Desiree's Baby Study Guide

Desiree's Baby by Kate Chopin

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Introduction

Kate Chopin, who reached her creative peak in the late nineteenth century, wrote about issues that wouldn' t take social focus until many years after her death. In her frank portrayals of female sexuality and female independence, Chopin raised such matters normally left to male writers—if any writers at all. In 1899, she published her highly controversial novel, *The Awakening,* which details one woman's adulterous affairs and, perhaps more shockingly, her intent to seize control of her own life. *The Awakening* is reputed to have been banned from Chopin's local libraries, to have led to her expulsion from literary society, and to have contributed to the virtual end of her writing career. However, even after its critical reception, Chopin continued to investigate similar themes in several short stories.

"Désirée's Baby," written in 1893, is the short story for which Chopin is most well known. When the story collection in which it was reprinted, *Bayou Folk,* was first published, reviewers particularly appreciated Chopin's remarkable evocation of Cajun Louisiana. Today, however, readers and critics find "Désirée's Baby" to be much more than an examination of a distinct cultural place. Though brief, the story raises important issues that still plagued Chopin's South, particularly the pervasive and destructive yet ambiguous nature of racism. The story also questions the potential fulfillment of woman's identity—a subject that fascinated the unconventional Chopin. In her portrayal of Désirée, a woman whose self-worth and self-exploration is intrinsically linked to that of her husband, Chopin opened the door to her lifelong query into a woman's struggle for a place where she could fully belong.

Author Biography

Chopin was born Katherine O'Flaherty on February 8, 1851, to a prominent family in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father died a in train accident when she was only four years old, and young Kate was brought up in a household with her mother and her great-grandmother, who descended from French-Creole pioneers. She also spent a great deal of time with the family's Creole and mulatto (a person of mixed white and African-American ancestry) slaves, which made her familiar with the unique dialects she would later create so accurately in her writings.

After graduating from high school, Chopin spent two years as a St. Louis belle. She married Oscar Chopin, a wealthy Creole cotton factory owner in 1870, and the couple moved to New Orleans. Over the next decade, Chopin lived out the life of a southern aristocrat, until in 1880, because of financial difficulties, the Chopin family (which now included six children) moved to her father-in-law's home in Cloutierville, a small town in Louisiana's bayou region. Oscar Chopin oversaw and subsequently inherited his father's plantations. After her husband died in 1883 of swamp fever, the young widow took on the responsibility of the plantation, which brought her into contact with most members of the community. She would later write about these people in her fictional works.

In the mid-1880s, Chopin left Louisiana to return to St. Louis to live with her mother. Encouraged by family friends, who found her letters entertaining, Chopin began writing short stories. Within a short period of time, she was at work on a novel as well. Chopin discovered the works of Guy de Maupassant, Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, and Sarah Orne Jewett, which influenced her own writing. By the early 1800s, Chopin was regularly publishing her stories in popular American magazines, including the *Atlantic* and *Vogue.* The two collections of short stories she published, *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie,* solidified her growing reputation as an important writer.

Chopin then set herself to work on a new novel—her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), had generated little critical or audience attention. Although a short story collection, *A Vocation and a Voice,* was rejected by publishers due to its subject content of female independence and sexual awakening, Chopin completed her novel, *The Awakening,* which is the story of a wife and mother who has an extramarital affair. Critics responded with hostility to this novel.

In her later life, Chopin spent much less time writing but did compose some short stories, such as "The Storm," which also depicts an adulterous affair, but she never even tried to have it published.

Chopin died of a cerebral hemorrhage August 22, 1904, in St. Louis, Missouri. While her writings, with the exception of "Désirée's Baby," went largely unnoticed throughout most of the century, she was "rediscovered" in the 1970s. Today, Chopin is considered a classic American writer, and *The Awakening* continues to be a much studied text. Chopin is now recognized for her pioneer examination of sexuality, individual freedom,

and the consequences of action. Her exploration of such themes, which would interest later twentieth-century writers, marks her as woman ahead of her time.

Plot Summary

Désirée's Background

"Désirée's Baby" opens with a brief history of the foundling, Désirée, who was adopted by the Valmonde family after they found her by the side of the road. The Valmondes were childless, and they took in the toddler and raised her as their own child. When Désirée becomes a young woman, her beauty attracts the attention of Armand Aubigny, a neighboring plantation owner and bearer of one of the finest names in Louisiana. Although Désirée's father reminds Armand that Désirée's heritage is unknown, Armand says that doesn't matter, that he will give her a new name.

Birth Brings Happiness

After their marriage, Désirée gives birth to a son. One day Madame Valmonde comes to visit. When she first sees the child she is surprised and exclaims, "This is not the baby!" Desiree laughs, believing her mother is talking about how much the child has grown. She boasts of her child. When Madame Valmonde asks what Armand thinks of the baby, Désirée says how proud he is and how pleased he is to have a son to bear his name. She also mentions that he has been much kinder to the slaves since the baby was born. Désirée is blissfully happy with her life and her family.

Things Change

Within a few months, Désirée begins to sense that something is amiss. There is an air of mystery among the slaves and unexpected visitors are coming to the plantation for no apparent reason. Then Armand starts acting coldly. He avoids spending time with his wife and child. Désirée, however, dares not ask him to explain why his mood has changed.

One day she watches a quadroon (a person of one-quarter African ancestry) slave fanning her child, who is lying on her bed. She looks back and forth between the slave child and her own child, and suddenly she sees the resemblance between them. When Armand comes in the room later, Désirée is still sitting, staring at her child. She asks Armand to explain the meaning of their child's appearance. Armand says that clearly the child is not white and that therefore she is not white. Désirée denies this charge. In despair, Désirée writes to her mother for an explanation. Madame Valmonde responds that Désirée and the child should come home to the family who loves her. Désirée shows the letter to Armand and asks if he wants her to leave. He answers in the affirmative, for his love for her has been killed by the shame she has brought to his name. Désirée takes her baby and goes outside. Instead of walking to the road that will take her home, Désirée walks across the fields and into the bayou. She and her baby are never seen again.

The Truth Is Discovered

A short time later, Armand is burning Désirée's possessions, including letters she sent him. While cleaning out the drawer, he finds a letter his deceased mother sent his father. In it, Armand's mother writes how glad she is that their son will never know that his mother is of African descent.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Madame Valmonde is going to visit her daughter, Desiree, and her new baby. She is shocked that Desiree could have a baby because it seems like only yesterday the young girl came into her life. Desiree was found at the Valmonde plantation by Monsieur Valmonde when she was just a toddler. All the town's people had theories about where the young girl had come from, but Madame Valmonde didn't care. She had no children of her own, and she considered Desiree a gift from God sent for her to love.

Desiree grew up to be a beautiful young lady who was worshiped by her mother. One day, as she stood by the pillar where she was found, Armand Aubigny rode past her and felt pangs of love. He had known Desiree all her life, but had never felt this way about her. Suddenly he was seized with the urge to marry her. Monsieur Valmonde tried to dissuade him from going forward with the marriage because of Desiree's unknown origins, but Armand could not be persuaded against marrying her. He sent to Paris to have a wedding set sent to him. Once it arrived with its household items, he and Desiree were married.

Madame Valmonde was making her first visit to Desiree in more than four weeks, and she is so surprised to see how much the child had grown. When she asks how Armand feels about the baby, Desiree gets so excited. Armand has always been known to running a strict plantation and for being exceptionally cruel to his slaves. Desiree tells her mother that he is so proud that he has been kind even to the slaves. Her mother notices that her happiness is apparent in every gesture she makes.

Desiree was right. Marriage and the birth of their son had made Armand happy and nicer. However, when the baby turned three months old, Desiree noticed something changing at the plantation. Visitors seemed to drop by for no reason, and Armand had grown distant. He had resumed punishing the slaves with a new fervor that Desiree hadn't seen before. She couldn't quite figure out what the problem was.

Then as she watches a young quadroon boy, a person who is one quarter black, fanning her son, she notices an astonishing similarity between the boys. When Armand walked into the room, she asked him what it means.

He tells her that it means their son is black and that she is not white. She is mortified at the revelation and sends a note to her mother telling her that everyone says she is not white. Her mother replies that she should return home with her baby. Desiree shows the letter to her husband, and he agrees that she should leave. She is sad and leaves immediately not bothering to even take any of her things with her. She doesn't take the road but rather walks through the field, ruining her dress and hurting her feet.

A few weeks later, Armand starts a bonfire and commands his slaves to burn the things that had belonged to his wife and child. The last thing he throws on the fire is a packet of love letters that Desiree had written to him. There is still one letter left in the drawer that he keeps his letters in. It is a letter from his mother to his father. In the letter, his mother thanks her husband for his love. She goes on to say she is so happy that Armand will never know that she belonged to the race that are considered slaves.

Analysis

This short story takes place in Louisiana during the time of slavery. All the characters speak French and Armand grew up in France prior to his mother's death. The main theme of the story is racism.

Desiree is of an unknown origin so she is plainly a good scapegoat for Armand. He is proud of his wife and of their child until it is discovered that the child is black. His racism, despite the fact that he is black, runs so deep that he ruins his wife's reputation and destroys their love for the sake of saving face.

His cruelty toward his own slaves is his way of punishing them for what he thinks is a fault in himself. Desiree is dependent on his happiness in the beginning of the short story, and she cringes at his frown; however, when he finally turns her away, she becomes stronger. This is shown when she chooses to walk through the field rather than take the road.

Desiree has left the "beaten path" and started in a new direction on her own that is independent from that of her husband. However, it is dramatic irony that she is not black; it is Armand who is black; yet she will have to live the rest of her life as a social outcast.

Chopin uses symbolism in the story to convey Desiree's situation and to highlight her innocence. Her name means "desired;" however, in the end she is only desired by her mother. She no longer is desired by her husband or by society because of her racial ambiguity. Throughout the story, Desiree is seen in white clothing. Her white clothing symbolizes not only her innocence but also the fact that she is white. As she walks through the field her white dress is tattered symbolizing the destruction of her racial identity.

Desiree thinks she will die of unhappiness. Her unhappiness is echoed in the "sadness" of Armand's house. The house looks sad because Armand is depressed in the knowledge of his racial background, and Desiree is sad in the newfound, albeit untruthful, knowledge of her racial background. Both Armand and Desiree's despair with their race is representative of society's view of race. It doesn't matter that the two are upstanding citizens or that they are wealthy—all that matters is the color of their skin.

The short story also touches on the patriarchal dominance of society. Desiree's life is dictated by her husband and her husband's station. He doesn't care if she has a name of her own because he will give his name to her. At the same time, he is glad to have a

son rather than a daughter because he will carry on his name. In this setting, it is important to be a man. Even Armand's mother thanked his father for being her husband. It is the husband who dictates not only emotion but status. In this short story, Desiree's fate is determined solely by Armand without consideration of her feelings or of the truth about her.

Characters

Armand Aubigny

Armand is a neighbor of the Valmondes. He has inherited his father's plantation along with one of the finest and oldest names in Louisiana. He seems to see the things in his life—Désirée, their child, his slaves—as mere possessions, ones that either reflect well or poorly upon him. His self-interest is easily evidenced in his strict rule of his slaves and his eager acquisition of Désirée. At first, Désirée's influence seems to soften him, and he is kinder to his slaves. She also thinks he is enormously proud of having a boy child—again, a possession that will bear his name. However, upon discovering his child's mixed ancestry, and blaming it on Désirée, Armand cruelly casts aside his wife and son, for they now have no worth to him. The unexplored irony of the story rests in his realization that it is he, not Désirée, who has African blood.

Désiréé Valmonde Aubigny

Désirée is the adopted daughter of the Valmonde family. Madame and Monsieur Valmonde have raised Désirée since she was a toddler when they found her by the plantation's front gate. Despite the fact that her ancestry is unknown, Désirée has grown up to be the "idol of Valmonde." She is a sweet, kind, affectionate girl. Her mild-mannered character, however, leads her to rely too much on Armand's love and approval. As his wife, her whole being seems centered around how her husband perceives her, their child, and their life together. When Armand rejects her, Désirée chooses to end her own life rather than start a new one at home with her loving parents. In so doing, she also chooses to end the life of her child, who has conspired unconsciously with her to bring shame to Armand's name.

Madame Valmonde

Madame Valmonde sees Déesirée's presence in her family as an act of God. She loves her daughter and continues to do so even after she comes to believe that Déesirée is of mixed racial ancestry. In pleading with her daughter to come home, Madame Valmonde demonstrates the depth of her maternal love.

Themes

Race and Racism

The themes of race and racism are integral to "Désirée's Baby," for prevailing ideas of Chopin's time that African Americans were inferior to whites leads to the destruction of Désirée and her baby. Armand is confident in the superiority of his lineage and his race. He comes from "one of the oldest and proudest [families] in Louisiana." Armand conducts himself in a way typical of the cruel master of southern legend. In marked contrast to his father, he rules his slaves strictly, and Désirée's delight in his initial good mood after the birth of the baby demonstrates his true nature: "he hasn't punished one of them [the slaves]—not one of them—since baby is born."

When the child begins to show evidence of being of mixed ancestry, Armand believes it must be Désirée's unknown ancestors who have tainted his family and brought "unconscious injury . . . upon his home and his name." He rejects both his wife and child because they are "not white." Yet, the irrationality of such racism is demonstrated at the end of the story when Armand discovers that it is he who is of mixed ancestry, not Désirée. Such a reversal clearly shows that ideas of race, and the racism stemming from such ideas, are created by humans alone.

