

Katherine Wagner

Danielle Mercier

LIT4386-01

11 April 2024

Once Again, White Men are the Worst;

Sense of Identity & Ideals of Authority in Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby"

In typical white-male fashion, the characters in "Désirée's Baby" grapple with their insecurities concerning their position in a changing society, reflecting Chopin's views on the backwards attitudes of the time period. Set in rural Louisiana, the narrative examines the complexities of identity and authority in a society where race and status dictate power dynamics. These ideas come to a head when Désirée, who is of unknown parentage and was adopted by plantation-owning parents, and her husband have a child who is born with African features. As their son grows older, Désirée's husband begins to revert back to his poor treatment of his wife and the enslaved people whom he oversees. This shift in their relationship greatly impacts Désirée, as she has grown rather dependent on how her husband is feeling as a source of her own mood. Désirée grapples with the change in her marriage while simultaneously discovering her interracial parentage which alters her sense of identity.

These complexities related to race are explored as a sense of anxiety among white Americans during the time, as analyzed by Olivia Stowell in her 2019 paper "Re-Inscribing Racial Hierarchy: White Racial Anxiety, Interracial Sexuality, and Ambiguously Raced Bodies in Kate Chopin's *Désirée's Baby*." At this time the racial tensions in America, including racially motivated violence against people of color, were heightened due to this anxiety as white mobs

attempted to “entrench white supremacist structures and terrorize black communities (Stowell2). These anxieties are reflected by the actions of Désirée’s husband, Armand, a white man who has grown up with status due to his family’s wealth and his racial identity. Armand is attached to the idea of racial purity, and once he sees his son has African features he expels Désirée and their son from their home and burns their belongings. Despite his previous love for his wife, the discovery of her interracial parentage becomes a threat to his status that he must remove. His feeling of superiority as a white man can also be seen in how his demeanor towards the slaves on his property shifted as his son grew older and appeared more African. Désirée even reveals it was as if “the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves” (Chopin 2).

Désirée as a character can even be seen as a personification of the so-called “white anxiety,” as the idea of white supremacy was based on the “purity of bloodlines.” Much of the fear from these white supremacists stems from the fact that they might be discovered to be “impure” or “less white” which would greatly impact their position in society (Stowell 3). These sentiments are what fueled the white supremacist agenda, and pushed the narrative that any blood other than white changed the bloodline irreparably, as Stowell explores in the context of writings from the time period which served as implicit warnings against interracial couples and children. During this time period, white individuals felt a great deal of anxiety not only surrounding the integration of people of color into their society, but the existence of “sleepers” or people of African descent who are white passing (Fedosik 2). Désirée had been afforded every luxury related to being white due to her appearance and her adoption by a white family, and had become quite accustomed to this life that only white people had access to. It is only when she has a son who her husband believes discloses her African lineage, that she loses everything she was

used to. This leads to her being expelled from her home due to her presumed “impurity.” These anxieties of white individuals surrounding a shift from a homogenous white society towards a more interracial one are clearly demonstrated by the way that Désirée is treated by her husband following the birth of their son as he seeks to prove his own purity and the purity of his home.

Désirée’s husband Armand was gifted with every advantage in rural Louisiana- not only as a man but as a white man from a wealthy and influential family. However, this advantage did rely solely on his “pure” parentage and socially acceptable marriage to another member of a wealthy, white family. Due to Désirée’s adoption, her true parentage is unknown and it is assumed that she is a white woman. Believing this and due to their close proximity from a young age, Armand decides to marry Désirée and have a child with her. When their son was first born Désirée tells her mother that “Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name” and even brightens when speaking of her husband and his reaction to their son. Her husband was even so thrilled with the addition of a son to their family that he softened in his treatment of the slaves on his plantation, having previously been known as a strict and harsh master (Chopin 1). Armand had loved his wife and his child when he believed they were white like him, even believing that the fact she was of “obscure origin” could be overlooked if she had his name- one of the “proudest in Louisiana”. His attitude towards the both of them and his slaves soured once the purity of his name could be questioned.

The relationship shift between Désirée and Armand represents the fears that white men of the period faced as they desired to maintain their societal status and the power that comes with it, while also serving as a commentary on the patriarchy and power men held. During the time in Louisiana, there was a social ban in place on legally acknowledged kinship between white and black people and any children they might have (Fedosik 2). When Désirée and Armand have

their child, due to the position of power he holds as a white man it is assumed that Désirée is the one to blame for the African appearance of their child- as there is no concrete evidence of her birth parents racial identities. The possibility of her having even a drop of black blood causes a complete uprooting of her life that leads to her drowning herself and their child after facing social ridicule and the shame she believed she brought by causing “unconscious injury upon his house and his name” (Chopin 3). Désirée’s fate and relationship with her husband becomes even more complex in the final lines of the story, where as Armand is burning his wife and child’s belongings it is revealed that he was the one of interracial parentage, not his wife (Chopin 4). Armand’s decision to allow his wife to take the fall rather than disclosing the true nature of the situation reflects the importance of whiteness in America as a source of power, to the extent that he was willing to sacrifice his wife whom he had once loved and their child simply to cement himself and his position in society.

