave. At the ball, Calixta insults Bobinôt's dancing with an unflattering comparison: "Hé, Bobinôt! Mais w'at 's the matta? W'at you standin' planté là like ole Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog, you?" By contemporary standards, this statement may only seem mildly inappropriate. However, through the character of Madame Suzonne, readers learn that such a statement, when coming from a lady, ought to result in punishment for its speaker. After Calixta's insult, Madame Suzonne "whispered to her neighbor that if Ozéina were to conduct herself in a like manner, she should immediately be taken out to the mule cart and driven home." From Madame Suzonne's reaction, readers can gather that Calixta's behavior is unacceptable by her society's standards. Furthermore, by late-19th century standards, Calixta's behavior with Alcée on the gallery is quite improper. This impropriety contrasts sharply with Clarisse's more restrained behavior. After Alcée declares his love to Clarisse, she disdainfully exclaims "Monsieur!" ("Mister!") and "Par exemple!" ("For example!"), while "looking him full in the eyes, without a quiver" with "the chill of her calm, clear eyes." From Clarisse, readers can see that an unmarried woman's response to a man's advances ought to be reserved. However, Calixta freely enjoys Alcee's attention when he flirts with her at the ball. Again, Calixta's lack of restraint renders her quite the opposite of the ideal late-19th century woman.

Despite her improper behavior, Calixta is generally accepted by the people around her, showing that a woman can do well in the

world without conforming to the rules and standards that society has set for her. Indeed, though Calixta lacks the characteristics of an ideal woman (and doesn't dress as nicely as the other ladies at the ball), many men find her attractive. Bobinôt, of course, is smitten, but what's more, "all the men agreed she was at her best [at the ball]." After all, she is full of "such animation! and abandon! such flashes of wit!" Through the men's admiration for Calixta, it becomes clear that she is liked and sought-after despite her nonconformity.

It's worth noting that "the women did not always approve of Calixta." Still, she is generally welcomed by the younger generation of women. For one thing, "she and Fronie had quite forgotten the battle on the church steps and were friends again." Furthermore, when Clarisse comes to fetch Alcée, she greets Calixta quite cordially: "Ah, c'est vous, Calixta? Comment ça va, mon enfant?" (Is that you, Calixta? How are things going, my dear?). Through Calixta's interactions with Fronie and Clarisse, the narrator shows readers that Calixta is not only accepted by men who find her attractive, but also by the younger women at the ball. The contrast between these young women and the older women who disapprove of Calixta also hints that there's something modern about Calixta's behavior; it's as if her more liberated way of being a woman is a glimpse of how Chopin expects the world to be in the future. The story also mentions that the characters in "At the 'Cadian Ball" excuse Calixta's improper behavior because of her foreign blood, as seen through statements like "c'est Espagnol, ça" ("it's the Spanish in her") and "bon chien tient de race" ("blood will tell"). Statements like these show that the characters in the story perceive feminine decorum to be the product of culture, rather than a universal standard that all women must meet. This perspective suggests that standards of femininity are always changing along with the evolution of culture, so perhaps a woman who doesn't follow those standards is simply defying culture rather than failing morally.

"At the 'Cadian Ball" uses the character of Calixta to show that a woman need not conform to societal standards if she wants to be accepted. Decorum and impropriety, in terms of feminine standards, are merely cultural and could change over time. Though Calixta is the story's primary example of this feminist message, Clarisse also embodies it in her own way, by running after Alcée and straightforwardly confessing her love to him. Through Clarisse, Chopin extends the story's argument to subtly suggest that society is changing to accommodate bolder behavior by all women—not just exceptions like Calixta.

NATURALISM

Literary naturalism refers to a sort of extreme realism, where natural forces predetermine characters' decisions. "At the 'Cadian Ball" demonstrates this naturalism in the deterministic way that Chopin portrays the events of the story. Throughout the story, many events occur in a cause-and-effect sequence, and characters don't really seem make their own decisions—it is as if nature guides them. Chopin's decision to employ naturalism in "At the 'Cadian Ball" may be seen as an attempt to counter certain aspects of Victorian literature that were prominent earlier in the 19th century. Many Victorian writers created characters who transcend their circumstances through either a good heart or a providential change in fate. By contrast, Chopin creates characters who are heavily impacted by their surroundings and circumstances, suggesting that people can't simply choose what happens to them; rather, the story argues that broad external forces like nature and society play crucial roles in determining an individual's fate.