Love

Love—and what this means to different people— is inherent in "Désirée's Baby." Armand hardly seems to truly love Désirée; rather, he "had fallen in love with her ... as if struck by a pistol shot." It seems more a passion that he feels for Désirée, not any deep-seated feeling or emotion. Indeed, Armand has known Désirée for years and never felt any feelings for her. Although the softening effect their marriage has on Armand is apparent—and this could derive from love—Armand seems to view Désirée more as a possession, something that reflects his status. After the birth of their child, Armand's love for Désirée quickly dies, for she brings shame upon his name. That his love for her could so easily be transformed demonstrates its superficial quality. For her part, Désirée truly loves Armand. Her world seems to hinge on his thoughts and feelings. When he begins to avoid her, "Désirée was miserable enough to die."

Maternal love is evident in the story as well. Madame Valmonde demonstrates the great depth of maternal love she feels in her desire to have Désirée return home, even after she "learns" of Désirée's child's African-American ancestry. She also demonstrates her continuing love for her grandchild in the invitation. The maternal love Armand's own mother felt for him can be seen in the letter he uncovers that his mother sent his father revealing how they hid from him the fact that his mother was of African descent. The logical explanation for this action is that his parents, who loved him, wanted to protect and shield him.

Identity

The theme of identity is important in "Désirée's Baby." The circumstances of her childhood strip Désirée of any true identity of her own. Her adoption by the Valmondes gives her a new identity, and indeed, she "grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmonde." However, Désirée's true lack of identity never ceases to exist. When Armand wants to marry her, Monsieur Valmonde reminds the suitor that "she was nameless." Armand's insistence that her heritage doesn't matter, that he will give her his name, enforces the idea that once again a new identity is being imposed upon Désirée, even if it does not fit her.

However, the issue of identity does not remain suppressed for long. Within a few months after the birth of their child, the identity of the son begins to be questioned. Désirée's mother and then Armand notice in him something they do not expect to see—evidence of African-American ancestry. That this turns out to come from Armand, and not Désirée, reinforces the idea that identity is not necessarily a fixed trait, but is derived as much from how others perceive a person as from qualities intrinsic to that person. That identity can so quickly change—for example, Armand who believes himself a proud, white man and superior to his slaves actually has African-American ancestors—demonstrates the capricious nature of naming and categorizing people based on family, appearance, or any other non-essential characteristic.

Armand, though he later finds out the truth about his own heritage, wants Désirée to leave his house because she has besmirched his name through the child she bears. When Désirée leaves his house, she does not return to the Valmondes, as her mother implored. Her decision to walk off into the bayou with her child, to certain death, shows her inability to forge an identity for herself. She feels cut off from both of her former lives. She also may be grappling with the knowledge of her child's newly discovered African-American ancestry, though there is little evidence of that in the story. Instead, what seems to trouble her the most is her rejection by Armand. That her reaction to his rejection is so extreme demonstrates the depth of feeling she has regarding his love and her identity both being taken from her.

Style

Setting and Local Color

At the time of publication of *Bayou Folk,* which reprinted "Désirée's Baby," Chopin was primarily seen as a local colorist. This designation was partially due to the fact that Chopin wrote about the Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana. This world, members of which had distinct cultural traits, was relatively unknown to northerners and even other southerners. The Cajuns were descendants of French settlers in Acadia, Canada. They had been driven from Canada in the 1600s, and came to settle in Louisiana, where their name—Acadians—was mangled into the name they are still known by today— Cajuns. Creoles are white people descended from early French and Spanish settlers, or people of mixed French or Spanish and Black descent.

The prevailing French atmosphere is apparent in the story. All of the characters descend from French immigrants, as evidenced by their names, both first and last. Désirée (also a French name) grows up in a household where "French was the language spoken," and Chopin employs relevant French phrases. Armand's plantation derives its name, L'Abri, from the French word for shelter. Armand even spent the first eight years of his life in Paris. These details help build up the insular world of the Louisiana bayous.

Trick Ending

Several critics of "Désirée's Baby" have charged that the ending is a trick ending, or an O. Henry ending, so-named after the short story writer famous for the reversals that came at the end of his stories. Undoubtedly, Chopin was familiar with the surprise ending. She was an admirer of the works of Guy de Maupassant, and his story, *"The Necklace,"* uses a surprise ending for tragic results. Indeed, "Désirée's Baby" too results in tragedy for all involved. Désirée and her child end in certain death while Armand discovers that the "African American blood" evident in their baby stems from himself. Many critics, however, have disagreed with assessments of the contrived nature of the ending of the story. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes in *The Southern Literary Journal,* "it is also the case that a 'trick' or 'surprise' conclusion is almost never a sufficient means by which to evoke a powerful and poignant reaction from the reader." The ending, in fact, demonstrates the irony and the ambiguous nature of racism.

Foreshadowing

Many critics have pointed out that the ending of "Désirée's Baby" would not come as a surprise to perceptive readers, for Chopin uses subtle foreshadowing to prepare the reader for the revelation of Armand's ancestry. Désirée has fair skin and gray eyes. She wears "soft white muslins and laces." When she stands before her husband with her mother's letter she is described as "silent, white, motionless." As she walks away from her home for the last time, dressed in a white garment, the sun brings out a "golden

gleam" from her brown hair. Armand, in contrast, is described as "dark." Armand' s racial ancestry is further foreshadowed in Chopin's repetition of the color yellow. His plantation house is yellow, as is the baby's nurse. Indeed, none of Armand's slaves are described as *black;* one slave is called La Blanche (the white woman), while the young slave who fans the baby is a quadroon (a person of one-quarter African ancestry). In fact, it is the appearance of the quadroon boy who sparks Désirée's comprehension of the racial ancestry of her own child.

The violence and destruction inherent in Armand's desire for Désirée is also foreshadowed in the story through a series of similes. Upon seeing Désirée at the gate of her home, Armand fell in love with Désirée instantly, "as if struck by a pistol shot." The passion awakened that day "swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles." Indeed, even the description of Armand's house, with a roof "black like a cowl" surrounded by "[B]ig, solemn oaks . . . [which] shadowed it like a pall" evoke funereal connotations, ones that will be realized in the deaths of Désirée and her baby.

Historical Context

Post-Civil War Southern Society

After the Civil War ended in 1865, the U.S. government embarked on a plan called Reconstruction to rebuild the South and reunite the nation. Reconstruction lasted from 1865 to 1877. During Reconstruction, the southern states set up new governments and revised their constitutions. All of the former Confederate states were readmitted to the Union by 1870, but many northern Republicans objected to the efforts made by the legislatures of southern states to restrict the freedoms of African Americans. Reconstruction governments, however, founded new social programs and organizations, such as public school systems. Southern states also spent a great deal of money repairing their infrastructure—railroads, bridges, and public buildings—which had been destroyed during the war.

At first, African Americans were optimistic about their futures. In 1866, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment, which extended equal citizenship to African Americans, and a few years later, passed the Fifteenth Amendment, which guaranteed that the right to vote could not be denied because of race. African Americans took an active part in government, serving as delegates at state constitutional conventions and in Reconstruction legislatures.

Despite this greater equality, as early as 1866, southern states began passing Black Codes, which were laws that greatly limited the freedom of African Americans. Many African Americans were also still tied to the land through the system of sharecropping, by which a sharecropper worked a parcel of land in return for a share of the crop. Under this system, most African-American sharecroppers (as well as white sharecroppers) remained in poverty. African Americans had few economic opportunities to better their lives. Many were also threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, which opposed African Americans obtaining civil rights and used violence to discourage them. By the late 1800s, many African Americans felt the New South was beginning to look very much like the Old South. As Democrats regained control of southern state governments, they began to overturn the Reconstruction reforms. For instance, they devised methods of keeping African Americans from voting by implementing poll taxes and literacy tests. Southern states also passed Jim Crow laws, which called for the segregation of African Americans. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that the standard of "separate but equal" facilities did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment—a ruling that would stand until 1954. In response to such prohibitory measures, African Americans built their own social institutions and adopted different approaches to fighting discrimination. In his Atlanta Compromise speech of 1895, Booker T. Washington spoke of peaceful coexistence and his belief that African Americans and whites should cooperate for economic progress. His views that African Americans should concentrate on economic advancement, and not protest discrimination, angered other African Americans, who believed that African Americans should protest unfair treatment. Ida Wells-Barnett and W. E. B. DuBois brought attention to racial prejudice. Wells-Barnett

urged African Americans to leave the South for the North, where there was less discrimination and violence perpetrated against African Americans.

The American Economy

The American economy was undergoing significant changes toward the end of the nineteenth century. A mining boom in gold and silver drew many Americans out west, and others chose to settle in the Great Plains, where they could find inexpensive land and rich soil for farming. The second industrial revolution, which began in the late 1800s, led to a period of explosive growth in U.S. manufacturing. By the mid-1900s, the United States was the world's industrial leader. Big business grew, as did the number of new factories. Many of the immigrants who were increasingly coming to the United States in the late 1800s were hired to work at these factories. As the United States population kept growing, doubling from 1860 to 1900, the number of farms tripled. Modern machines allowed farmers to produce crops much faster than they ever had before. However, the combination of more farms and greater productivity led to overproduction and lower crop prices. By 1893, because of a stock market panic, the United States had entered a depression.

The American Woman

In the late 1800s, women had greater access to higher education, but often found it difficult to obtain jobs. Women could obtain work in fields such as teaching, social work, and library management, but professions such as law and medicine were still dominated by men. Women denied careers often turned their energies to numerous reform movements. Many women took part in the temperance movement, which sought to make the production and sale of alcoholic beverages illegal in the United States. Many women also joined efforts to work for suffrage. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony founded the National American Woman Suffrage Association in 1890 for this purpose. The states of Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming all gave women full suffrage in the 1890s.

Plantation Life

Although Chopin wrote all of her fiction well after the Civil War had emancipated African-American slaves, the setting of "Désirée's Baby" draws on the well-known histories of plantation life in the antebellum South. Prior to the Civil War, the Southern economy relied on slave labor to work the many plantations and smaller farms. Cotton was the staple crop, and cotton plantations stretched from North Carolina all the way to Texas. Sugar cane and rice were also grown throughout much of Louisiana. Despite the fact that by 1860, less than 12 percent of the South's planters held more than twenty slaves, these wealthy people dominated Southern society. The richest planters lived in elegant mansions, often purchased fine goods from abroad, and sent their sons to Europe for the "Grand Tour." Despite such luxuries, many planters had little ready cash. Much of

their wealth went to brokers, who bought their crops and sold them household goods and farm equipment.

The bulk of the work on the plantation was performed by slaves, though the plantation owner managed the plantation, assigned tasks to supervisors or slaves, kept records of business transactions, and worked with ship owners, bankers, and brokers. The plantation mistress also supervised the spinning, weaving, mending, housecleaning, and food preparation. More than 75 percent of African-American slaves worked on southern plantations. Adults and children alike worked long hours, both in the fields and in the slaveholder's house.

Critical Overview

"Désirée's Baby," which for decades was the only piece of writing for which Chopin was known, was first published in the inaugural issue of *Vogue* in 1893. The following year, it was reprinted in *Bayou Folk,* Chopin's first collection of short stories. Chopin' s publisher marketed it as "several tales drawn from life among the Acadians and Creoles of Louisiana." The collection included character sketches, stories about domestic dramas, stories about defiant women, as well as children's tales.

The original print run of *Bayou Folk* was a respectable 1,250 and over the next sixteen years, it was reprinted several times. That the land about which Chopin wrote intrigued Americans was immediately obvious from the first review to appear in the *New York Times* (reprinted in Emily Toth's biography). Under the heading, *"Living Tales From Acadian Life,"* the reviewer devoted all but two sentences of the review to an often-erroneous discussion of Louisiana life and culture. The review, however, was the first national critique of Chopin as a short story writer:

A writer needs only the art to let these stories tell themselves. It is not an art easily acquired, but Kate Chopin has practiced it with force and charm in the several stories of her agreeable book.

The word *charming* was to appear in many of the some one hundred press notices that followed publication of *Bayou Folk,* which established Chopin as a new and important writer. Laudatory reviewers from national magazines commented on Chopin's artistry. The *Atlantic Monthly* reviewer asserted, "In this work we have a genuine and delightful addition to the ranks of our storytellers." *Nation* wrote, "Her pen is an artist's in choice of subject, in touch, and in forbearance." *The Review of Reviews* as stated in Toth's biography, *Kate Chopin, A Life of the Author of 'The Awakening,'* called *Bayou Folk* "decidedly one of the best volumes of short stories which has appeared for some time." Several reviewers also saw in Chopin's work the influence of short story masters such as Guy de Maupassant. Wrote a reviewer for the *Pittsburg Bulletin* and reprinted in Toth's biography, Chopin's "dramatic effects are worthy of that artist."

Some reviewers did call out "Désirée' s Baby" as a stand-out in the collection. As Toth points out in her biography, Rosa Sonneschein, publisher of a new magazine called *The American Jewess,* wrote in 1895 that the story was the "most remarkable" of all those in *Bayou Folk,* and one which "set the critics wild with enthusiasm."

For the most part, however, reviews focused on the "local color" aspect of Chopin's work instead of its literary merit, which disappointed the author. As reprinted in the Toth biography, she wrote in her diary, "I am surprised at the very small number [of reviews] which show anything like a worthy critical faculty."

In the decades following Chopin's death, her body of work went generally unnoticed. Thanks largely to the efforts of the critic Fred Lewis Pattee, who repeatedly anthologized "Désirée's Baby" in collections he brought out, that story was still known to

an audience. In his historical survey, *The Development of the American Short Story,* published in 1923, he laments the critical neglect of her work. He wrote, "Without models, without study or short-story art, without revision, and usually at a sitting, she produced what often are masterpieces before which one can only wonder and conjecture."

