

---

## Desiree's Baby: Troubling History And Continuation Of Racism In The United States

In Kate Chopin's "Desiree's Baby" is a brief story that was originally published in 1893, under the title of "The Father of Désirée's Baby," in Vogue magazine. The story is narrated in a third person. The main protagonist is Desiree, who was abandoned as a baby and was later found in the ruins which soon she got adopted by the Minister and Madame Valmonde. Everywhere the story, we can see the ideas of what is the story's purpose which is love, racism, and destructive prejudice within the antebellum French Creole culture in Louisiana during civil war times. The historical setting of Chopin's story helps develop the themes and characters with a plot twist. The Valmondés, who is portrayed as plantation owners, are established as wealthy and white. Their adoption of Désirée affirms their kindness, despite their economic prosperity. Her adoptive father finds Désirée in the shadow of the stone pillar. This shadow symbolizes the skepticism of her origins. The pillar is also an indication of the wealth and property of the Valmondés, and Désirée's appearance there introduces her into a world of privilege. "The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles."

Love- Désirée senses the dilemma before she consciously confesses it. This speaks to the theme of Love and Blindness in the story. Because Désirée loves her son, it takes her longer than everyone else to acknowledge the truth. Armand does not understand that because he doesn't want a child who is not white.

Race- "When the baby is born, Armand is at first delighted. However, the baby's skin color soon shows signs of the baby being a "quadroon" or "octoroon"— either 1/4 or ? African. Armand assumes that because of Désiree's unknown parentage that she is part black." When her mother came to visit her and the baby after three months without seeing them. She points out and says that that is not her grandson. Which made Désiree upset, but she doesn't know her background history and ancestors. Which made her uncomfortable after comparing her son to one of the servants tending her son. When she saw the similarities, she went to go tell Armand when he gets home. When Armand arrives back home, Desiree asks him about the baby. He responds that indeed the baby is not white, which means that she is not white either. Desiree points out all her physical features that strongly suggest that she is white, but her angry husband tells her she is as white as their mixed-race slaves.

"Armand," she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. "Armand," she said again Then she rose and tottered towards him. "Armand," she panted once more, clutching his arm, "look at our child. What does it mean? Tell me." He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from his arm and thrust the hand away from him. "Tell me what it means!" She cried despairingly. "It means," he answered lightly, "that the child is not white; it means that you are not white."

Confront her, but reverts to his cruel nature. This shows Armand's immediate decision to blame his wife for their child's appearance, as well as the way that racial issues were connected with such shame—because of the institution of slavery—that no one among the white plantation slave owners could even discuss it

---

Destructive prejudice—Armand wants to strike out against what he sees as his cruel “fate” of having a black child, and he does this by striking out at his wife. Yet just as Madame Valmondé interpreted her “fate” of finding Désirée as a blessing, Armand’s “fate” is defined by his acceptance of racist and sexist ideas. Désirée is the same person she was before—she has done absolutely nothing wrong or cruel. So Armand seals his fate as cruel by refusing to see beyond race. Meanwhile, Désirée’s shame at being black is so great, that she chooses to throw away her and her child’s life rather than return to her loving mother Armand’s treatment

Of Désirée shows that he is ashamed, on the one hand, and no longer sees her as a person worthy of respect to the other. He does not lash out at her, but ignores her, as if she has lost her right to sympathy and care. Désirée’s beauty made him not care about her “mysterious past” when he thought that in the past was one of the poor parents that he owns, but when he believes it is, in fact, poverty of mixed racial heritage it becomes overwhelmingly important and shameful to him. Proud, arrogant, and cruel, as his treatment of his slaves has previously shown, Armand confronts Désirée. She denies being of African descent, and she writes to her mother, begging her for help. Madame Valmondé responds that she and the baby should return home to the Valmondé estate. However, her letter does not reach Désirée in time. Scornful and disbelieving of Désirée’s claims, Armand insists that Désirée and the baby leave at once. Désirée walks off with the baby in her arms into the bayou; they are never seen again.

Armand burns all of Désirée’s belongings on the front lawn, including the baby’s cradle. He also burns all of the love letters Désirée sent him during their courtship; however, one letter in the bundle is a letter from Armand’s mother to his father, which Armand reads. In this letter, Armand’s mother reveals that Armand is part black, through her lineage. Désirée’s ancestry is never disclosed. The bonfire symbolizes Armand’s wealth as well as the intersection of classism, racism, and sexism. Armand can afford to destroy Désirée’s possessions, which are the marks of feminine beauty. He doesn’t do this work, but directs his slaves to do it. Both the gifts he gave Désirée and the idea that he can eliminate her from his life by burning them indicate how Armand always viewed Désirée as a possession rather than as a person.

Désirée’s reaction shows that she is afraid of having a child who appears black.

Though Chopin sets her story to purposefully touch on the troubling history and continuation of racism in the United States, which is still occurring in current events today. By exposing Armand’s racism and hatred for his wife and child, whom he previously adored so dearly, Chopin reveals how deeply-embedded prejudice and racism are among the privileged, “white” French Creoles. Many modern literary critics observe and admire Chopin’s themes and writing techniques, which incorporate with use of Creole dialect and culture that add that realistic effect to her story. Another aspect of Chopin’s writing: women’s roles and the need for women’s rights and equality which showed when Désirée was in a pitiful, despairing dilemma, once Armand banishes her and the baby.