In the first part of the story, Bobinôt is a prime example of a character whose fate is determined by natural forces. Bobinôt does not seem to relish the fact that he loves Calixta. Indeed, it seems that if it were his choice, he would sooner love another woman: "Why could he not love Ozéina, who would marry him to-morrow; or Fronie, or one of a dozen others, rather than that little Spanish vixen?" The narrator implies that Bobinôt could easily win the hand of another woman. However, nature has determined that he should be overwhelmingly attracted to Calixta, with her "voice like a rich contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan." Calixta has bewitched Bobinôt (perhaps even by supernatural means, as the reference to Satan suggests), and he is not free to love anyone except her. Despite his love for Calixta, Bobinôt had originally decided not to go to the ball. Nevertheless, while shopping at Friedheimer's store, "he heard someone say that Alcée Laballière would be there." After hearing this, Bobinôt decides to go to the ball out of a sense of responsibility for Calixta and a desire to protect her from Alcée, who could get "the devil in his head" after some drinks. Here, Bobinôt ends up doing something totally different than what he intended and feels that he has no choice about it—his environment seems to have decided his fate.

Alcée Laballière is probably the most overt example of a naturalistic character in "At the 'Cadian Ball"—in a very literal sense, nature changes his fate. At the beginning of Alcée's narrative, readers learn that "that was the year that [he] put nine hundred acres in rice," but then "**the cyclone** came [and] cut into the rice like fine steel." For a farmer, such a disaster could be nothing short of devastating; Alcée lost his crops and, consequently, his income. This loss, combined with Clarisse's rejection, leads Alcée to go to the ball in order to relieve stress, and the story notes: "what he did not show outwardly was that he was in the mood for ugly things to-night." In other words, Alcée is looking to seduce a woman to alleviate his frustrations with Clarisse and the cyclone—both forces beyond his control. The excitement of the ball leads Alcée to flirt intimately with Calixta on the gallery. However, his flirtation appears to be more the result of instinct—of nature—rather than rational

decision-making; the two are "acting like fools." When Clarisse comes to fetch him, Alcée immediately changes: "For an instant confusion reigned in Alcée's thoughts, as with one who awakes suddenly from a dream." It is as if Clarisse, one force of nature, has derailed Calixta, another force of nature. Alcée is simply caught in the middle of everything, powerless against these forces.

On the surface, it may seem like Calixta is not a naturalistic character; she defies societal conventions and seems outwardly in charge of her own fate. However, the latter half of "At the 'Cadian Ball" reveals that even Calixta is, in the end, the product of her circumstances. Calixta is drawn to Alcée under the magic of the ball, in the same way that Alcée is drawn to her. For Calixta, the handsome Alcée is also a force of nature: "Calixta's senses were reeling; and they well-nigh left her when she felt Alcée's lips brush against her ear like the touch of a rose." The narrator compares Alcée's charm to that of a rose, underscoring this moment's connection to nature in its instinctual irresistibility. It is important to note that Calixta most likely has no intention of engaging in an enduring attachment with Alcée. Indeed, when Alcée asks her if she plans on marrying Bobinôt, she responds, "I don't say no, me." Calixta's noncommittal attraction to Alcée is comparable to a sort of animal instinct, something beyond her rational control. Calixta's eventual acceptance of Bobinôt most likely arises as a result of the events of the ball. It is clear that she feels rejected when Alcée leaves her for Clarisse. When Alcée turns back to say goodnight and shake hands, "she [pretends] not to see it." This rejection spurs her to accept the advances of a man who has eyes for no one but herself: Bobinôt. It is interesting to note that after rejecting Alcée's offer for a handshake, Calixta, after accepting Bobinôt, "[holds] out her hand in the business-like manner of a man who clinches a bargain with a hand-clasp." Circumstances have caused Calixta to accept a man she was previously unsure of, and she does so in the least romantic, most matter-of-fact way possible.

