

ANALYSIS

“Desirée’s Baby” (1893)



Kate Chopin

(1851-1904)

“Desiree’s Baby’ is Kate Chopin’s most famous story. It was a success from the moment it appeared in *Vogue* in 1893. By 1907 Leonidas R. Whipple was calling it ‘one of the most perfect short stories in English.’ In the 1920s Fred Lewis Patee, among the first scholars to study the American short story, closed his discussion of the work by writing that Chopin ‘produced what often are masterpieces before which one can only wonder and conjecture.’ In the 1930s Arthur Hobson Quinn added his considerable authority to what had become a general opinion among scholars: ‘Desiree’s Baby,’ he said, is ‘one of the greatest short stories in the language’....

The final sentence is among the most powerful in Kate Chopin’s fiction. Not only are Desiree and the baby dead [see contrary interpretation below], not only is Armand revealed to be himself what he hatefully accused his wife of being, but the words of revelation come from Armand’s mother—a woman with black blood, a woman who lived with her husband the very life that is so impossible for Armand to contemplate, so ugly and unthinkable for him that he must destroy whatever reminds him of it.”

Bernard Koloski
Kate Chopin: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 25

This is the most reprinted story by Kate Chopin, due especially to its treatment of miscegenation, a subject largely taboo in the 19th century. She was preceded by George Washington Cable, who had written about miscegenation in stories collected in *Old Creole Days* (1879). The year after her story was published Mark Twain dramatized the subject at length in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), likewise with a richly ironic plot. William Faulkner later expanded on the ambiguities and ironies of racial identity in fictions including *Light in August* (1932).

Surprising ironies and poetic justice are the main satisfactions of “Desirée’s Baby.” Desirée was abandoned as an infant at the slave plantation of the Valmonde family. By the age of 18 she is all a man

could desire and an aristocratic neighbor Armand Aubigny falls in love with her and they marry. When she has a baby who is visibly part black, Armand assumes that she is part black and sends her (and their baby) away, back to her mother in disgrace. Instead, Désirée disappears into the bayou with her baby like a runaway slave and is never seen again. In the end Armand finds an old letter from his mother to his father indicating that she “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.” Armand has falsely condemned Désirée (and their baby) and sent them away because out of prejudice and arrogance he assumed they were *part* black when in fact his own mother was *all* black. His father proved himself a better man than Armand by transcending race in loving his wife and, implicitly, by treating his slaves more humanely because of that.

The French characters, names and phrases contribute to the exotic atmosphere and tone of a romantic tale. Slaves are picking cotton in the hot fields and a half-naked quadroon boy fans the baby slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Chopin displays her facility as a storyteller in “Désirée’s Baby,” which is economical, clearly focused and well paced with the abrupt surprise ending that soon became formulaic in the early 20th century as perfected by O. Henry. The characters are stock rather than realistic and her style is plain as compared to the lyricism, figurative language and vivid Impressionism in *The Awakening* 5 years later, with only a few similes, conventional except for “That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot.”

The most effective scene is subtle, when Désirée looks slowly back and forth from the quadroon boy with the fan to her baby and gradually realizes that her child too is part black: “The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.” Chopin deepens the sense of injustice and intensifies ironies with a few thoughts of Armand when he sends Désirée and their baby away: “He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed this into his wife’s soul.” Just as he is oblivious to the injustice--and futility--of punishing Désirée (and their baby) to pay back God, he thinks nothing of his injustice to his slaves: “And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves.” Chopin’s ability to multiply ironies is evidence of an unusually discerning intellect, like Wharton.

Like Twain in *Pudd’nhead*, Chopin ridicules the absurdity of defining people by race, especially in fractions. She emphasizes the ongoing tragic effects of racism by focusing on the baby in her title. Even if Désirée and her baby make it through the bayou alive—like many slaves following the legendary “underground railroad”—we must assume they will never learn the truth that Armand discovers in the end. Both will be burdened throughout their lives by a falsehood that should not matter. That is the theme Faulkner picks up in *Light in August*.

Michael Hollister (2013)