

Desiree's Baby

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For much of history, social boundaries between race and culture have been set by money, skin color, and gender. Furthermore, those boundaries became determinants of freedom, segregation, discrimination, and social limitations that benefited some while subjugating others. Although the system was created to benefit white males, like Armand, their devastating effects changed not just the course of what could be a happy life with Desiree and their baby, but it also converted him into a potential victim of the same intolerance that he projected against his beloved wife and child. Kate Chopin's story, "Desiree's Baby" uses race and gender roles to explore the concept of racial purity and social limitations that drove Desiree to her tragic end.

When Armand fell in love with the beautiful, gentle, and sincere Desiree, he did not care about her obscure origin nor the fact that she was nameless. As a white male with social privileges, he had the power to take all of her origin away and, "give her one of the oldest and proudest [names] in Louisiana." (Chopin 70) As a slave owner, he knew that he had the power to do that as long as she was white. Indeed, her whiteness was never questioned because she grew, looked, and acted white. None of this mattered after she had the baby; because of her obscure origin, she was to blame. Having a baby with darker skin meant being "cursed with the brand of slavery." (Chopin 74) This led to Armand having the desire to break off any relationship he had with Desiree or her baby because, "the child [was] not white." (Chopin 73) As a white baby he was going to inherit all of Armand's possessions, including his name. As a biracial child, he was no longer entitled to those privileges; at least that is what Armand thought.

Armand's life was arranged in such a way that no one would ever question his racial purity or his whiteness. Instead of being seen as a biracial male, he was seen as a white male

with a “dark handsome face” (Chopin 71) and grew, looked, and acted white. His son and Desiree, on the other hand, became the symbol of intolerance that Armand had against slaves. Growing up in a society with such fine boundaries, how could he forgive Desiree? How could he forgive “the unconscious injury [that] she [and their baby] had brought upon his home and his name[?]” (Chopin 71) Although he once loved his wife, he could not forgive her for giving him a non-white child. Unaware of the lack of his own racial purity, he felt betrayed. Furthermore, he became the victim of God’s cruelty. Therefore, he could no longer love her or his child, a quadroon boy.

Even though Desiree tried to defend her whiteness under Armand’s false allegations, she got attacked by him and was accused of being "as white as La Blanche's," (Chopin 73) a biracial slave that worked in the main house doing light work. This meant that her beloved child was a quadroon kid, like "La Blanche’s little quadroon boys," (Chopin 73) with no social status and with social limitations. Therefore, Desiree’s Baby’s racial purity back then was going to determine his social status, social limitations, and segregation. Having a quadroon child in Louisiana white’s society was a price too high for Armand to pay and a price emotionally too high for Desiree. She felt that after all those allegations life was not worth living, at least not as a slave.

Following the gender expectations of her era, Desiree grew up to be gentle and affectionate. Restricted by her gender role, she had the power to accept or decline that marriage proposal. Though, in reality, if she had declined the marriage proposal it would have made it more difficult in the future for her to have another proposal. In contrast, Armand grew up to be practical, aggressive, and a risk taker. Unbound to his gender role, he had the power to choose who he wanted to marry. However, love, indignation, and anger made them buck their gender

expectations. Love made Desiree go from trembling when he frowned to enamored when she “asked no greater blessing of God when he smiled.” (Chopin 70) Indignation and anger, on the other hand, changed her attitude toward her beloved Armand. They caused her to call his name and “[cry] despairingly... in a voice which must have stabbed him” (Chopin 73) to find the answer to her child's skin color. Her social limitations only allowed her to act as a wife and mother. That notwithstanding, she went beyond her gender role and questioned her husband.

In contrast, Armand went from punishing slaves and disciplining them in cruel ways to being less restrictive after he married Desiree. Indeed, “marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly.” (Chopin 70) His softening led to him behaving differently than most males in his position. Unfortunately, this change did not last long. After the unexpected visits from far-off neighbors to see their family, he could not hide his anger and indignation towards Desiree and the baby. He went back to behave in the same way that he always had.

What difference would it have been in Desiree's life if she had gone to Madame Valmonde's house with a biracial child? She was socially limited by her gender, but even more by her lack of racial purity. Happiness then became unattainable by the social limitations that Desiree acquired when she left Armand's house and by the intolerance that Armand projected against her. Love for Armand became a matter of racial purity, and love for Desiree a matter of life and death. As a wife, she loved her husband so much that she would have rather died with her son than have to live a life without his love. Unable to find her place in the world without her beloved Armand, she decided to end her life and the life of her baby.

Work cited

Chopin, Kate. *The Father of Desiree's Baby*. University of Virginia Library, January 14, 1893.