Despite the efforts of Daniel Rankin, Chopin's first biographer, who wrote *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories* in 1932, Chopin remained unfamiliar to most readers until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when she was "rediscovered," primarily due to the publication of her scandalous, now classic novel, *The Awakening.*

In the ensuing decades, scholars have devoted a good deal of attention to Chopin and her master short story. Recent criticism of "Désirée's Baby" has certainly been more in-depth and provocative than early reviews. Many scholars, however, continually remark on Chopin's reliance of a trick ending to achieve the dramatic effect and some continue to see it as an example of local color. Some critics have directly answered these charges. Cynthia Griffin Wolff contends that "Désirée's Baby" develops the most pervasive theme of Chopin's fiction, the vulnerability of life itself. "Read quite independently," writes Griffin in *The Southern Literary Journal,*

'Désirée's Baby' may be judged a superb piece of short fiction—an economical, tight psychological drama. However, seen in the more ample context of Chopin's complete work, the story accrues added significance as the most vivid and direct statement of her major concern—the fiction of limits.

Other critics also cite the story for the issues it raises, such as that of identity, as well as evidence of Chopin's careful craftsmanship. As such, "Désirée's Baby" will certainly remain at the forefront of Chopin's fine body of work.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses constructions of identity in Chopin's short story.

As early as 1923, the scholar and critic, Fred Lewis Pattee, wrote that Kate Chopin "must be rated as genius, taut, vibrant, intense of soul." Despite his whole-hearted endorsement, for the majority of the twentieth century, "Désirée's Baby" was the only piece of writing by which Chopin was known. In fact, until the reprinting of *The Awakening* in 1972, her reputation rested upon the one story. With the "rediscovery" of the author in the past several decades, however, a host of literary critics have re-examined Chopin's body of work, including "Désirée's Baby." While reviewers and readers of Chopin's day lauded the story, most emphasized Chopin's ability to bring to life the bayou Louisiana that she knew so well. Critics today find "Désirée's Baby" a rich text filled with universal themes and careful authorial technique. As Robert D. Arner writes of the story, it is "one of the best of its kind in American literature."

In certain ways, "Désirée's Baby" is atypical of Chopin's body of work; it is the only story to concern miscegenation; it is the only story to feature a stereo typically "cruel" Southern master; it does not explore issues of female sexuality. However, as Peggy Skaggs points out in her book, *Kate Chopin,* with *Bayou Folk*—the collection from which "Désirée's Baby" was taken—the author "seems . . . to be moving toward the study of women in search of themselves," which became her primary literary focus. "Chopin creates . . . characters struggling to fulfill the needs for self-knowledge, for love, and especially for a place in life where they can feel they belong."

The title character, Désirée, truly belongs nowhere. Found abandoned in front of the gates to the Valmonde plantation when only a toddler, Désirée is taken in by the family. For a while she assumes their identity; she grows into a girl "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere—the idol of Valmonde." But the antebellum South offers few opportunities for women other than being someone's wife or mother, so Désirée marries and assumes the role of wife of Armand Aubigny. Her lack of individual identity is underscored by his treatment of her as a possession instead of a beloved but human partner. Armand shows his acceptance of this nineteenth-century belief when he brushes aside questions of Désirée's heritage: "What did it matter about a name when he could give one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?" Though Désirée witnesses this trait in him, she doesn't understand it. She tells her mother:

'Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name; though he says not,—that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true.'

Such a statement directly implicates Armand as seeing his family—both wife and child—as reflections upon himself. The child, a boy, will carry his name, but a girl would only

grow up to take on someone else's name, to become someone else's prized object, as did Désirée.

Thus, with her marriage, Désirée takes on a new identity, but she is unable to hold on to it for long. When the baby son of Désirée and Armand begins to show African characteristics, Armand assumes that Désirée, the child of unknown parents, has tainted his bloodline with that of African ancestors. His cruel spurning of her makes it clear that there is no longer any place for Désirée in his life, but Désirée also does not feel she can return home to the Valmondes, though they love her. Instead, she takes the baby, and the two disappear in the bayou. It is only through their deaths that Désirée and her child, both half-castes in a world where things are measured by black and white, find their final identities as tragic figures.

The role of identity also plays an important part in Armand's mental and emotional state. His identity is intrinsically linked to his idea of his racial superiority. That Armand believes himself to be superior to the slaves he owns is clear. He rules them strictly and "his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easygoing and indulgent lifetime." However, his racist ideas more clearly express themselves in his treatment of Désirée after she bears him a child of African heritage. When Désirée first notices this— long after the neighbors, the slaves, and Armand has already done so—she goes running to her husband, demanding an explanation. He answers coldly, "'It means . . . that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.'" His refusal to speak with her in any depth on the matter shows both his anger at her but also his belief that she is now beneath him and that she is not worthy of his time. For she is white only on the exterior, and he casts her in the same category as his slaves; her skin is "'[A]s white as La Blanche's,'" he says, making a direct comparison between his wife and his slave. In the final exchange between husband and wife, Armand acknowledges that "he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name." Such thinking clearly shows his own feelings about the worth of African Americans, but it aptly reflects those of his community as well; indeed, the gossip among the slaves and the "unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming" demonstrate the crisis that Désirée's baby has caused in the region. Thus, Armand's racism is seen, in part, as a product of his environment.

Not everyone, however, subscribes to such racist propaganda. Three people in the story espouse more enlightened views: Armand's father, Madame Valmonde, and Désirée herself.

In the story's final paragraph, Armand's father is revealed to be superior to standard ideas of racial inequity; he wed a woman of African descent. The Aubignys' joint decision, however, to hide this truth from Armand shows their understanding of the racism that most of their contemporaries feel. The excerpt from Madame Aubigny' s letter reveals how keenly she and her husband both feel the effect of racism, and she tellingly chooses to refer to herself not as a person of African descent, but through her ascribed role in American society: as a member of "the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

Madame Valmonde is another character who demonstrates the ability to look beyond the connotations of African blood. When she receives Désirée's letter, she clearly comes to the same conclusion as Armand—that Désirée is of African heritage. Her brief reply, which does not even attempt to refute such an assertion, speaks volumes. But she also wants Désirée and the baby to come home. She is willing to accept her daughter and grandson no matter their background and the stigma attached to it.

Lastly, Désirée emerges as a figure who does not hold those prejudices typical of her era and community. For when she first realizes her child has African characteristics, she assumes them to come from Armand; with her grey eyes, fair skin, and hands "'whiter than yours, Armand,'" she has never had any cause to question her ethnicity. Her pleading letter to her mother shows her need to be white, but she desires this not out of shame, but because she sees the race issue as separating her from her beloved husband. As long as her husband thinks she is of African descent, she knows he will not accept her. The proof of her character comes when she says to her mother, "'Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true'"; these words indicate her willingness to accept Armand, white or black.

The final irony emerges in the last lines of the story when Armand and the reader discover his true heritage. But even with these lines, Chopin shows the ambivalence of racism, for Armand is the only person in the story to act with abject cruelty—and it turns out that he is of African ancestry. As Barbara Ewell writes in *Kate Chopin,* "Armand is the proud man who comes to know himself too late as the source of 'evil'—identified here with . . . 'black blood.'" Indeed, the story links Armand to that first source of evil—Satan—even before the last lines are revealed; after Armand realizes the truth about the baby "the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold him in his dealings with the slaves." With the revelation of the ending lines, however, the final image of Armand takes on greater relevance:

In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out half a dozen negroes the material which kept the fire ablaze.

Armand's connection to the icon of evil shows that he was never worthy of Désirée, regardless of bloodlines. For Désirée is equated with God and goodness itself. Her very presence seems to Madame Valmonde to be the work of a "beneficent Providence." Desiree's feeling of foreboding— "When the baby was about three weeks old, Désirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace"—further demonstrates her connection with an omniscient presence. Even Armand recognizes Désirée's divinity. When he tells her to leave L'Abri, he imagines "that Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul." As Arner assesses this scene, "By insulting and injuring Désirée, Armand believes that he hurts and insults God as well; he casts them both out of his house." Desiree is linked to a higher power of good, and is thus fundamentally incompatible with Armand.

Désirée, however, places her own attachment to Armand above all other concerns in her life, including the welfare of her child. Her sacrifice of her own life, and that of her child, reveals her basic inability to see an existence outside of her relationship with Armand; the love for her child is not sufficient. Désirée's actions rest in marked contrast to both Madame Valmonde's and Madame Aubigny's, whose maternal love remains strong throughout. As mentioned, Madame Valmonde is more than willing to have her mixed-ancestry daughter and grandson return to her home. Madame Aubigny's desire to keep Armand ignorant of her true heritage also shows that she elevates her son's best interests above all else. Monsieur Aubigny reiterates the strength of parental love; he stays in France to keep up this charade, renouncing, for a time, his homeland. Ironically, the Aubignys' decision to keep Armand uninformed about the truth, ends in no good for anyone. Armand grows up to become a cruel, prejudiced man, and his feelings of superiority lead to the destruction of his own child and the wife who "desperately" loves him.

According to Peggy Skaggs, "Désirée and several others [of Chopin's women] find a sufficient sense of identity in viewing themselves as prized possessions of the men to whom they belong." Perhaps this sentiment is the key to Désirée's suicide and, in essence, the destruction of her infant. For Désirée has never truly had a place where she belonged, despite the love and welcome of the Valmondes. Monsieur Aubigny labels this source of discomfort early in the story when he reminds Armand of "the girl's obscure origins." Desiree's identity is always at stake, always at risk, and in the end, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes, Désirée

loses her own tenuous grasp on the balance of life. For her there seems only one choice, one final boundary to cross: and the alternatives are measured by the line between civilization and the patient, hungry bayou that lies just beyond. Madness, murder, death—all these wait to claim the love-child who could not keep her stability in the face of life's inescapable contrarieties.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Désirée's Baby," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Erickson explores how Chopin uses fairytale features in "Désirée's Baby" for "exploration of the theme of appearance versus reality."

The presence of fairytale features in Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" is virtually unmistakable. What is perhaps less obvious is how they are used in the story as a basis for its exploration of the theme of appearance versus reality, a theme that is omnipresent in the traditional fairytale. The features are put to use for the purposes of the short story, but their presence raises expectations in the reader that are potentially incompatible with those of a realistic short story. The result is a rather complex tension between these expectations and the possibility of their being realized in a non-fairytale world—a tension that contributes substantially to the interest of the story.

This juxtaposition of two frames of reference provides a case study in the sort of 'intertextuality' that Bernd Lenz has referred to as genre cross-reference *(Gattungswechsel)* and which has also been referred to more traditionally as 'contamination.' It can only be used effectively when it is certain that the reader is acquainted with the conventions of the basic genres and can recognize the conflict between the two frames of reference. To describe the effect produced, Lenz suggests the extension of Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic to include the possibility of multiple genre voices in a text. The dialogic results from the fact that one set of expectations reflects on and essentially undermines the other.

The primary expectation raised by the fairytale is that there will be a happy ending, that the hero(ine) will overcome adversity and everything will turn out well. But this is obviously not the case in "Désirée's Baby"—the story leads on inexorably to tragedy. Thus at the level of plot structure the theme of appearance versus reality is introduced directly into the story as a result of the inevitable conflict between the expectations the reader has on the basis of the fairytale framework invoked and the realities dictated by the inflexible social context providing the backdrop for the story. The death of Désirée seems to show that intractable social problems are the reality and the expectation that they can be solved within the traditional folktale framework is just appearance. But the dialogic does not terminate with the death of Désirée. Chopin offers the reader a second ending. The story begins with an interesting combination of two well-known folktale motifs—the wished-for child and the foundling. These are both motifs in the sense of Lüthi since they entail a particular plot kernel and raise certain specific expectations in the reader; the reader typically knows what such motifs should lead on to.

The wished-for child usually comes under 'magical' circumstances to a woman who has virtually given up hope of ever having a child. The motif where the wished-for child is female is familiar from both the Grimms' tales "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves." In "Sleeping Beauty" the child's coming has something to do with the intervention of a magical frog, and in "Snow White" there is a spell involving drops of blood on the snow. When the wished-for child is a daughter, she is of extraordinary beauty and this beauty is a significant factor in determining her fate—but the daughter,

as the story's heroine, is also largely passive, someone who waits and accepts what fate has in store. In the two fairytales mentioned above, this passivity even involves a magical sleep during which the heroine awaits the arrival of the prince.

In "Désirée's Baby" the motif is introduced according to pattern:

Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé.

The heroine, Désirée, is largely passive in her behavior throughout the story, and there are also suggestions of the sleep feature. Her future foster father finds her "lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar," and she is found by Armand, her future husband, standing "against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before."

The use of the foundling motif to introduce the child is an especially interesting feature since it effectively eliminates the magic from the wished-for-child motif—though the possibility of "Providence" is not ruled out—and makes it suitable in the context of the more realistic short story. It demystifies the motif, but at the same time it also brings along a different sort of mystery. Foundling children in the fairytale turn out to be superior in one way or another despite their unpromising beginnings—for example in having extraordinary strength, luck, or beauty—and the uncertainty of their origin conceals an important secret about their parentage, one that will turn out to be significant in the course of the story. The motif thus also introduces the conflict between appearance and reality on the character level: the reader is primed to expect that there is more to the child than appearances suggest, that the answer to the open question of origin will reveal some important hidden reality. The standard expectation is that the child will turn out to be of interesting parentage, and this expectation is manipulated by Chopin in a very ingenious way.

