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Haunting Identities:

The Gothic Lens On Racially Motivated Tragedy in “Désirée’s Baby”

The short story “Désirée’s Baby” was written by Kate Chopin, an American Woman writer, in 1892. Chopin wrote a handful of novels and countless short stories, many of which were published by popular magazines and appeared in her publications as well. Plenty of her works were highly praised by critics while others were viewed as morbid. Much of her work was heavily focused on portraying women’s lives (“Biography”). “Désirée’s Baby” is just one of hundreds of Chopin’s brilliant short stories. It was published in *Vogue Magazine* in 1893 and later included in her own collection, *Bayou Folk*, in 1894. Throughout the story of “Désirée’s Baby” Chopin employed the use of numerous tropes of gothic literature, including suspense, uncertainty, isolation, psychological decline, death, and foreboding environments, to explore the heavy presence of racism and how it led to the tragedies that occurred.

This work follows the story of a young woman, Désirée, and her husband Armand as they watch their baby begin to grow, only for them to notice something about him appears different. The story begins with the introduction of Madame Valmondé, Désirée’s mother, and brief explanations of Désirée and Armond's upbringings, leading to how they came to be married. Madame Valmondé visits the new family at Armand’s plantation and is shocked by the baby’s appearance, but Désirée is overly joyous about the state of her life, noting that Armand has become so happy and changed for the better since falling in love with Désirée. This state of

perfection does not last long though. Once the baby reaches just three months of age, Armand grows cold, isolates himself from his family, and returns to his old ways of violence toward his slaves. Désirée eventually determines the reason for Armand's change; The baby does not appear to be white. From here, the couple's marriage and each of their psychological states unravel due to the overwhelming question of how their child is one of mixed race. The blame is put on Désirée, causing her to run off with the baby, never to be seen again, only for it to later be revealed that Armand himself comes from mixed ancestry. Through this narrative, there is an exploration of various heavy themes, a few of which include racism, identity, and the tragedies that these concepts can lead to.

Chopin utilized the mysteries of the unknown to create a suspenseful storyline and leave readers with a feeling of uncertainty about some plotlines, which is often seen throughout works of gothic literature. Her use of this trope highlighted the intense emotional distress Désirée, and even Armand, face when confronted head-on with the uncertainties they must face in their lives. A focal point of uncertainty was Désirée's "obscure origin," referencing the fact that she was found outside the Valmondé plantation as a baby with no trace of where she came from (Chopin 1). The lack of information leaves Désirée's ancestry a mystery and opens up the possibility of her being from a mixed-race family, which becomes an intense, emotional question later in the story. This question comes to the surface when Armand and Désirée note that their baby's appearance is similar to that of a mixed-race child on the plantation. When Armand immediately blamed Désirée she wrote to her mother asking to confirm she is white, but her mother's response dodged the question of her ancestry entirely (Chopin 3). This lack of assurance left both Désirée and readers questioning her identity. The use of this trope builds emotional tension

within the story whilst also showing significant concern about racial identities, reflecting the intensely racist mindset among southern plantations, like L'Abri.

Isolation, another common trope within gothic literature, stems from the uncertainty of how Armand and Désirée's child was born mixed race. Armand blamed Désirée and no longer wanted the association with her so "He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child," (Chopin 2). His newfound hatred toward them came solely from the idea that they are not white. He chose to be alone and distant in hopes of maintaining his status of authority and power over those who are not white, thinking he gained this status by being white. The change in Armand's behavior forced Désirée into a place of isolation as well. With no husband to confide in "Désirée's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her," (Chopin 2). She could sense there was something wrong, yet she was not entirely sure what it was. This feeling of struggle with no possible solutions made her feel powerless and alone. After her lonely struggle, she concludes that the baby's race is Armand's reason for isolation, but rather than choosing to listen to her mother and return home, "She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away," (Chopin 4). Armand abandoned her and her mother was not of the same blood, so she did not understand what it was that Désirée felt, so Désirée's internal struggles with her racial identity paired with a lack of support caused her to fall deeper into this internal isolation. She had already felt so alone for so long that she saw no other way to go than to disappear on her own and bring herself to a place of physical isolation as well.