"At the 'Cadian Ball" depicts characters in a naturalistic manner: Bobinôt, Alcée, and Calixta are not in control of their fates, even as they shape each other's. In this way, the lives of these characters resemble the lives of real people: the story reminds readers that circumstances are often beyond humans' control, and Chopin suggests that fiction should reflect this reality.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE CYCLONE

The cyclone serves as the embodiment of the story's naturalism, representing the notion that the natural forces ultimately hold power over the people who inhabit it. Indeed, the cyclone is the driving force behind the story's plot, as it has a domino effect on the characters attending the 'Cadian ball. The cyclone drives Alcée to despair and leads him to attend the ball in hopes of relieving his frustration and distress. This, in turn, causes Bobinôt to attend the ball in attempt to protect Calixta from a dangerous Alcée. Alcée's attendance also drives Clarisse to fetch him from the ball, which leads to her ensuing confession. The couples that form at the story's end are, in effect, all products of the cyclone. The manner in which the cyclone has a domino effect on the romantic interactions of these four characters also parallels the instinctual love and sexual desire they feel for one another, such as when Calixta's senses "reel" from the feeling of Alcée's "touch of a rose." Like the cyclone, the primal attraction the male and female characters feel for each other is a natural force beyond their control that goes on to dictate their motivations and actions, and can change the course of the night in an instant. In this way, the cyclone represents how nature has the potential to control people, and even to determine their destinies.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet edition of *The Awakening and the Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* published in 1976.

At the 'Cadian Ball Quotes

❝ Her eyes,—Bobinôt thought of her eyes, and weakened,—the bluest, the drowsiest, most tantalizing that ever looked into a man's; he thought of her flaxen hair that kinked worse than a mulatto's close to her head; that broad, smiling mouth and tiptilted nose, that full figure; that voice like a rich contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan, for there was no one else to teach her tricks on that 'Cadian prairie. Bobinôt thought of them all as he plowed his rows of cane.

Related Characters: Calixta, Bobinôt

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

Towards the beginning of "At the 'Cadian Ball," Bobinôt thinks of a young woman in his community, Calixta, and contemplates his relationship with her. From the passage, readers can see that Bobinôt is madly in love with Calixta and completely under the spell of her beauty. Indeed, Calixta is, for Bobinôt, a force of nature. The thought of her

eyes causes him to "[weaken]" and he likens her voice to a "broad, contralto song, with cadences in it that must have been taught by Satan." In this way, readers can perceive the beginnings of a naturalist strand in the story: Bobinôt's love for Calixta is driven by forces outside of his control, suggesting that nature and instinct have a more significant impact on people's decisions than their own free will. As Bobinôt is plowing cane, readers also infer that he is an Acadian farmer and, thus, part of the working class. This sets Bobinôt apart from Alcée, who is a Creole planter and part of a richer upper class, and gives the reader a sense of the social stratification that is present in Acadia's society.

> Calixta swore roundly in fine 'Cadian French and with true Spanish spirit, and slapped Fronie's face.

Related Characters: Fronie, Calixta

Page Number: 178-179

Explanation and Analysis

The narration recalls a time when Calixta and another young woman, Fronie, fought over a lover outside of church. "At the 'Cadian Ball" takes place in the late-19th century, when society expected women to behave a certain way—polite, modest, and restrained. From the quote, readers can see that Calixta is none of these qualities. Her language and gestures are utterly uninhibited. Writing of Chopin's time rarely ever depicted women swearing, much less engaging in physical violence. From this, readers can see that Chopin embraces a revolutionary depiction of women, where they are free to defy the expectations of society.

Furthermore, society does not shun Calixta for her unfeminine behavior. Indeed, Bobinôt loves her, and, as readers will see later in the story, Fronie forgives her. Even those belonging to the upper class, such as Alcée and Clarisse, politely interact with her. Only older women, such as Madame Suzonne, disapprove of Calixta. All others accept her as she is. In this way, Chopin demonstrates that women who defy societal conventions will not necessarily face ostracism. Rather, Chopin portrays Acadia as an example of what society could (and perhaps should) look like, if women were allowed to behave as their true selves regardless of social conventions and standards of propriety.

> But he must have been crazy the day he came in from the rice-field, and, toil-stained as he was, clasped Clarisse by the arms and panted a volley of hot, blistering love-words into her face. No man had ever spoken love to her like that.
>
> "Monsieur!" she exclaimed, looking him full in the eyes, without a quiver. Alcée's hands dropped and his glance wavered before the chill of her calm, clear eyes.
>
> "*Par exemple!*" she muttered disdainfully, as she turned from him, deftly adjusting the careful toilet that he had so brutally disarranged.