Désirée is identified as the heroine both as a result of being embedded in the above motifs and also because of her association with brightness and, of course, with gold—typical associations identifying the folktale heroine:

Désirée is surrounded by images of whiteness. Recovering from labour, she lies "in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch." She stands next to Armand "like a stone image: silent, white, motionless" after she has given him her mother's letter and is awaiting his reaction. On the day she walks into the wilderness around the bayou, she wears "a thin white garment"; her hair radiates a "golden gleam" in spite of its brown color.

As Lüthi points out, "gold is a sort of *summum bonum* in the fairytale."

Given the basic framework offered by the two opening motifs and the identification of the heroine, the story then appears to continue as a realization of one of the basic folktale plot structures involving what Thompson has referred to as a "banished wife or

maiden." Such banished wives undergo various setbacks after once having found their prince—they are typically maligned and/or persecuted—but the expectation is always that they will overcome all adversity and achieve lasting happiness.

It is common in these stories that the heroine should be discovered by a passing 'prince' and that the prince should experience what Lüthi has termed the "shock effect" of beauty. He offers an example of this feature from a French-Canadian fairytale of the Our-Lady's-child type, one belonging to the above group:

One day when the prince happens to come down to the kitchen and gets a look at the beautiful girl, he stops in the middle of the staircase as if his shoes were nailed down. "He found her unbelievably beautiful; he stared at her. He could neither go back up nor continue descending." Finally, however, he does turn around and goes straight to his mother. "You have to know, the girl that you' ve just taken on—she'll be my wife." "Your wife!" "Yes." "You can't marry someone like that . . ." "She's beautiful." "She is beautiful, but that's all she has—beauty . . ." "I'll send her to school, I'll have her taught . . ." And it goes according to the wishes of the son.

The parallelism with the corresponding scene in "Désirée's Baby" is clear:

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. [. . .] The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmondé [her foster father] grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl's obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. He was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana? [. . .] then they were married.

The question of origin is still hovering in the background—it has not ceased to be significant. Before the heroine "lives happily ever after," there must be some complication, and the open question is sure to be relevant to the continuation of the story. In the banished-wife group of tales this complication is closely connected with childbirth. In the above-mentioned Our-Lady's-child type, the heroine must allow her newly-born child to be taken away and herself to be accused of killing him or her (Innocent woman accused of eating her newborn children). In the maiden-without-hands type, the wife is calumniated in a falsified message sent to her absent husband saying that she has just given birth to an animal child (Calumniated wife: substituted letter), and in the three-golden-sons type the elder sisters substitute a dog or a cat for the newly-born child and accuse the heroine of having given birth to it (Animal-birth slander). As a result, the heroine is banished by her scandalized husband. But everything works out. Regardless of what bad things seem to be true of her, they are only appearance, just as

is the possibility that her happiness is forever a thing of the past. The heroine, the figure associated with brightness/gold, will ultimately come into her own.

The coming of the child of the title also offers the basis for the complication in "Désirée's Baby"— for the (temporary) adversity that the heroine must experience before everything is put right. Just as in the case of the fairytale husband who cannot accept an animal child, in the social context of the Chopin story there seems to be no way of resolving the difficulty raised by Armand's aversion to having a non-white child. The open question of the origin of the heroine now also appears to be answered for it offers an obvious explanation of the fact that the child is not white: the heroine must be of mixed race. But such a conclusion conflicts with the identification of the heroine with brightness/gold and with the expectation that an accused heroine must be innocent whatever the accusation. In line with expectation, Désirée is banished by Armand, but whatever guilt might be associated with having a non-white child, it cannot be that of the heroine. And like the fairytale heroine who knows she has been falsely accused, Désirée is convinced that she cannot be responsible for the child's being of mixed race:

"It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair," seizing his wrist. "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand."

The obvious doubts about the guilt of the heroine encourage the reader to look for a solution for the complication which would—in line with the traditional fairytale pattern—establish Désirée's innocence and reunite her with a repentant husband. Chopin thus tempts the reader with a possible way of resolving the conflict—one that widens the cleft between appearance and reality on the plot level because it seems to show further that folktale solutions are untenable, that their effectivity is only appearance. What if the baby is not the real baby, what if there has been some mistake? The author toys with the reader here by suggesting two possibilities. The first possibility is offered by what is more a legend than a fairytale motif but it is widespread in the folklore of Western Europe: that of the changeling *(Wechselbalg).* Supernatural beings may abscond with a natural child and leave one of their members in its place. The child is at first not recognized as a substitute, but certain characteristics point to the fact that it is not really the natural child. It has a voracious appetite—often drinking the mother dry—and it develops physically in unexpected ways, e. g. it has an overly large head, it does not speak, or it just does not grow. But when its existence is recognized, it can be exorcized and the natural child is returned. In "Désirée's Baby" this motif is just hinted at. The question of the appetite of the child is introduced: Désirée speaks of the child as "the little *cochon de lait."* And it is obvious that there is something physically unusual about the child. Désirée's mother exclaims "in startled tones": "This is not the baby!" *(ibid).* Désirée is the last to note that something is amiss. The child is, of course, not a changeling, and the problem cannot be gotten rid of in this manner. The child eats voraciously— but it grows, and its unusualness must be explained on some other basis. A trick has been played on the heroine, but not by supernatural forces.

The second possibility offered avoids the supernatural by suggesting something parallel to the substitution of the animal child mentioned above. Chopin hints that the nurse La

Blanche, a slave of mixed race, might somehow be behind a substitution. Only when Désirée compares the baby with one of La Blanche's children does she see what the others already seem to have noticed: "She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over." The reader grasps at straws, but this possibility also fades.

The reader looks to a solution involving a substituted child because of the persistent expectations raised on the basis of the 'banished wife or maiden' pattern. Somehow, as heroine, Désirée must be able to overcome adversity and live happily ever after with her prince and her child. We expect that the heroine will be falsely accused and may even be temporarily separated from husband and child, but since she is the heroine the insolubility of problems will turn out to be appearance only, and the story will end happily. For the reader, the only remaining possibility for resolving the conflict and leading to a happy ending appears to be the still-open question of the heroine's origin.

Even in the context of the fairytale, however, it is possible to have an unhappy ending. This leads to what Jolles has termed an "anti-fairytale" *(Antimärchen),* a fairytale that ends tragically through no fault of the hero(ine). Röhrich argues that such anti-fairytales are somehow unsatifactory because they violate the most basic convention of the genre. But such stories do occur and the only requirement that normally has to be met is that the reader must be given suitable justification for the disappointment of the usual expectation. Such justification is difficult to provide on the basis of the Jolles definition, but for Röhrich, whose definition differs from that of Jolles, an anti-fairytale is a fairytale where the plot is carried by a negative hero, and a negative hero gets what he deserves.

In "Désirée's Baby" there are actually two endings to the story. The first would simply be that of the anti-fairytale in the Jolles sense, and the story might have stopped when the question of origin was 'answered.' The heroine does not live happily ever after with prince and child but instead dies, committing suicide, and the tragic ending occurs through no real fault of her own. But the reader has also been given actual reasons to expect that the story might end as an anti-fairytale in the Röhrich sense. Clearly Désirée is not a negative heroine, but the story hints right from the introduction of the 'banished wife' pattern that something is amiss in the constellation of figures—that there are very complex questions of appearance and reality involved, not only with Désirée but also with her prince. Désirée has the typical features of fairytale heroines (her beauty and her association with brightness/gold), and she is the figure the story follows. A prince, on the other hand—especially one not syncretized with the hero— need have no particular features at all. The prince normally has a kingdom, but whatever positive features are assigned to him are subsidiary to his function of being the heroine's prince, and thus he may have any arbitrary set of decorative ones. But he should not be associated with negative features, and presumably not with those of darkness. The obvious apparent exceptions to this generalization are the various 'animal bridegrooms' that occur in such stories as "Beauty and the Beast." But here the folktale is again playing with appearance and reality, just as in the case of "The Frog King." The beast is really a handsome prince enchanted by the forces of evil. When the enchantment is broken, the

truth comes to light—and in many cases, the reality is apparent to the heroine long before.

Armand, Désirée's 'prince,' is rich and handsome, and has a 'kingdom,' but he is associated with darkness from the outset. His estate is a place of terror and his house inspires fear [. . .]. The house, in other words, functions as a symbolic projection onto the landscape of Armand's personality. Armand himself is described, with more than a hint of irony in the first adjective, as having a "dark handsome face."

But—the story suggests—this too may only be appearance. After Désirée comes he brightens up and begins to treat his slaves well. But the darkness is not just appearance—it is the reality. The animal bridegroom undergoes no real transformation. The prince is thus somehow unsuitable.

For Röhrich, an anti-fairytale *(Antimärchen)* is a fairytale where the plot is carried by a negative hero, but even though the prince is not syncretized with the hero here, whenever the features associated with a basic role are negative when they should be positive or neutral it implies and offers justification for a negative ending. Still the death of Désirée cannot be a real ending for the story, however. Even if it is to be an anti-fairytale there remain other expectations that have been raised by the fairytale framework and not yet fulfilled. The question of the origin of the heroine still hovers in the background, for unlike the situation with the negative features associated with Armand, no indication is given that the apparent truth of the accusation raised against Désirée can be anything other than appearance. The question of origin must be answered more satisfactorily to conclude the story. There is thus the second ending.

Critics have found fault with this feature of the story because it appears to be an unexpected trick ending. That Armand should accidentally stumble across a letter from his mother to his father indicating that she was of mixed race, and that thus Armand and not Désirée is responsible for the baby's not being white, may seem too good to be true. But the reader conditioned to the conventions of the fairytale is prepared for this ending. After the death of Désirée the ending is open because the obvious explanation for the race of the baby must be wrong: an accused heroine must be innocent. Yet even if Désirée were responsible for the race of the child, the ending would still be open from the point of view of the reader, since she is innocent in a second sense. She has done nothing, and it is clear that Armand has perpetrated a villainy against her. The prince not only has negative features but has been syncretized with the villain, and the fairytale also raises expectations about villains. The question of origin must be answered more satisfactorily— and the villain must be punished.

The villainy is elaborated on in Armand's attempt to burn everything associated with Désirée and the baby. Since he is clearly identified as the villain he could be punished, e. g. by having the house burn down around him, but this would not answer the still-open question of Désirée's origin. His punishment in the story is more appropriate to the deed and at the same time the question of origin is answered, at least to the satisfaction of the reader. Armand finds out that in order to expunge the guilt, he would have to expunge himself. Given the fairytale framework, the reader is satisfied both with this

punishment and because the obvious answer to the open question—and the guilt of the heroine—have been shown to be only appearance.

But in the context of the dialogic, this second ending also has additional significance. The innocence of the heroine has been established and at the same time the villain has been punished, but the ending of the story is still an unhappy one. One appears to be left with the conclusion that folktale solutions to real social problems are unviable, even if the heroine is innocent and the villain is punished. The primary expectation one brings to a fairytale, that there should be a happy ending, is disappointed. But the note that Armand finds also suggests that perhaps it would not have had to have been, that if Désirée had really responded like the typical fairytale heroine, everything might have worked out after all. In the course of the story, Désirée only acts once— in committing suicide. The typical fairytale heroine, cognizant of her own innocence, would not have given up. Instead she would have bravely accepted the necessity of suffering and patiently waited for everything to work out—and it would have. The writer suggests that the same might have been the case with Désirée. She could have returned to Valmondé, as her mother urges, and waited. The reader is not told what Armand's reaction is to finding the note, but perhaps, Chopin suggests, even a villain might turn into a repentant husband. The note indicates that Armand's parents clearly found a solution to comparable problems and lived happily ever after. The note might not just have been the punishment for the villain but also the basis for disenchanting the 'animal bridegroom.' There is no way of knowing. The first ending remains, though the second questions its inevitability. The circumstances that lead to the suicide of the heroine—the first ending—argue that fairytale solutions to real social problems are unviable. But the second ending, reflecting on the first, asks if they are really as unviable as it seems.

For a normal short story, the second ending would presumably be unnecessary. The fact that the baby is of mixed race would both explain and be explained by the open question involving the heroine's origins, and in the world of the short story, villains do not have to be punished. But the second ending—that demanded by the fairytale framework— both lays bare the arbitrary injustice of the racial mores of the society portrayed and suggests that they might not be as inflexible as it would appear. At the conclusion of the story the tension between the two frames of reference remains unresolved; the genre dialogic continues to raises questions about the necessity of Désirée's committing suicide, the villain status of Armand, and even the inflexibility of the social context. To see the ending as anything other than an integral part of the story is to fail to appreciate how ingeniously Chopin makes use of the juxtaposition of the two frames of reference— the genre dialogic—and to what end. It is not very clear in what sense the story could be successful despite its ending rather than because of it. The second ending follows from the fact that traditional fairytale conventions are used in a short story that ends tragically. Without the second ending the use of such conventions and the expectations they raise would be simply an irrelevancy, and the story would not evoke the interest that it does.

Source: Jon Erickson, "Fairytale Features in Kate Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby,'" in *Modes of Narrative: Approaches to American, Canadian and British Fiction,* edited by Reingard M. Nischik and Barbara Korte, Konigshausen & Neumann, 1990, pp. 57-64.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Peel uses a combined semiotic and political approach to show that the character of "Désirée casts doubt on the meaning of race, sex, and class."

At first "Désirée's Baby," published in 1893 by Kate Chopin, seems no more than a poignant little story with a clever twist at the end. Yet that does not fully explain why the tale is widely anthologized, why it haunts readers with the feeling that, the more it is observed, the more facets it will show. In "Désirée's Baby" Chopin, best known as the author of *The Awakening,* has created a small gem, whose complexity has not yet been fully appreciated. As I explore that complexity, my broader goal is a theoretical one: I plan to show not only that a semiotic and a political approach can be combined, but also that they must be combined in order to do justice to this story and to others like it, stories that lie at the nexus of concerns of sex, race, and class.