This theme of isolation directly connects with the trope of psychological deterioration, which is represented through both Armand and Désirée as they uncover their baby's race and

become isolated individuals rather than a united family. At first, Armand was overjoyed with his role as husband and father and his “face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with [Désirée],” (Chopin 2). But with the discovery of his child’s race and the assumption that he married a woman with black ancestry, he spiraled back into his cruel, angry ways “And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves,” (Chopin 2). Armand’s emotional wellbeing took a turn for the worse and his breakdown reflects his racist beliefs. His sense of self-identity came from his high status in the social hierarchy and the power he held above others. With the discovery that he had tainted his status, he lost himself and his feeling of control, which he attempted to take back by shutting himself off from his wife and child and reestablishing his brutal treatment of the slaves.

Désirée also reflects this notion of psychological distress through her unraveling mental state. At the start of the story she was like Armand, content with their marriage, a proud new parent, and happily in love. But as her husband grew cold and she herself discovered the mystery of their child, she fell apart. “Désirée was miserable enough to die,” (Chopin 2) once Armand’s mannerisms changed. Her mental state changed so drastically in such a short period of time, causing her to lose her will to live entirely. When Armand put the blame for his misery on her and forced her to feel guilty for the baby’s race, she expressed in the letter to her mother “I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live,” (Chopin 3). She left the L’Abri plantation with the baby and made her way to the bayou where she ultimately took her own and her baby’s lives (Chopin 4). Her fear of coming from black ancestry, and therefore tainting Armand’s family name, grew so intense that she felt the only way to continue on was to kill herself. She saw no possibility of a future where she could find happiness knowing her origins, highlighting her

defeated mental state and her deep-rooted hatred for the black race, so extreme that the idea she was a part of it drove her to insanity.

Death is yet another common figure among gothic works, including this short story, which killed off characters rather than including an ending that gave them closure. Désirée's ending is a tragic one in which "She disappeared ... and she did not come back again," (Chopin 4) by her own choice, taking the baby with her as well. She and the child's deaths were confirmed in the final scene where Armand created a fire with all their things including "A graceful cradle of willow ... a priceless layette ... silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones ... laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves," (Chopin 4). As willow trees often represent new life, the burning of the cradle signifies the end of life. The destruction of this cradle, amongst all of their other belongings, suggested that Désirée and the baby would not return. Their tragic death can be blamed on nothing other than Armand's hatred, one so strongly rooted in racism that he had to remove every aspect of his wife and son from his life.

Chopin included the descriptive language of the settings throughout the story that highlighted the eeriness of the environments, an additional trope within gothic literature. The L'Abri plantation, which Armand and Désirée called their home, was a truly dark place. When Madame Valmondé arrived there "she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place," (Chopin 1). Just from an outside view, the plantation gave off an uncanny feeling, one that highlighted the dark, hateful ideals the plantation was built on. The home is further described to have large oaks surrounding it with "their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadow[ing] it like a pall," (Chopin 1). Not only did this reference to a pall create a somber mood, but also foreshadowed the concept of death. And the oak trees that surrounded the

house kept it isolated from its surroundings. Both of these descriptions accentuated the gothic feel of the story and hinted toward its tragic end.

Later in the story, another foreboding environment was used to create a ghastly background for the tragedy that took place, emphasizing the story's gothic elements. When Désirée left the house "It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton," (Chopin 4). The choice for this to have occurred in October is important to note considering the grief that is often associated with the month, which marks a transition from summer to the dark, cold winter. It is also important to notice the slaves being pointed out in order to remind readers of the intense history the plantation has with slavery, as well as a reminder of the violence and aggression that Armand utilizes there due to his racist views. As Désirée continued on, she avoided the road leading back to her parent's plantation and instead "walked across a deserted field" and "disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou;" (Chopin 4). The choice for Désirée to go the dangerous, daunting route created a greater possibility for tragedy whilst the environment itself highly reflected one of gothic literature.

The final revelation of this story leaves nobody with closure. Armand is left to deal with the shocking news of his own mixed-race ancestry along with the guilt of knowing he caused the death of his wife and child by blaming Désirée for what must have been, at least partly, his fault. Readers are left in suspense with the question of how Armand reacted to this letter from his mother. Ultimately, this story had no happy ending, just one that left its audience deep in thought about the catastrophes that occurred. Through the use of suspense, uncertainty, isolation, psychological decay, death, and foreboding environments, Chopin successfully portrayed the devastating consequences that come with racially motivated hatred overpowering love.

Works Cited

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