Related Characters: Clarisse (speaker), Calixta, Alcée Laballière

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

A couple of days before the cyclone hits Acadia, Alcée spontaneously confesses his feelings for Clarisse. Alcée's love for Clarisse parallels Bobinôt's love for Calixta, continuing the strand of naturalism that is present throughout the story. In both cases, the woman is depicted as an instinctual, undeniable force of nature that casts a spell over the man. Clarisse and Calixta are somewhat of a parallel to the cyclone that sweeps over the town, as they are a powerful force which leaves the men powerless in their wake. Clarisse drives Alcée "crazy," just as the thought of Calixta's eyes makes Bobinôt weak. Bobinôt and Alcée cannot help but love Calixta and Clarisse—in this sense, love and desire are portrayed as agents of change that act upon people. Chopin thus suggests that people's wants and actions are dictated more by nature and instinct than by free will.

Here, Chopin depicts Clarisse as Calixta's foil. In contrast to Calixta and her raucous manner, Clarisse is well-behaved and polite, one who keeps a "careful toilet." Alcée's confession scandalizes her, as such passionate confession should scandalize any lady from polite society. However, there is something cold in Clarisse's manner that may be off-putting. She rejects Alcée's genuine confession with only two curt exclamations and "the chill of her calm, clear eyes," before immediately going back to rearrange her clothing. In this way, Chopin indicates that there may be instances where decorum is distasteful, and that acting genuinely may require people (particularly women) to reject the social limitations that are placed upon them.

❝ It was an awful thing, coming so swiftly, without a moment's warning in which to light a holy candle or set a piece of blessed palm burning.

Related Characters: Madame Laballière, Clarisse, Alcée Laballière

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

The cyclone serves as the strongest manifestation of naturalism in "At the 'Cadian Ball." It is, in effect, the driving force of the story's plot, as without the cyclone, only Calixta would be at the ball and, consequently, none of the main events of the story would have taken place. Chopin describes the cyclone as "an awful thing," implying that the whims of nature are not inherently beneficial to human issues, but objective and indifferent. Naturalism invokes a sort of cause-and-effect phenomenon where the results can be either pleasant or unpleasant. In the case of the cyclone, the immediate result is disastrous: Alcée loses all of his rice crops. However, the long-term results are more nebulous. Chopin also details that the cyclone comes "without a moment's warning in which to light a holy candle or set a piece of blessed palm burning." Through alluding to Roman Catholic practices of invocation and stating the inability of characters to practice them, Chopin hints that natural forces render all else obsolete.

❝ "Gre't Peter! Miss Clarisse. I was n' sho it was a ghos' o' w'at, stan'in' up dah, plumb in de night, dataway."

Related Characters: Bruce (speaker), Clarisse

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

After Alcée sneaks away from the plantation, Clarisse calls out to his black servant, Bruce, who is startled by her voice. His language here is the most "improper" of any of the characters in the story, as it has the most contractions, colloquial phrases, idioms, and grammatical errors. This demonstrates that he is in the lowest class, the servant class. In this way, readers can see that though the story takes place after the Civil War, racial equality is not yet in place in the South.

"At the 'Cadian Ball" often uses phonetic spelling for colloquial language such as this, which, in turn, is an indicator of class. Dialogue belonging to Alcée Laballière features the same spelling and style as the language of the narration, as he belongs to the highest class among the characters in the story. Clarisse's language is grammatically correct, like that of Alcée, but carries certain contractions. On the other hand, Bobinôt and Calixta use purely colloquial language that features many contractions and grammatical errors, signaling that they belong to a lower class. The use of varied dialects and colloquial language throughout the story thus highlights the stratification present in Acadia (as well as the rest of the American South during this time) and adds a layer of complexity to the different social expectations placed upon each of the characters.

❝ "The 'Cadian ball," she repeated contemptuously. "Humph! *Par exemple!* Nice conduc' for a Laballière. An' he needs a saddle-bag, fill' with clothes, to go to the 'Cadian ball!"

Related Characters: Clarisse (speaker), Bruce, Alcée Laballière

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Clarisse shows contempt for Alcée's going to the 'Cadian ball. This is in part due to her fear that the ball will lead Alcée to attend Assumption mass with Calixta, where the two were rumored to have engaged in a scandalous tryst last year. On the other hand, the quotation demonstrates that Clarisse views the 'Cadian ball to be below someone of Alcée's social standing, as seen by her exclamation, "Nice conduc' for a Laballière." In this way, readers can see that Clarisse believes rich Creoles need not socialize with less wealthy Acadians. And if a Creole were to associate with Acadians, they definitely do not need "a saddle-bag, fill' with clothes" to change into. In other words, by going to the ball, Alcée is engaging in improper behavior.