A semiotic approach to the work reveals that, despite its brevity, it offers a rich account of the disruption of meaning, and that the character largely responsible for the disruption is Désirée Aubigny, who might on a first reading seem unprepossessing. She is a catalyst, however, for the subversion of meaning. When the semiotic approach is supplemented by a political approach, it can be seen that, in particular, Désirée casts doubt on the meaning of race, sex, and class. In this drama of misinterpretations, she undermines smugness about the ability to read signs, such as skin color, as clear evidence about how to categorize people.

The disruption culminates when Désirée, whom everyone considers white, has a baby boy who looks partly black. When she is rejected by her husband, Armand, she takes the infant, disappears into the bayou, and does not return. Armand later finds out, however, that he himself is black, on his mother's side. Désirée, though unintentionally, has devastated him by means of these two surprises, one concerning her supposed race and one concerning his own.

Using a combined semiotic and political approach, my analysis consists of four steps: I trace how the surprises to Armand disrupt signification; question whether they are actually as subversive as they first appear; shift the focus more definitively to Désirée to show how the story associates her with certain enigmatic, subversive absences; and, finally, discuss how the story criticizes, yet sympathetically accounts for, the limitations of Désirée's subversiveness.

The story takes place in an antebellum Creole community ruled by institutions based on apparently clear dualities: master over slave, white over black, and man over woman. Complacently deciphering the unruffled surface of this symbolic system, the characters feel confident that they know who belongs in which category and what signifies membership in each category. Moreover, as Emily Toth has observed, in the story the three dualities parallel each other, as do critiques of their hierarchical structures.

Within this system of race, sex, and class, the most complacent representative is Armand Aubigny. Confident that he is a white, a male, and a master, he feels in control of the system. In order to understand how his wife challenges signification, we must take a closer look at the surprises that Armand encounters.

The tale begins with a flashback about Désirée's childhood and courtship. She was a foundling adopted by childless Madame and Monsieur Valmondé. Like a queen and king in a fairy tale, they were delighted by her mysterious arrival and named her Désirée, *"the wished-for one," "the desired one."* She, like a fairytale princess, "grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé." When she grew up, she was noticed by Armand, the dashing owner of a nearby plantation. He fell in love immediately and married her. She "loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God." They were not to live happily ever after.

Soon after the story proper opens, Armand meets with the first surprise. He, other people, and finally Désirée see something unusual in her infant son's appearance. She asks her husband what it means, and he replies, "It means . . . that the child is not white; it means that you are not white." Désirée writes Madame Valmondé a letter pleading that her adoptive mother deny Armand's accusation. The older woman cannot do so but asks Désirée to come home with her baby. When Armand tells his wife he wants her to go, she takes the child and disappears forever into the bayou.

Thus, Armand's first surprise comes when he interprets his baby's appearance to mean that the child and its mother are not white. What seemed white now seems black. Désirée, with the child she has brought Armand, has apparently uncovered a weakness in her husband's ability to decipher the symbols around him.

Ironically, Désirée's power comes from the fact that she seems malleable. Into an established, ostensibly secure system she came as a child apparently without a past. As a wild card, to those around her the girl appeared blank, or appeared to possess nonthreatening traits such as submissiveness. Désirée seemed to invite projection: Madame Valmondé wanted a child, Armand wanted a wife, and both deceived themselves into believing they could safely project their desires onto Désirée, the undifferenti-ated blank screen. Actually, however, her blankness should be read as a warning about the fragility of representation.

One aspect of Désirée's blankness is her pre-Oedipal namelessness. As a foundling, she has lost her original last name and has received one that is hers only by adoption. Even foundlings usually receive a first name of their own, but in a sense Désirée also lacks that, for her first name merely reflects others' "desires." In addition, namelessness has a particularly female cast in this society, since women, including Désirée, lose their last name at marriage. Namelessness connotes not only femaleness but also blackness in antebellum society, where white masters can deprive black slaves of their names. Although Désirée's namelessness literally results only from her status as a foundling and a married woman, her lack of a name could serve figuratively as a warning to Armand that she might be black.

But he sees only what he desires. Before the wedding he "was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?" On this virgin page Armand believes he can write his name, the name he inherited from his father or, more broadly, the patriarchal Name of the Father. In addition, as a father, Armand wants to pass on that name to his son. Before he turns against his wife and baby, she exclaims: "Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, *chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name;* though he says not,—that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true. I know he says that to please me" (emphasis added).

The approaching downfall of Armand's wife, and hence of his plans for his name, is foreshadowed by the relationship between Désirée's blankness and another name, that of the slave La Blanche. The mulatta's name refers to the whiteness of her skin, but *can also mean "pure" or "blank," recalling Désirée's blankness. La Blanche is Désirée's double in several ways. Neither has a "proper" name, only a descriptive one. During the scene in which Armand rejects his wife, he explicitly points out the physical resemblance between the women:*

"Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," [Désirée] laughed hysterically.

"As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly. . .

The story also links the two women through their children, for the mistress first notices her son's race when she compares him to one of La Blanche's quadroon sons. And perhaps Armand is the father of La Blanche's son. The two women—and even their sons—may have parallel ties to Armand because of the possible sexual connection between slave and master. So much doubling hints that the slave's racial mix has foreshadowed that of the mistress.

Because La Blanche's name refers to her in the visual but not the racial sense, her appearance illustrates the contradiction of a racial system, that is based on color but does not consider visual evidence conclusive. In this discourse a person who looks white but has a "drop" of black "blood" is labeled black. As Joel Williamson says, the "one-drop rule" would seem definitive but in fact leads to the problem of "invisible blackness."

Miscegenation, which lies at the heart of the contradiction, marks the point at which sexual politics most clearly intersect with racial politics. Theoretically either parent in an interracial union could belong to either race. Nonetheless, "by far the greatest incidence of miscegenation took place between white men and black female slaves." Even when the white man did not technically rape the black woman, their relationship tended to result from, or at least be characterized by, an imbalance of power in race, sex, and sometimes class. Ironically, descendants of such a union, if their color was ambiguous, embodied a challenge to the very power differential that gave birth to them.

"Désirée's Baby" calls attention to the paradoxes that result from miscegenation and the one-drop rule. La Blanche and Désirée look white but are considered black, while "dark,

handsome" Armand—whose hand looks darker than theirs—is considered white. Désirée's entry into the symbolic system forces Armand to confront the contradiction he ignored in La Blanche, another white-looking woman. A form of poetic justice ensures that the same one-drop rule that enables him to keep La Blanche as a slave causes him to lose Désirée as a wife. After the first surprise, Armand sees Désirée's blankness as blackness, not *blanche-ness.*

It is crucial to note that Désirée is disruptive, not because she *produces* flaws in the signifying system but because she *reveals* flaws that were already there. Long before her marriage, for instance, Armand was considered white and La Blanche was considered black. In a sense, Désirée acts as a mirror, revealing absurdities that were always already there in the institutions but repressed. Her blankness has reflective power.

In another sense, Désirée's potential as a mirror was one of her attractions for Armand, for he wanted her to bear a child that would replicate him—in a flattering way. Armand blames and smashes the mirror that has produced a black reflection. An outsider observing Armand's generally harsh treatment of slaves might, however, see his baby's darkness as another instance of poetic justice, the return of the oppressed.

Similarly, if the baby's darkness comes from his mother, whom Armand dominates, then the child's appearance represents the return of another oppressed group, women. To reproduce the father exactly, the child would have to inherit none of his mother's traits. In a metaphorical sense the first surprise means that Armand learns that his son is not all-male but half-female. The infant is an Aubigny but has inherited some of Désirée's namelessness as well, for we never learn his first name (nor that of his double). More generally, paternal power, the name of the father, seems to have failed to compensate for the mother's blackness or blankness.

To blame someone for the baby's troubling appearance, Armand has followed the exhortation, *"Cherchez la femme."* In particular, he is looking for a black mother to blame. He is right to trace semiotic disruption to Désirée, but the trouble is more complex than he at first realizes.

The end of the story brings the second surprise— black genes come to the baby from Armand, through his own mother. Early on, readers have learned that old Monsieur Aubigny married a Frenchwoman in France and stayed there until his wife died, at which point he brought eight-year-old Armand to Louisiana. Only after Désirée and her baby have disappeared and her husband is burning their belongings, do he and the readers come across a letter from his mother to his father: ". . . I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery." As Joseph Conrad suggested, the "heart of darkness" lies within the self: the letter unveils Armand's "dark, handsome face" to himself.

At this point, several shifts occur. One takes place between wife and husband. For Armand, his wife was originally a screen onto which he could project what he desired.

When he found a black mark on the screen, he rejected it. Now he has learned that the mark was a reproduction of his own blackness. The mark, which he considers a taint, moves from her to him.

Another shift takes place between sons and fathers. As Robert D. Arner implies, Armand at first rejects his baby for being the child of a white man and a black woman but then finds that the description fits himself. With blackness, the half-female nature attributed to the baby has also moved to Armand. An intergenerational shift occurs between women as well as men, for the role of black mother has gone from Armand's wife to his mother.

Thus two surprises have profoundly disturbed Armand. As in the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, these two surprises have shaken the structure of white over black, male over female, and master over slave. Armand, the figure who seemed to belong to the dominant race, sex, and class, is shown to be heir to blackness and femaleness and to belong to the group "cursed with the brand of slavery." The repressed has returned and drained meaning from the established system of signification.

Nevertheless, these surprises are less subversive than they first appear. The fact that they shake Armand's concept of meaning and punish his arrogance does not mean that they actually change the inequality of power between the sexes, between the races, or between the classes, even on his plantation. Armand might be less sure of his ability to tell black from white, but he probably will not free his slaves. Moreover, through the traumas experienced by Armand, the story invites readers to pity the suffering caused by inequalities of power but not to wonder how those inequalities could change. In other words, the surprises are more disruptive in a *semiotic* than a *political* sense; they endanger the system of *signification* more than the system of *domination.*

The text directs sympathy less toward black characters than toward characters on the margin between black and white. The story urges us to consider it a pity that Désirée and Armand, brought up as white, must undergo the trauma of receiving the news that they are black. But we are hardly urged to pity the much larger number of people who have lived as enslaved blacks since birth. The implication is that being black might deserve no particular sympathy unless a person was once considered white. The broader effects of race and its relation to slavery remain unexamined.

The problem arises in part because Chopin is using the Tragic Mulatto convention, which appears repeatedly in American literature. It is often easy for white readers to identify with the Tragic Mulatto, because she or he is typically raised as white and only later discovers the trace of blackness. Yet the invocation of "tragedy" introduces problems, partly because it implies resignation to the inevitable. The very idea of a Tragic Mulatto also suggests that mulattoes may be more tragic, more deserving of pity, than people of purely black ancestry.

Moreover, the very notion of pity is inadequate as a political response and can even have a conservative effect. The limitations of pity are best observed by looking at the traces of sexism that, like traces of racism, appear as a residue in the text. The parallel between racism and sexism in the story is complicated, because *insufficient* concern for

blacks and slaves corresponds to *excessive* concern for women. Excessive concern can be debilitating for women by defining them solely as victims.

When Désirée walks away, apparently to her death, the tale most strongly urges readers to show such concern for women. This arises because of the sympathetic way in which the entire story has represented her. She is good: "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere." She is appealing: "'Armand,' she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human." She is vulnerable: "Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes . . . She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds." This doe-like character joins a long line of women who, by dying at the end of a story or a novel, call forth readers' tears. In particular, Tragic Mulattoes tend to be *mulattas.*

But scrutiny of such endings raises the discomfiting possibility that they rely on feminine vulnerability in order to move readers. A strong, rebellious, surviving heroine might not provide such tidily tragic closure. I am not suggesting that Désirée's pain should be presented less sympathetically; rather, I am questioning the implication that a less vulnerable woman would deserve less concern.

The connection of pity with race, class, and sex is noteworthy in the double of Désirée's baby—La Blanche's quadroon son. In contrast to Désirée's bruised feet, his bare feet are described merely as coming in contact with a polished floor, for the story presents only Désirée as suffering from the lack of sturdy shoes. Here the stress on feminine vulnerability combines with the acceptance of black slavery, as if it were a pity for a person such as Désirée to suffer: a member of the weak sex, someone who at least used to belong to groups that do not deserve such treatment—the race with "a golden gleam" in their hair and the class with the right to "tender feet."

For these reasons, even though the meanings of race, sex, and class are threatened by Armand's surprises, those two events do not seriously disturb the system of power relations. The story invites sympathy for Désirée partly on the sexist grounds that feminine women are weak and on the racist grounds that white members of the master class do not deserve to be treated like black slaves.

Twentieth-century readers may be troubled to find that Armand's surprises have a less subversive effect than at first seemed possible. The ideologies behind them can be better understood if placed in historical context. Because the story is set in the era of slavery, its verisimilitude would falter if Armand suddenly reformed and freed his slaves. We must also consider the era in which the story was written and originally read, for the late nineteenth century in the United States was marked by a rebounding prejudice against blacks. Attitudes towards women also differed substantially from those of the late twentieth century: even the women's movement drew on notions of female purity and martyrdom that sound strange today but were part of nineteenth-century discourse. Thus it would be anachronistic to expect more subversiveness from the traumas experienced by Armand.

Some of these problems can be mitigated, however, by thinking more carefully about the text—or rather about what is missing from the text. Shifting the focus more definitively to Désirée discloses certain enigmatic, disruptive absences.