The complexities of these racial relations are not only reflected in Désirée’s relationship with her husband, but with his relationship to his own identity. Armand’s sense of self is based on the position he holds, which as previously mentioned, relies solely on his race and the fact that he was born into a family of wealth. If he were to be discovered as having interracial parentage, he would surely lose the authority he has grown accustomed to, thus altering his sense of identity. Armand’s frustration with his parentage can be seen in the shift of treatment of the slaves on his family’s plantation, as his father had been described as “easy-going and indulgent” in contrast to Armand who was strict (Chopin 1). It can be argued that Armand treated his slaves with such a cruel hand because he was ashamed of that part of him, most notably due to the fact that the note revealing his parentage states his mother “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (Chopin 4). This phrasing could be seen as the seed that blossomed into the

internalized racism that Armand carries with him, manifesting in the poor treatment he shows his slaves and how he allowed his wife to face the fate of lost status that should have befallen him. This further exemplifies the importance of race as a source of authority, as she is forced out of the life she had always known and subjected to the treatment of the servants she had always had at her disposal. Her lack of recognition of the fact that she feels the treatment she is receiving is unjust, yet she feels no remorse for playing a part in her slaves and servants being treated in the same manner, highlights the connection that race has to authority quite clearly.

In the context of Désirée herself, Chopin uses her experience to reflect the deep rooted misogyny characteristic of the setting. Throughout the story Désirée's identity is linked to her husband and how he is feeling, to the extent of "when he frowned she trembled" and "when he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God" (Chopin 2). Her reliance on her husband is also reflected in the rejection she feels so deeply to the point of wanting to die once he decides to let her take the fall for having an impure bloodline. Désirée also can be seen relying on her husband for much of what she believes, even doubting her own parentage simply due to the fact her husband said she had to be the one that is not white. When realizing their child does not have typical white features her first reaction is to ask her husband why. Despite the fact she believes herself to be white due to her appearance, his claim causes her to doubt herself and resign to believing she should die rather than be "stained" with this fact. It is also important to note that the fact that Armand was able to so easily cast blame on his wife with no speculation that he could be the source of their sons African appearance is a direct reflection of the power of men and the lack of respect that women, even white and wealthy women, were afforded. Even though Armand is described as having "dark" features, their community believed the only possible

source of the “impure” bloodline had to be Désirée, as Armand was a known and respected member of society (Chopin 1).

Through the story of Désirée and her unfortunate, and frankly unfair, circumstance, Chopin is able to illuminate the importance of race as a source of authority in rural Louisiana and the south as a whole during the 19th century, while also utilizing the relationships between the characters and their identities as it is related to their race and status to comment on the complexities of the structure of society. Through the story of Désirée, Chopin comments on the permanence of misogyny and racism and calls attention to the unfairness of the system. Through the story of Armand and Désirée, Chopin is able to highlight the fact that the system really only benefits white men and will continue to, even if it is at the expense of women or people of color. While “Désirée’s Baby” might have been based in the 19th century, one fact remains true: white men, when grappling with their own anxieties and insecurities, have and always will be the worst.

Works Cited

Stowell, Olivia. "Re-Inscribing Racial Hierarchy: White Racial Anxiety, Interracial Sexuality, and Ambiguously Raced Bodies in Kate Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby.'" *Liberated Arts: A Journal for Undergraduate Research*, 10 Apr. 2019, ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/lajur/article/view/7588.

Chopin, Kate. "Desiree's Baby." The Kate Chopin International Society, 2005-2021, 1892. Retrieved from <https://www.katechopin.org/pdfs/desirees-baby.pdf>.

Fedosik, Marina. "Genealogical Ambiguity and Racial Identity: Adoption and Passing in Kate Chopin's 'Desiree's Baby' and Jessie Redmon Fauset's 'The Sleeper Wakes.'" *Academia*, 2018, Accessed 2024.

Revision Reflection

Utilizing the shell of my original paper as a guide, I was able to better develop the points I was trying to make in a more clear manner. Truthfully, my first draft was incredibly rough. After going over the revision notes, I took a lot of time to reread and examine the characters and their relationships and identities on a deeper level. This lead me to deciding to go in a different direction with the revision of my paper, focusing on Armand and his character rather than the obvious choice of Désirée. Diving deeper into Armand's character gave me a deeper insight into the commentary that Chopin aimed to communicate with society as a whole during such a tumultuous time in the context of racial relations in the deep south.

During the rewrite process I was also able to better organize my essay and give it a more understandable flow. Overall, what I first thought would be a couple of simple tweaks turned into me deciding to go a completely different direction that gave me a better opportunity to analyze the complex issues that Chopin addresses in the narrative. I was also able to take the time to rework the formatting of my paper and ensure that it followed the necessary guidelines. In my original paper, I had neglected to include page numbers in my in-text citations and lacked a header with page numbers. When reworking my paper I made sure to include these tweaks as well.

The rewrite process gave me the opportunity to see the story from a different perspective and create an essay that I felt better translated the important issues that Chopin addresses, and their relevance to society during the time and today.