Clarisse's careful attention to decorum and awareness of social classes emphasizes the importance of propriety in Southern society during this time, and demonstrates once again that she is Calixta's foil.

❝ That was an excellent thrust at Bobinôt, who had forgotten the figure of the dance with his mind bent on other things, and it started a clamor of laughter at his expense. He joined good-naturedly. It was better to receive even such notice as that from Calixta than none at all.

Related Characters: Calixta, Bobinôt

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

At the ball, Calixta insults Bobinôt by comparing him to a cow. Her rudeness is noted by Madame Suzonne, who believes a young woman who behaves this way ought to be "immediately be taken out to the mule-cart and driven home." However, Bobinôt takes this "excellent thrust" in stride. Indeed, Chopin uses this passage to show the depth of Bobinôt's love for Calixta: he joins in with the "clamor of laughter at his expense," feeling that "it was better to receive even such notice as that from Calixta than none at all." In other words, Bobinôt loves all of Calixta, including her rudeness to him, which contrasts with Alcée's shallow, passing attraction for her. This passage also shows that Bobinôt is, as Chopin states at the beginning of the story, "good-natured." When Clarisse rejects Alcée, the latter becomes withdrawn and frigid. On the other hand, Bobinôt displays an admirable constancy. Through his affection for Calixta, then, Chopin suggests that true love is shown through devotion and consistent action, rather than empty words and casual flirtation.

❝ Calixta's senses were reeling; and they well-nigh left her when she felt Alcée's lips brush her ear like the touch of a rose.

Related Characters: Calixta, Alcée Laballière

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

Alcée and Calixta step away from the ball to have a rendezvous on the gallery. Their interactions are rather sensual, especially for an unmarried couple from the late-19th century. Chopin gives details of the two holding hands and engaging in other flirtatious behavior like the kiss in the passage above. Writers from Chopin's era tended to refrain from such explicit portrayals of sensuality. The late-19th century was generally a conservative time and direct depictions of sensuality were considered taboo. By portraying the flirtation between Calixta and Alcée in such a way, Chopin demonstrates a certain progressivity that sets her apart from many other writers of her time. Furthermore, Chopin specifically chooses to relate Calixta's feelings and desires in this passage, subverting the 19th-century belief that sexual desires of women are inappropriate and unnatural. In this way, Chopin's depiction of Calixta advocates for the normalcy of women's sexuality and sensual experience. Chopin serves as a forerunner of later feminist writers, particularly female writers from the American South.

❝ Was it last week the cyclone had well- nigh ruined him? The cyclone seemed a huge joke, now. It was he, then, who, an hour ago was kissing little Calixta's ear and whispering nonsense into it. Calixta was like a myth, now. The one, only, great reality in the world was Clarisse standing before him, telling him that she loved him.

Related Characters: Clarisse, Alcée Laballière

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 188

Explanation and Analysis

Clarisse confesses her love to Alcée on their way home from the ball. Alcée, thrilled, forgets about not only Calixta but also the cyclone: Calixta is now "like a myth" and the cyclone that "well-nigh ruined him" has become "a huge joke." Through this, readers can see that while Alcée was attracted to Calixta, he loves Clarisse. In a way, Alcée's thoughts and feelings in this passage reinforce the story's strand of naturalism. The cyclone, a force of nature, devastated Alcée. Similarly, Calixta, a sensual force of nature, almost leads Alcée to do something scandalous. Clarisse, the most important force of nature and the one that drives Alcée's passion, shows herself to be "the one, the only great reality in the world" and takes him home, soothing his sorrows and refreshing his senses. Through these occurrences, readers can see that Alcée has no real agency—he simply receives the pushes and pulls from people and events surrounding him. Through this characterization, Chopin suggests that people are ultimately at the mercy of natural forces—whether the external environment or the instinctual desires that govern them.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

AT THE 'CADIAN BALL

Bobinôt, an Acadian farmer, thinks to himself that he will not go to the 'Cadian ball, despite the fact that Calixta, the woman he loves, will be there. Bobinôt wishes he did not love Calixta, as she does not seem to return his affections; nevertheless, her hold over him is strong. Calixta is simply too beautiful and too charming. Bobinôt thinks all this as he is plowing cane.