Almost everyone who has written on the story has mentioned, favorably or unfavorably, the concluding revelation about Armand's mother. This final twist recalls the surprise endings of Guy de Maupassant, who strongly influenced Chopin. While evoking sympathy for Désirée, the twist essentially turns backward to tradition and male power: the very presence of a plot twist may reflect Chopin's inheritance from de Maupassant, a literary forefather; in the ending the focus of narrative point of view is Armand, upholder of conservative values; and the female character earns sympathy largely through a sentimental convention—through powerless, victimized innocence. In fact, my discussion itself has so far concentrated on surprises undergone by Armand, a figure of male conservatism. I agree with Cynthia Griffin Wolff that we should cease analyzing the surprise ending and look elsewhere.

Instead of concentrating on the ending, with its conservative, male orientation, we should turn to Désirée, who is absent from the ending. Although submissive, the young woman does have some power. Her boldest action is disappearance, but she does act. While she neither desires nor anticipates the havoc she wreaks, she does catalyze the entire plot.

Through Armand, we have already started to see how the meanings of race, class, and sex are crumbling. Désirée offers two greater challenges to meaning, because she may not be wholly white and because she may not die in the bayou. These are enigmas, in the sense used in *S/Z,* and they remain inconspicuously unsolved, both for readers and, apparently, for other characters. The enigmas are silent, formless absences that cannot be found in any specific location.

To begin with, Désirée may be black—and thus a black mother—after all. If she is black, that mitigates some of the racism I discussed earlier. Instead of being a white character who deserves sympathy for unjust treatment that includes the accusation of being black, she is a black character whose unjust treatment, minus the accusation, on its own account deserves sympathy. Whether or not Désirée is black, the impossibility of knowing her race reveals the fragility of meaning more than Armand's knowable race does. The *presence* of a traditional, *male-oriented* twist *located* at the end of the story veils a troubling, *female-oriented absence*— of knowledge based on skin color or on writing— that has *no particular location.*

Désirée's is troubling in another way as well. The tale says, "She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again," but it never actually says she dies. Just as it is possible that she is partly black, so it is possible that she (with the baby) is alive. If so, that survival mitigates some of the sexism I discussed earlier. Désirée deserves sympathy even if she does not pay for it with her life. In addition, if she does not kill herself, she is saying in effect that life is worth living even if she is black and has lost Armand's love. Indeed, by escaping she has freed herself from those who once projected their desires

on her. Even if she does kill herself and her child in the bayou, it is significant that the deaths are absent from the text, because in this way the work allows some hope, however slight, for the race, class, and sex the characters represent. Like the impossibility of knowing Désirée's race, the impossibility of knowing her death offers a challenge to complacency about knowledge.

As the two unsolved enigmas suggest, the challenge to meaning, like Désirée, tends to operate negatively, through non-sense. She sometimes cries out unconsciously and involuntarily or remains completely silent. These traits appear in the scene where she notices her baby is black:

" Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered . . .

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door.

She at first seemed no threat to the signifying structure she had entered, but the very inarticulateness of this blank card reveals that the system of signification sometimes breaks down.

By creating Désirée's enigmas—the possibility that she is black and the possibility that she and her baby are alive—Chopin to some extent resists the racism and sexism to which she was urged by much in her historical moment. It is important that the enigmas are not just difficult but decipherable puzzles that, when solved, would clearly state that Désirée was black and alive. Instead, the enigmas have the elusive indeterminacy typical of Désirée.

As we have seen, Armand first thinks his wife is white, but he decides he has misinterpreted her. He thinks his wife is black and solely responsible for their son's blackness, but again Armand finds he has misinterpreted. Although unsettling, both incidents leave intact the hope that knowledge can correct misinterpretations. Yet the absences associated with Désirée erode some of that semiotic hope. Because the readers—and probably the characters— never know whether she is partly black and whether she survives the bayou, the story throws into question the very possibility of knowledge, at least in some cases.

It would be satisfying to end on that note, but I must add that Désirée still disrupts the practice of domination less than semiotic practice. While sympathetic to her, Chopin reveals the limitations of some of the character's values. Of course the author does not hold twentieth-century beliefs; yet she is far enough from Désirée's antebellum era to present a critique indicating that the young woman, as a product of her society, has internalized so many of its values that she can never fully attack it. Chopin subtly indicates that, in spite of the disruptiveness of Désirée's enigmas, her subversiveness remains limited, for three main reasons.

To begin with, Désirée is excessively dependent on the unconscious. She is "unconscious," in the sense that she is unaware. For example, Désirée is the last to

realize that her child is not white, and it never occurs to her that her baby's blackness comes from her husband. On another level, she often seems unaware of herself, driven by her own unconscious. Her actions after discovering the baby's race seem trancelike, as if in a dream—or nightmare. And, as has been shown above, she sometimes cries out involuntarily. On still another level, Désirée's lack of political consciousness could also be seen as a kind of "unconsciousness." None of this detracts from her raw power, but uncontrollable power can be as dangerous to those who wield it as to others.

The second restriction on Désirée's subversiveness comes from a certain negative quality. Through her silence (and inarticulateness), through the story's silence about her enigmas, and through her final absence, she disrupts her society's signifying system by revealing its contradictions and meaninglessness. She does destroy complacency about knowledge. Yet all this is not enough. Destruction often must precede creation but cannot in itself suffice. Désirée creates nothing but a baby, whom she certainly takes away, and perhaps kills.

Even Désirée's destructiveness is limited, for she possesses another negative trait: she is "essentially passive." She is discovered by Monsieur Valmondé, she is discovered by Armand, she is filled with joy or fear by her husband's volatile moods, and, while lying on a couch and recovering slowly from childbirth, she is visited by Madame Valmondé. Désirée is immersed in her husband's value system and never stands up to him, not even to interpret the meaning of his dark skin or the baby's, much less to criticize his racism, his sexism, or his treatment of slaves. When she finally acts, she pleads ineffectually with her husband, writes ineffectually to her mother, and then takes the most passive action possible—she disappears. Like the suicide of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening,* Désirée's disappearance is hardly a triumph.

The third weakness lies in Désirée's lack of a sense of political solidarity. She acts only individually or as part of a nuclear family, never as part of a broader group. She fails to acknowledge ties with anyone outside the family who belongs to her sex or to her newly attributed race and class. Her similarity to La Blanche, for instance, fills her with horror. In fact, in Désirée's final efforts to win back Armand she is seeking someone she thinks is her diametric opposite—a white male, assured of his place as master. The only exception to Désirée's final solitude is her baby. But even he cannot represent any kind of political bonding. Even if she does not murder him, nothing indicates that she sees him as linked to her in shared oppression.

Désirée' s individualism resembles that of other characters. For instance, the general condition of blacks and slaves never really comes into question. Madame Valmondé, like Désirée, regrets that one individual, Armand, treats his slaves cruelly, but not that he or other people own slaves in the first place. Instead of recognizing the institutional nature of exploitation based on race, class, and sex, Désirée and others seem to feel that problems stem from the lack of certain personal qualities, such as pity or sympathy. "Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one . . . and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easygoing and indulgent lifetime." Indulgence rather than emancipation is presented as the alternative to Armand's harshness. In a similar vein, individualizing love is shown as the "antidote to the poison

of Armand's racial abstraction." His love for his wife and baby causes him to treat the slaves well for a while. This makes Désirée happy, but she does not question whether one man's moods should have such power over other people.

Chopin sympathetically but critically shows that her characters define problems in terms of the lack of individualistic qualities such as love and mercy, not in terms of the subordination of one group by another. I do not mean to say that individual virtues totally lack value, only that they may not suffice to solve certain problems. In short, though some characters feel pity for slaves, blacks, and women, the assumption that they are inferior goes unquestioned.

In this ideology, superiors should have a sense of *noblesse oblige,* but they remain superior. Concerning sex, race, and class, Désirée upsets systems of meaning but—by failing to connect the personal with the political—stops short of attacking hierarchical power structures. Disruption of meaning could lead to, and may be necessary for, political disruption, but Désirée does not take the political step.

Instead of attacking the meaningfulness of racial difference as a criterion for human rights, Désirée takes a more limited step: she reveals that racial difference is *more difficult to detect* than is commonly supposed. In this view, suffering can result if people classify each other too hastily or if, having finished the sorting process, people treat their inferiors cruelly. But the system of racial difference, with its built-in hierarchy, persists. In this system, superiority is still meaningful; the only difficulty lies in detecting it. It is no wonder that those viewed as inferior do not unite with each other.

Chopin presents these three reasons—unconsciousness, negativeness, and lack of solidarity—to help explain why Désirée does reveal her society's lack of knowledge but fails to change its ideological values, much less its actual power hierarchies. She poses so little threat to the dominant power structures that she holds a relatively privileged position for most of her life. Yet subversiveness need not be bound so tightly to traits such as unconsciousness that make it self-limiting.

Désirée's semiotic subversiveness should be taken seriously. Her disruption of meaning may even be necessary, but Chopin skillfully suggests it is not sufficient.

Source: Ellen Peel, "Semiotic Subversion in 'Désirée's Baby,'" in *American Literature,* Vol. 62, No. 2, June 1990, pp. 223-37.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Wolff addresses enigmatic elements in "Désirée's Baby," defining "ways in which it articulates and develops themes that are central to other of Chopin's works."

For many years, "Désirée's Baby" was the one piece of Chopin's fiction most likely to be known; even today, despite the wide respect that her second novel has won, there are still readers whose acquaintance with Chopin's work is restricted to this one, widely-anthologized short story. Rankin, who did not feel the need to reprint "Désirée's Baby" in *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Tales,* nonetheless judged it "perhaps . . . one of the world's best short stories." Unfortunately, Rankin left future critics a terminology with which to describe the value of this and other studies in *Bayou Folk:* it had the "freshness which springs from an unexplored field—the quaint and picturesque life among the Creole and Acadian folk of the Louisiana bayous." In short, it was excellent "regional" work—hence limited to certain circumscribed triumphs.

Critics' tendency to dismiss Chopin's fiction as little more than local color began to diminish by the late 1950s; nevertheless, old habits died hard. "Désirée's Baby" continued to be the most frequently anthologized of her short fictions, and while the comments on it strained after some larger tragic significance, the definition of that "tragedy" was still formulated almost exclusively in "regional" terms. Claude M. Simpson introduces the tale in his collection with a brief essay on the local color movement and concludes that the story draws its effect from a reader's appreciation of the impartial cruelties of the slave system. Several years later, in another anthology of American short stories, Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick give Chopin credit (again as a regionalist) for daring to touch upon the forbidden subject of miscegenation; and, of course, the story they select to illustrate Chopin's particular talent is "Désirée's Baby."

Other critics, still acknowledging the importance of regional elements in the tale, seek to discover the reasons for its persistently compelling quality by examining the structure. Thus Larzer Ziff observes that "the most popular of Mrs. Chopin's stories, while they make full use of the charming lilt of Creole English and the easy openness of Creole manners, concern themselves, as do Maupassant's, with some central quirk or turn in events which reverses the situation that was initially presented." He cites the conclusion of "Désirée's Baby" as an example: "So, characteristically, does the Chopin story depend on a twist." Taking a similar view, Per Seyersted remarks the "taut compression and restrained intensity" of the tale and then notes (with some asperity) that "the surprise ending, though somewhat contrived, has a bitter, piercing quality that could not have been surpassed by [Maupassant] himself." Yet, in the final analysis, these judgments are no more satisfactory than those that grow from the more narrow definition of Chopin as "local colorist": if significant effects are seldom achieved merely through a deft management of dialect and scenery, it is also the case that a "trick" or "surprise" conclusion is almost never a sufficient means by which to evoke a powerful and poignant reaction from the reader.

Thus "Désirée's Baby" remains an enigma. We still tend to admire it and to demonstrate our admiration by selecting it to appear in anthologies; yet the admiration is given somewhat grudgingly— perhaps because we cannot fully comprehend the story. The specifically Southern elements of the story seem significant; however, the nature of their force is not clear. The reversal of the situation that concludes the tale is important (although to a discerning reader it may well be no surprise), but, contrary to Seyersted's remarks, the story's full impact patently does not derive from this writer's "trick." And while the story has been accepted as characteristic of Chopin's work, it is in several ways unusual or unique—being the only one of her fictions to touch upon the subject of miscegenation, for example. We might respond to this accumulation of contradictions by assuming that a mistake has been made somewhere along the line—that the tale has been misinterpreted or that it is not really representative of Chopin's fiction. Yet such an assumption would not explain the force of those many years of readers' response; in the end, it would not resolve the persistent enigma of "Désirée's Baby." Alternatively, we might try to understand why critics' judgments of the story have been so different, presuming such judgments to be insufficient but not, perhaps, fundamentally incorrect. But more importantly, we must expand our vision of the story in order to see precisely those ways in which it articulates and develops themes that are central to other of Chopin's works.

A majority of Chopin's fictions are set in worlds where stability or permanence is a precarious state: change is always threatened—by the vagaries of impassive fate, by the assaults of potentially ungovernable individual passions, or merely by the inexorable passage of time. More generally, we might say that Chopin construes existence as necessarily uncertain. By definition, then, to live is to be vulnerable; and the artist who would capture the essence of life will turn his attention to those intimate and timeless moments when the comforting illusion of certainty is unbalanced by those forces that may disrupt and destroy. Insofar as Chopin can be said to emulate Maupassant, who stands virtually alone as her avowed literary model, we might say that she strives to look "out upon life through [her] own being and with [her] own eyes"; that she desires no more than to tell us what she sees "in a direct and simple way." Nor is Chopin's vision dissimilar to Maupassant's, for what she sees is the ominous and insistent presence of the margin: the inescapable fact that even our most vital moments must be experienced on the boundary— always threatening to slip away from us into something else, into some dark, undefined contingency. The careful exploration of this bourne is, in some sense, then, the true subject for much of her best fiction.

