

Kate Chopin Désirée's Baby

The author

Kate Chopin became famous for her short stories during her own lifetime. Many of them were printed in magazines – “Désirée's Baby” appeared in 1893 in *Vogue* – and later in her collected stories, *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). She was counted as one of the local color writers of the South, because of her precise depictions of the milieu, of regional idiosyncracies of speech, of typical settings and her exact differentiation between the various racial groups living in the South. As a member of the French speaking Creole upper class, which was descended from the eighteenth century French and Spanish settlers, and as the wife of a businessman and owner of a local store she constantly came into contact with all social and racial classes. Consequently her stories are based on a profound knowledge of the existing circumstances.

Although Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* was banned shortly after publication and brought her the reputation of being an immoral writer, today we appreciate her work particularly for this novel and its realistic portrayal of a woman's growing psychological awareness.

Summary of the story

Madame Valmondé visits Désirée, whom she has brought up since she found her outside her gates as a baby. Désirée has given birth to a son after her marriage to the rich Creole plantation owner, Armand. While her daughter tells her about the pride and happiness of her husband, who has been less cruel to his slaves since the child was born, Madame Valmondé is shocked at the sight of the baby. When the child is three months old Désirée has to realize that her

forebodings were correct, the child's skin is not white. As a result, Armand places the guilt on her and sends her away. Désirée takes her baby and goes to her death in the river. Shortly after, Armand is burning everything that could remind him of Désirée and the baby when he finds a letter from his dead mother which tells him that it is *he* that “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery”.

A perfect short story

“Désirée's Baby” has been called one of the most perfect short stories in English. Indeed, technical perfection in general as well as typical characteristics of Kate Chopin's mode of writing can be demonstrated from this story. The concentration on one aspect – miscegenation (mixture of races) –, the realization of this in four different scenes in the plot, the relatively few characters, the economy of the means and the surprise ending, all these together result in a model short story. In this respect the mode of integration of the past (exposition) into the narration is interesting. After the first sentence, which refers to Madame Valmondé's journey to L'Abrie and thus introduces the action, the information which is necessary about Désirée's background and character is inserted in a mixture of Madame Valmondé's own thoughts and the narrator's report. The same method is used to introduce Armand's background, and this comes naturally into Madame Valmondé's mind when she reaches his house.

In contrast to this economy of means of exposition there is a richness in the presentation of optical details, for example in the portrayal of the house with its menacing and derelict appearance, the scene in which the baby is lying asleep with the negro boy fanning it, and the description of the landscape when Désirée leaves to commit suicide by drowning in the river: “It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton ...”. As in all Kate Chopin's short stories the beauty lies in the tension which arises from the contrast between richly portrayed setting and the brevity of action.

There is a constant change between explicitly given information – as described above – and passages of vague implication, for example in the description of the house as Madame Valmondé sees it on her arrival, or in the depiction of Madame Valmondé's reaction when she sees the baby, which is left uncommented, or in Désirée's own forebodings. Although this gives rise to tension in the reader, Kate Chopin maintains the lightness of touch which she also shows in the atmosphere she creates.

Irony is a means which Kate Chopin makes use of in various forms. The most obvious is in the surprise ending with its dramatic irony, but irony is also to be found in the names, for example La Blanche for the quadroon or L'Abrie (shelter) for the house. Apart from this, there is no other form of judgement in the story. The form of narration is neutral without any moral comment, on the contrary it is characterized by authorial reserve and discretion which is the more effectful for the reader in his/her attempt for form an individual opinion. This, too, is a typical and much praised quality of Kate Chopin's work.

Miscegenation

Kate Chopin is dealing with more than just local color when she chooses the theme of miscegenation in this story. It is part of her continuous preoccupation with people under the impact of customs, inflexible social roles, moral prejudice and rigidity. Whereas in most of her stories this is exemplified by means of examples dealing with woman's identity and self-assertion (a secondary theme of this short story, too), here her predominant interest is concentrated on racial prejudice and misplaced Creole pride. Although the story dates back to the time before the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the theme of racial discrimination was still of immediate interest for Kate Chopin and her contemporaries. (Her father-in-law had been a very cruel slave owner; he bought his plantation from McAlpin, who is said to have been the model for Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.) From the context of her other stories, in which she des-

cribes a great many individual and convincing colored people, it is easy to define her point of view: her aims are peaceful and humane coexistence between colored and white in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Suggestions for teachers

As this story cannot be understood without the necessary historical and social background it will be the task of the teacher to supply this, preferably before hearing the broadcast for the first time, from the material given here. As this text can be considered as a model short story it provides a good opportunity to discuss in class more general features of short story writing, some of which have been dealt with above.

Editions and studies

Kate Chopin, "Désirée's Baby", in *American Short Stories 3* (ed. T. Wolpers), Paderborn (Schöningh)

- in *Seven Anglo-American Short Stories* (eds. K. U. Dürr, R. Kopetzki), Frankfurt (Diesterweg)

- In *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (ed. P. Seyersted), Baton Rouge (Louisiana State University Press) 1969

Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, Baton Rouge (Louisiana State University Press) 1969

Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Kate Chopin and the Fiction of Limits: 'Désirée's Baby'", *The Southern Literary Journal*, 10 (1978), pp 123-133
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