From the names of the characters, readers can gather that the story takes place in a French American community. Since Bobinôt is plowing cane, readers can also infer that the story takes place in the American South. It is immediately clear that Bobinôt is primarily fixated on Calixta outer appearance, rather than her personality—it remains to be seen, then, whether his affections are based upon love, or merely upon physical attraction.

Bobinôt recalls a time when the community gossiped about Calixta doing something scandalous at Assumption mass, though what she did he leaves unsaid. He remembers her verbally and physically fighting with Fronie. The community excused her impropriety on account of her Spanish blood. Bobinôt attempts to use this memory to convince himself not to go to the ball. However, upon hearing at Friedheimer's store that Alcée Laballière is attending, Bobinôt decides to go, worried that "a gleam from Calixta's eyes, a flash of her ankle, a twirl of her skirts" would "put the devil in [Alcée's] head."

Calixta's behavior is quite improper for a lady from the late-19th century American South. In a culture that values demure manners for women, her lack of verbal and physical restraint is quite far from cultural ideals. Yet, it appears that despite Calixta's impropriety, Bobinôt still loves her. Indeed, the sense of responsibility he has with regards to her wellbeing and his desire to shield her from Alcée demonstrates that his feelings for Calixta go beyond mere attraction.

The story switches focus to Alcée, relating that the Creole planter put 900 acres into rice that year. His mother, Madame Laballière, and her beautiful goddaughter, Clarisse, look forward to the potential returns and often entertain guests while Alcée is working the fields. Alcée, in love with Clarisse, confesses to her with "a volley of hot, blistering love-words" one day after returning from the fields. Clarisse, scandalized, rejects him. Days later, a **cyclone** destroys the rice fields. Alcée, devastated, becomes "ill and gray," and even the "soft, purring words of condolence" from Clarisse does not help.

Clarisse appears to be Calixta's foil: she is well behaved and easily scandalized by anything less than polite. Yet, for all her and Madame Laballière's high-class airs, life at the plantation is still agrarian—a single cyclone can have a devastating effect. Readers can see this in Alcée's dejected behavior following the cyclone. Thus, readers can detect a sense of naturalism: in the story, nature and the environment determine characters' fates, highlighting the relative powerlessness that human beings experience at the whims of their natural landscapes.

One or two nights later, near midnight, Clarisse accidentally witnesses Bruce, a black servant, leading a horse to Alcée, who then mounts the horse and leaves. Unsettled, calls out to Bruce from the gallery and asks him where Alcée is going. It takes some coaxing from Clarisse before Bruce reluctantly relays that Alcée has gone to the 'Cadian ball to relieve his frustrations after drinking "a big dram o' w'iskey." Clarisse, scandalized, reenters the house.

Clarisse's disapproval of Alcée's attending the ball is telling. First, it indicates that though she rejected Alcée, Clarisse is actually interested in him. Alcée has claimed to be in love with Clarisse, but it is unclear whether she possesses the same fidelity and devotion for him, or if she is merely attracted to him on a superficial level. Second, it hints that the Laballière family is of a higher social class than the attendees of the ball and does not typically attend such social events. Indeed, the family is rich enough to employ a manservant. This highlights the importance placed upon decorum and status in Southern society.

Alcée arrives at the ball, which takes place in a big room surrounded by galleries. The ball has a great variety of people, albeit only white people, from "sober-faced men" playing cards to babies sleeping in "*le parc au petits*." Alcée's presence causes "a flutter," and many men admire his braveness in showing his face after the cyclone. It is revealed that **the cyclone** does not entail much of a financial blow to the Laballière family, as the family is wealthy and has other resources; nevertheless, the men at the ball think that "it [takes] a *brave homme* to stand a blow like that philosophically."

Although the story takes place after the Civil War, racial equality is still far away: there are no black attendees at the ball. In addition to the clear gap in expectations between male and female characters, this is yet another level of inequality present in Acadia's social structure. Alcée appears to be a bit of a celebrity among those in the Acadian community. Men and women alike watch, admire, and gossip about him. The fact that the loss of 900 acres of rice crops isn't much of a financial blow to Alcée reinforces the idea that the Laballière family belongs to a higher social class, and thus highlights the stratification that is inherent to their community.

Though he does not show it, Alcée is "in a mood for ugly things," something that only Bobinôt vaguely detects. Alcée stands out among the other men, as most of the men are "dull-looking and clumsy." However, the women are beautiful and many of them hope to capture Alcée's attention, glancing at him as they pass him.