Certainly it is the core subject of "Désirée's Baby"—a story that treats layers of ambiguity and uncertainty with ruthless economy. Indeed, the tale is almost a paradigmatic study of the demarcating limits of human experience, and—since this subject is so typically the center of Chopin's attention—our continuing intuition that this story is a quite appropriate selection to stand as "representative" of her work must be seen as fundamentally correct. What is more, if we understand the true focus of this fiction, we are also in a position to comprehend the success of its conclusion. The "twist" is no mere writer's trick; rather, it is the natural consequence— one might say the necessary and inevitable concomitant—of life as Chopin construes it.

At the most superficial level in "Désirée's Baby," there are distinctions that attend coloration, differences of pigment that carry definitions of social caste and even more damning implications about the "value" of one's "identity." The problem of race is managed quite idiosyncratically in this tale: we have already noted that this is the only one of Chopin's many stories to treat miscegenation directly or explicitly; however, we can be ever more emphatic—this is the only story even to probe the implications of those many hues of skin that were deemed to comprise the "negro" population. Yet from the very beginning Chopin focuses our attention upon this element with inescapable determination: she chooses not to use dialect conversation; she reduces the description of architecture and vegetation to a minimum—leaving only the thematically necessary elements. The result is a tale where the differences between "black" and "white" remain as the only way to locate the events—its only "regional" aspects, if you will—and we cannot avoid attending to them.

Yet for all this artistic direction, Chopin is clearly not primarily interested in dissecting the *social problem* of slavery (as Cable might be); rather, she limits herself almost entirely to the personal and the interior. Thus the dilemma of "color" must ultimately be construed emblematically, with the ironic and unstated fact that human situations can *never* be as clear as "black and white."

In the antebellum South, much private security depended upon the public illusion that whites lived within a safe compound, that a barrier of insurmountable proportions separated them from the unknown horrors of some lesser existence, and that these territorial boundaries were clear and inviolable. The truth, of course, was that this was an uncertain margin, susceptible to a multitude of infractions and destined to prove unstable. At its very beginning, the story reminds us of inevitable change ahead: Désirée is presumed to have been left "by a party of Texans"—pioneers en route to the territory whose slave policies were so bitterly contested when it was annexed that they proved to be a significant precursor to the Civil War that followed. Chopin's touch is light: the implications of this detail may be lost to a modern audience, but they would have loomed mockingly to a reader in 1892, especially a Southern reader.

Even within the supposedly segregated social system there is abundant evidence of violation. "'And the way he cried,'" Désirée's remarks proudly of her lusty child; "'Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin.'" What color is La Blanche, we might wonder, and what was Armand's errand in her cabin? "One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys . . . stood fanning the child slowly," and he becomes a kind of nightmare double (perhaps a half-brother, in fact) for Désirée's baby—a visual clue to the secret of this infant's mixed blood; eventually, his presence provokes the shock of recognition for Désirée. "She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. 'Ah!' It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered." None of the "blacks" is referred to as actually dark-skinned; even the baby's caretaker is a "yellow nurse."

In the end, only Armand's skin is genuinely colored—a "dark, handsome face" momentarily brightened, it would seem, by the happiness of marriage. And if this description gives a literal clue to the denouement of the story's mystery, it is even more

effective as an index to character. Armand has crossed that shadowy, demonic boundary between mercy and kindness on the one hand and cruelty on the other. His posture towards the slaves in his possession has always been questionable—his "rule was a strict one . . . and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easygoing and indulgent lifetime." Little wonder, then, that when his wife's child displeases him, "the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him." His inhumanity towards Désirée and the servants alike bespeaks an irreversible journey into some benighted region; and the bonfire, by whose light he reads that last, fateful letter, is no more than a visible sign of the triumph of those powers of darkness in his soul. Thus when Désirée exclaims wonderingly, "'my skin is fair . . . Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,'" her comment *may* be relevant to the parentage of each; however, within the context of the story, it figures more reliably as a guide to the boundaries of humane behavior.

Underlying this insistent preoccupation with the literal question of color, then, is Chopin's ironic perception of the tenuous quality of such distinctions: it is simplistic to call "quadroons" and "yellows" "blacks" and "negroes." And if we move from this overt level into the labyrinth of the human soul, we will discover a man who has become lost in the wilderness of his own "blackest" impulses—a master who reverts to tyranny and is possessed by Satan, by the only absolute darkness in the tale. The lesser existence into which Armand sinks stems not from his Negroid parentage, but from a potential for personal evil that he shares with all fellow creatures (as the leitmotif imagery of salvation and damnation suggests). Thus the horror that underlies Chopin's tale—and the ultimate mystery of "black and white" as she defines it—is not *really* limited to the social arrangements of the Southern slave system at all.

A world of evil is one sort of wilderness that lies along the margins of our most mundane activities, but it is not the only horror that lies in wait. Our moments of most joyful passion, too, threaten us with a form of annihilation: to be open to love is to be vulnerable to invasions that we can neither foresee nor fully protect ourselves against. Thus Chopin's rendering of the love between Désirée and Armand is an insistent compression of opposites. Armand is supposed to have fallen in love at first sight: "That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot . . . The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles." The difference in Armand's life between love and some other force—something equally turbulent but more reckless and cruel—is no more than a hair's breadth or the fluttering of an eye. Linguistically, the two forces cannot be separated at all.

In Désirée's case, the peril of emotional entanglement has different origins; yet if anything, it is even more dangerous. She has been God's gift to her adoptive parents, the child of love as her name implies, helpless and delicate and unable to comprehend anything but love in its purest manifestations, "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,— the idol of Valmondé." Of the other side of love— of violence and baser passions—she is entirely innocent. In fact, innocence is her most marked characteristic, a kind of childlike, helpless ignorance. "It made [Madame Valmondé] laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Désirée was little more than a

baby herself." Repeatedly, Chopin displays her infantine charm: Désirée couched with her baby, for example, "in her soft white muslins and laces," looking like nothing so much as a child herself. The vulnerability of such innocence is captured in her naive questions, in her trusting tendency to turn to her husband who has rejected her, even in the fragility of her garments that were surely intended only for one whose life might be protected from harsh contingencies. When Désirée married, she came to live at her husband's plantation, L'Abri (The Shelter); and such a home seems right, even necessary, for this delicate creature, even though the physical realities of the estate belie its name. "The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall." However, Désirée must accept this refuge at mere face value: she cannot bring herself to see the ominous possibilities in those ancestral trees that portend both life and death.

In the end, Désirée cannot withstand the shock of being forced to acknowledge the contingencies whose existence she has ignored for so long. When Armand's love slips into cruelty, when L'Abri echoes with sibilant mockery, Désirée loses her own tenuous grasp on the balance of life. For her there seems only one choice, one final boundary to cross; and the alternatives are measured by the line between civilization and the patient, hungry bayou that lies just beyond. Madness, murder, death—all these wait to claim the love-child who could not keep her stability in the face of life's inescapable contrarieties. "She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches . . . Désirée had not changed the thin white garments nor the slippers which she wore . . . She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds. She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again."

Much of the effect of this tale derives from the understatement that Chopin employs to render Désirée's annihilation and Armand's inescapable, internal hell. Even more, perhaps, the effect comes from the economy with which she captures the precariousness of the human condition—the persistent shadow-line that threads its way through all of the significant transactions of our lives. This is, perhaps, the most consistent theme in all of Chopin' s fictions. We can see it in her choice of subject—preoccupation with marriage that may be either destructive or replenishing, the relationship between mother and child that is both hindering of personal fulfillment and necessary for full womanly development, and the convulsive effects of emergent sexuality. We can see it even more subtly (but more insistently) in her imagistic patterns.

As early as the first novel Chopin was already focusing on the implications of that margin between the bayou and the transient clearing of the domesticated plantation, although her management of this theme is less skillful than it will become in later works. Mélicent is charmed by Grégoire' s Southern passion and inclined to suppose that it is harmless— merely a game. Similarly, she is intrigued by the tropical bayou and disposed to project her simple, uncomplicated imagination into its dark recesses: "The wildness of the scene caught upon her erratic fancy, speeding it for a quick moment into

the realms of romance." Very soon, Mélicent realizes that there is an unknowable, primitive force in the bayou's depth—something that both frightens and repels her. "Nameless voices—weird sounds that awake in a Southern forest at twilight's approach, — were crying a sinister welcome to the settling gloom."

Eventually, she is shocked by a similarly ominous and irrational strain in Grégoire's passion for her, the hint of a potential for blind destruction. In both cases, Chopin demonstrates Mélicent's reluctance and innocence by showing her need to honor certain boundaries that society has drawn. She ventures out in the pirogue only once, shunning the bayou thereafter; eventually, she rejects the lover, too, by returning to the safety of her Northern home.

Much later, when she wrote *The Awakening,* Chopin would again employ this metaphor of margins (as she had throughout the many stories written between her first and second novels); and in this work the theme appears with consummate artistry. Here Chopin deals with the many implications of Edna Pontellier's emergent sexuality—both its positive and its destructive elements. The irresistible sensual call of the sun and sea echoes throughout the book to render the tidal pull of the heroine's nascent feelings; and throughout there is a linguistic insistence upon the significance of boundaries and of their violation. Indeed, the earliest descriptive passages announce the motif: we are at the beach where water meets land, sky meets water; and in the tropical white sun, demarcating lines waver uncertainly. "[Mr. Pontellier] fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at a snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon." As the novel progresses, this initial statement of theme is expanded to include many paired possibilities— sleeping and waking, freedom and isolation, life and death—and the almost unendurable tension that is felt by all who must maintain at a balanced separation between the warring opposites in life is suggested by Chopin's repeated use of the word "melting."

The vision in all of Chopin's best fiction is consummately interior, and it draws for strength upon her willingness to confront the bleak fact of life's tenuous stabilities. Read quite independently, "Désirée's Baby" may be judged a superb piece of short fiction—an economical tight psychological drama. However, seen in the more ample context of Chopin's complete work, the story accrues added significance as the most vivid and direct statement of her major concern—the fiction of limits.

Source: Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "The Fiction of Limits: 'Désirée's Baby,'" *in Kate Chopin,* edited by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views, Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, pp. 35-42.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Toth explores how Chopin used literary conventions to engage readers, then transcended those conventions to treat her subject matter in original ways.

Kate Chopin read widely, and recognized literary conventions when she saw them. In her diary entry for May 12, 1894, she writes of her neighbor Mrs. Hull's story, which involves

a girl with Negro blood who is loved by a white man. Possessing a noble character she effaces herself and he knows her no more. She dies of consumption.

The story is a theme "which Cable has used effectively," Chopin notes, and adds that for herself, "I have no objection to a commonplace theme if it be handled artistically or with originality." But Mrs. Hull, sadly, lacks "freshness, spontaneity or originality of perception. The whole tendency is in the conventional groove."

Kate Chopin expected of Mrs. Hull, then, what she expected of herself: that conventional material be handled creatively.

In her writings, Chopin uses the term *conventional* only in its least favorable senses: lacking in originality, dutiful, derivative, trite. In her essay on the Western Association of Writers, for instance, she criticizes their conservative "clinging to past and conventional standards," ignoring the real world outside "ethical and conventional standards." She approves of Hamlin Garland's suggestion that "the youthful artist should free himself from the hold of conventionalism"; she dislikes the representation of Edwin Booth through his letters, "expressions wrung from him by the conventional demands of his daily life."

But Kate Chopin recognized in her own fiction the artistic value of social convention, as a contrast with the independent and questioning qualities of her best characters. She also saw the uses of literary conventions: procedures or devices a writer takes over from earlier works. Any writer has a certain storehouse of forms and images to draw upon: techniques, plots, or characters which have been repeatedly used by numerous authors, often in different periods and with special modifications for the time. Still, in each period a convention must be accepted as conventional by the writer's audience: the audience must recognize the writer's shorthand, or much of the writer's meaning is lost.

Thus the shrewd author can use conventions as Kate Chopin did, to attract readers—and then to lead them beyond convention to new insights, beyond "that outward existence which conforms" and into "the inward life that questions."

Throughout her works, Chopin uses numerous literary conventions to present women and black people. In *At Fault* (1890), for example, the central female characters are

distinguished by coloring and character, Thérèse Lafirme resembling the Fair Maiden and Fanny Hosmer approximating the Dark Lady, to use Leslie Fielder's terminology. As is conventional, the Dark Lady drowns, and the hero marries the Fair Maiden. The story has few surprises.

As for Chopin's early black characters, many of them fit the Contented Slave or Happy Darkey convention: see, for instance, "For Marse Chouchote" (1891), "The Bênitous' Slave" (1892) and "Old Aunt Peggy" (1892). Joçint in *At Fault* bears some resemblance to the Brute Negro; many minor characters provide local color. Although Chopin knew she was using conventional materials in these and other stories involving blacks, not all critics have recognized that fact. Richard Potter, for example, asserts that Chopin was not "in step with her times" and that her pictures of white brutality, paradoxical white attitudes, and the "curse" of slavery have not appeared in other southern authors until recent years.

While these are important subjects in Chopin, they are also significant in Grace King and especially in George W. Cable, who was writing fifteen years before Chopin. Kate Chopin's originality lies not in her use of the themes Potter mentions, but in her combination of these themes with a criticism of the role of women. In *The Grandissimes* (1880), Cable criticizes white women for their ineffectuality; in her stories, most notably in "Désirée's Baby," Chopin explains the powerlessness of women, both white and black, through using the Tragic Mulatto convention.

The Tragic Mulatto, or Tragic Octoroon, convention is more often than not based on the idea that racial inheritance determines character. A *reductio ad absurdum* of this idea appears in Roark Bradford's *This Side of Jordan:*

The blade of a razor flashed through the air . . . Her Negro blood sent it unerringly between two ribs. Her Indian blood sent it back for an d and third slash.

But better and more thoughtful writers like George W. Cable, William Faulkner, and Kate Chopin recognize that it is not a person's inherited race which determines character, but society's reaction to race. In other words, environment plays a major role in shaping an individual's character.

The Tragic Octoroon, whether in life or art, has a divided inheritance. In the most conventional literature, the Tragic Octoroon has a constant conflict between the passions (inherited from the black side) and the intellect (from the white portion). The male Tragic Octoroon is militant, rebellious, and melancholy, much like Harriet Beecher Stowe's George Harris in *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* the female is beautiful and, usually, self-sacrificing—like Stowe's Eliza. She is often seen on the auction block, as in William Wells Brown's *Clot el* (1853) and Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon* (1859), and her closeness to the white beauty ideal makes her the perfect vehicle for creating pity and terror in a white audience.

The male of mixed blood has never been so interesting to writers as the female—and indeed, the term "octoroon" is rarely applied to men. Conventionally, the white-

appearing female could be recognized as octoroon through a few vestiges of her black ancestry, most notably (as in Boucicault' s *The Octoroon)* the bluish tinge in her nails and the faint blue mark in the white of her eyes. As with Stowe's Eliza, the octoroon's hair is as straight, her features as keen, and her feet as dainty as any Caucasian woman's.

In "Désirée's Baby," Chopin appears to be writing about the tragic octoroon, female—until the dénouement reveals her actual, unconventional theme.

For more than half a century, "Désirée' s Baby" (1893) kept Kate Chopin's name alive. When *The Awakening* (1899) was condemned for alleged immorality and its author ostracized most of her other works quickly faded from view. Only "Désirée's Baby" remained continuously in print, a staple of short story collections, and so well-known that its plot is sometimes confused with *The Awakening's* But like most short stories, "Désirée's Baby" has attracted very little serious attention: to date, only articles by Robert D. Arner and Cynthia Griffin Wolff.

Arner's criticism of the story concerns its multiple ironies, and the human need for love to overcome rigid racial differences. Arner discusses, briefly, the relationship between character and environment, but much of his article is devoted to the tale's imagery: contrasts between light and dark, oppositions between God/Providence and Satan. Arner sees "Désirée's Baby," correctly, as a mixture of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Clarissa Harlowe* traditions, both traditions with enormous popular appeal.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, in contrast, is more concerned with the story's psychological aspects. She notes that critics have, mistakenly in her opinion, attributed the tale's tragic significance to its "regional" qualities, or to the sudden twist at the end. To Wolff, the core of "Désirée's Baby" is the tension between stability and impermanence, the shadowy line between humane behavior and the human potential for evil.

"Désirée's Baby" is, of course, ironic, symbolic, regional, and psychological. Yet neither Arner nor Wolff, nor the other critics who have made briefer comments on the story, have seen it as a political analysis of slavery. "Désirée's Baby" is not simply the story of one master and his wife; its power derives from what it says about slavery and character, about women and blacks in a patriarchal society—and what it says is grafted upon literary convention as a vehicle.

"Désirée's Baby," written in late 1892, is about a foundling discovered by M. Valmondé, whose wife had despaired of having a child. Désirée grows up to be beautiful, gentle, affectionate, and sincere. Armand Aubigny, riding past her home, falls violently in love with her and marries her, despite her unknown origins.

A short time after Désirée gives birth to a baby boy, all is changed, for Armand notices that the child is not entirely white in appearance. Armand ignores Désirée, or speaks to her cruelly. Soon he tells her that she is not white. When Désirée's adopted mother asks her to come home and bring the child, Désirée leaves Armand—but turns toward the bayou instead of home, and is never seen again.

After burning Désirée's effects, Armand finds a letter from his dead mother to his dead father. The mother gives thanks for her husband's love, and to

the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.

In the final ironic reversal, then, it is Armand— the master of the plantation—who is black.

"Désirée's Baby" is about environment, the effect of slavery on men's character. It is also about the parallels between roles of women and blacks (or "persons of color"). Chopin shows that color caste and economic superiority develop certain unenviable but inevitable qualities in the white masters. She admired Emerson, who wrote of the slave owner that he enjoyed

the existence, beside the covetousness, of a bitterer element, the love of power, the voluptuousness of holding a human being in his absolute control.

Armand has this unchecked power, and a disposition to go with it: his is an "imperious and exacting nature" prone to violence in thought and action. Even his falling in love comes "as if struck by a pistol shot." His plantation is funereal and forbidding, too long without "the gentle presence of a mistress," since old M. Aubigny, Armand's father, had stayed with his wife in France. Désirée's presence does not moderate her surroundings, although falling in love improves Armand's temper: his "dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her."

Toward his slaves Armand is harsh, cruel. He finds his identity in possession and domination. But with a son to follow him, he can relax his iron grasp on his slaves. As Désirée reports happily to her stepmother, since the boy's birth her husband has not punished a single slave—not even one who pretended to burn his leg in order to avoid work. But after Armand thinks he has discovered mixed blood in Désirée, "the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves." His attitude toward his wife parallels his actions toward his slaves.

Armand's Satanic conduct associates him, as do his funereal surroundings, with the powers of darkness, in contrast with the whiteness of Désirée. Like the angelic feminine figures of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, Désirée is constantly seen in white. When she leaves, her white feet and white gown are torn—reminiscent of Elizags escape in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the trials of Christian saints. White and black are thus signs of morality, not of race.

Désirée's whiteness stands for the code of behavior she represents: femininity, submission to a father, then to a husband. The wife's love for her husband is like the mother's love for her child— supposed to be unconditional. While Armand's love depends on his belief that Désirée is white—he no longer loves her when he feels she has injured his name—her love for him is independent of his behavior.

Moreover, the virtues expected of women—in particular, submission—are those required of blacks in a slave society. Women are expected to love unconditionally, and obey their fathers or husbands. Blacks are to obey unconditionally, and love their masters devotedly. Désirée does not object to Armand's sending her away. The slaves do not rebel, though under Armand's iron rule, "his Negroes had forgotten to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime."

It was the old indulgent master, Armand's father, who broke the color taboo, marrying a woman considered black. Armand appears to have a sexual relationship with La Blanche, one of his slaves, but he violates no social rules: he simply takes his right to her because he is master. The responses of the two men reveal the complex interrelationships of sex and race. The easy-going master is the unconventional husband; the man who is imperious in one sphere is equally demanding in the other, for in each case he requires mastery.

In the end Armand, not Désirée, is the tragic octoroon. The signs of Désirée's whiteness that Armand rejects are the conventional ones: her brown hair, "long, silky" with "a golden gleam"; her gray eyes; her white hand, "whiter than yours, Armand." According to literary convention, her proximity to whiteness is supposed to bring Armand's sympathy.

But Armand himself has the qualities of the Tragic Octoroon male: he is militant, rebellious, melancholy, at the mercy of his fierce passions. Chopin prepares her readers for one set of conventions—the female ones—and then surprises them with the male set. The story may be read as a deterministic unfolding of Armand's character, but with Chopin the relationship between race and behavior is more ironic, and more complex. Ultimately we do not know where she stands on the connection between racial inheritance and character.

What is noteworthy about "Desiree'sBaby" is the double characterization of Armand: through his behavior to his wife and to his slaves. The reader sees what Harriet Beecher Stowe also showed: slavery destroys not only the slave's character, but also the master's. Chopin shows that patriarchy limits the development not only of the wife, but also of the husband.

"Désirée's Baby" is, in essence, a political and psychological analysis of a master's character. What Désirée gives birth to is a new kind of knowledge, a new standard of judgment. The narrator's eye is the conventional eye of society, that judges men by their power, and women by their beauty. But Chopin uses the literary conventions of the Tragic Octoroon to show what judgments are most significant. Désirée has the physical qualities of a Tragic Octoroon, but Armand has the more important psychological traits.

Finally, Chopin seems to be saying that to judge on appearances is hardly enough: reliance on convention, either in literature or in life, can mislead and enchain. Armand, who judged by appearances rather than essence, and who was sensitive to male power but not to female emotions, destroyed his own happiness. Armand is a credit to neither of his races, and the last word of the story is "slavery."

Source: Emily Toth, "Kate Chopin and Literary Convention: 'Désirée's Baby,'" in *Southern Studies,* Vol. XX, No. 2, Summer 1981, pp. 201-08.

Topics for Further Study

Find out more about plantation life in the antebellum South. Based on this research, do you think the portrayal of L'Abri is accurate with regards to Louisiana's history?

Chopin has been noted for her exploration of a woman's search for identity. Do you find evidence of such investigation in "Désirée's Baby"? Why, or why not?

Do you understand why Désirée took the course of action she did at the end of the story? Explain your answer.

Do you think if Désirée had chosen to return to her family home with her child, they would have been able to have any kind of normal life? Why, or why not?

How do you think Armand feels at the end of the story? Do you think he will continue to embrace his racist views, in the light of his knowledge regarding his own ancestry?

Compare and Contrast

1890s: Cotton is the primary crop for many southern farmers. Its price fluctuates greatly. Cotton production, however, is on the rise, and by the mid-1890s, more than twenty million acres of cotton are harvested.

Today: The price of U.S. cotton fluctuates between $0.47 per pound up to $1.13 per pound. The United States remains the world leader in cotton exports, with 6.8 million bales sold abroad in 1999-2000.

1890s: By the end of the 1890s, American farmland comprises about 841 million acres. Of this acreage, almost 44 percent of farms are located in states east of the Mississippi River and 56 percent are in states west of the Mississippi River. Around 10.2 million Americans work in agriculture.

Today: By the mid-1990s, American farmland comprises about 972 million acres. Of this acreage, only about 21 percent of farms are located in states east of the Mississippi River and almost 79 percent are in states west of the Mississippi River. Today, farming makes up less than 2 percent of the United States' total annual gross national product. Around 3.6 million Americans work in agriculture.

1890s: By the middle of the decade, Louisiana's population is just over 1,100,000, which includes 559,000 African Americans.

Today: By 1998, Louisiana's population is around 4,400,000, which includes 1,400,000 African Americans. Of the total population, 15 percent of Louisiana's residents are employed in farm-related work.

1860: In the antebellum years, the majority of African Americans in the south are enslaved. In 1860, slaves make up 34 percent of the southern population while free African Americans—around 260,000—make up about 2 percent of the southern population.

1890s: By the time Chopin writes "Désirée's Baby," slavery has been outlawed by the Thirteenth Amendment.

Today: Most nations throughout the world have abolished slavery, although it is still practiced in some parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights in London estimates that forms of servitude affect more than 200 million poor people.

1890s: In 1896, 130,334 African Americans in Louisiana cast their votes.

Today: There are 902,000 African Americans in Louisiana who are of voting age.

1890s: In 1896, 125,000 American families have estates valued at $50,000 or greater. This is out of total population of around 70 million people.

Today: Only 6.5 percent of Americans have a net worth greater than $100,000. There are 16.5 million American families with an income of $50,000 or greater, out of a total population of just over 101 million families. Of the families in this income bracket, 14.8 million are white.

What Do I Read Next?

Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) was controversial because of its frank treatment of an adulterous affair as well as the subject of female sexuality. Largely unread throughout most of the 1900s, it was rediscovered in 1972 and has since become a classic.

"The Necklace" (1884) by Guy de Maupassant, who is considered to be France's greatest short-story writer, includes a "trick ending" that has tragic results.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman was a New England writer working at the same time as Chopin who was also considered a local colorist. "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1891) tells a funny but serious story of a Massachusetts farm wife's assertion of independence.

Sarah Orne Jewett is another of Chopin's contemporaries who wrote regional fiction. Her collection of sketches about life in a fictional Maine coastal village, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), is an acclaimed example of local color.

O. Henry is the master of the "trick ending." His story "The Gift of the Magi" (1905) is perhaps the most well-known of those stories with an ironic reversal at the end. It tells about a young couple who, despite their poverty, want to give each other a fine gift on Christmas Eve.

Mark Twain's 1894 novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is a story about miscegenation (cohabitation, sexual relations, or marriage between persons of different races) in the antebellum South. A light-skinned slave switches her baby with her white owner's baby, with unexpected results for the entire household. The novel is noted for its grim humor and its reflections on the nature of racism.

Charles Chesnutt's story "The Wife of His Youth" (1899) examines color prejudices among African Americans against those people with darker skin.

Cane (1923), an experimental novel by Jean Toomer, expresses the experience of being African American in the United States. The novel is comprised of a variety of literary forms, including poems and short stories. It draws on the South's rural past and on African-American folklore.

Further Study

Bannon, Lois Elmer, *Magnolia Mound: A Louisiana River Plantation,* Firebird Press, 1984.

This book examines plantation life and the economic system of slavery in the old South.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Kate Chopin,* Modern Critical Views, Chelsea House, 1987.

This volume is a collection of critical essays on Chopin.

Jones, Anne Goodwyn, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936,* Louisiana State University Press, 1981.

This work features a discussion of important southern

women writers.

Saxon, Lyle, *Old Louisiana,* Pelican Publishing Company, 1989.

The main emphasis of this work is life in the old South.

Seyersted, Per, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography,* Louisiana State University Press, 1969.

This book is one of the earliest full-length critical works on Chopin, which helped lead to her "rediscovery."

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Pattee, Fred Lewis, "The Revolt of the 'Nineties,'" in *The Development of the American Short Story: A Historical Survey,* Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1923, pp. 309-36.

Rankin, Daniel, *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories,* University of Pennsylvania Press, 1932.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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