Alcée is not only rich but also quite handsome, setting him apart from the other "dull-looking and clumsy" men at the ball. Consequently, he is a desirable match for all the single women at the ball—regardless of whether their feelings for him are genuine, or merely based on superficial attraction. In this way, Chopin sets up the story so that Calixta's attraction to Alcée seems inevitable and only natural.

Calixta is the belle of the ball—"Such animation! and abandon! such flashes of wit!" She briefly teases Bobinôt: "Hé, Bobinôt! *Mais* w'at 's the matta? W'at you standin' *planté là* like ole Ma'ame Tina's cow in the bog, you?" Bobinôt takes this in stride, glad that Calixta has shown him any attention at all. However, Madame Suzonne, an older woman, is disapproving. The narrator comments that "the women did not always approve of Calixta."

Chopin depicts Calixta as Alcée's natural partner at the ball: she stands out among the women the same way that Alcée stands out from the men—it is clear that they are valued first and foremost for their physical appearances, rather than any deeper qualities they may possess. However, where Alcée receives what seems to be universal approval, Calixta experiences disapproval from older women who find her much too improper and, perhaps, too ostentatious.

Calixta and Alcée escape to the gallery for a rendezvous. They talk about last year's Assumption mass, where people assumed they had a scandalous tryst. Bobinôt unsuccessfully looks for Calixta, which Alcée sees. Alcée asks Calixta if she plans to marry Bobinôt, and she replies with "I don't say no, me." The two flirt and Calixta's senses are "reeling," "well-nigh [leaving] her when she [feels] Alcée's lips brush against her ear like the touch of a rose."

The community in the story is very traditional: even a young woman and man attending mass together can lead to gossip regarding the potential of impropriety. In this way, Calixta and Alcée's intimate interaction on the gallery is highly improper, especially if readers compare Calixta's behavior to the reaction Clarisse had towards Alcée's blustering confession.

A black servant interrupts the rendezvous by informing Alcée of a visitor. Alcée harshly dismisses him, saying, "I wouldn't go out to the road to see the Angel Gabriel. And if you come back here with any more talk, I'll have to break your neck." Calixta and Alcée then continue their flirtation until Clarisse arrives. Though Clarisse assures Alcée that nothing is wrong, he immediately abandons Calixta without a second thought and starts for home with Clarisse.

Alcée's suave language around Calixta forms a contrast with his verbal ineptitude around Clarisse. This hints that he is only attracted to Calixta and does not love her. The superficiality of Alcée's feelings for Calixta is reinforced by his immediate abandonment of Calixta when Clarisse comes to the ball to fetch him.

Bobinôt finds Calixta alone on the gallery. She expresses a desire to go home. Bobinôt asks if he may accompany her, and she assents with indifference. On the way home, Calixta tersely accepts Bobinôt's affections: "You been sayin' all along you want to marry me, Bobinôt. Well, if you want, yet, I don' care, me." Bobinôt is elated and asks Calixta to kiss him. She refuses, but still, he is satisfied.

Alcée's rejection leads Calixta to brusquely accept Bobinôt. In this way, readers can continue to see the naturalistic cause-and-effect sequence present in the story, as chance encounters and decisions have profound impacts on other characters. Bobinôt rejoices in her acceptance despite her indifference, reinforcing his unconditional love for her.

The story switches to focus on Alcée and Clarisse. The two are taking a break to rearrange the saddle and Alcée asks Clarisse "for the twentieth time" if something is wrong. She replies that she was afraid he would go to Assumption. Eventually, Alcée coaxes a confession of love from Clarisse and, overjoyed, forgets all about Calixta and even **the cyclone**: "The one, only, great reality in the world was Clarisse standing before him, telling him that she loved him." The story ends with pistol shots in the distance signaling the end of the ball.

Clarisse's roundabout acceptance of Alcée contrasts with Calixta's direct acceptance of Bobinôt, once again establishing Clarisse as Calixta's foil. Alcée, overjoyed by Clarisse's confession, forgets about Calixta and the cyclone. In this way, readers can see that it takes one force of nature—one "great reality"—to counter the effects of the other. Love and attraction, then, are portrayed as natural and ultimately uncontrollable forces that can have profound impacts on an entire community—not just the two people directly involved in a romantic pairing.

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