“Desiree’s Baby” – Kate Chopin

Introduction

“Désirée's Baby,” written in 1893, is the short story for which Chopin is most well known. When the story collection in which it was reprinted, Bayou Folk, was first published, reviewers particularly appreciated Chopin's remarkable evocation of Cajun Louisiana. Today, however, readers and critics find "Désirée's Baby" to be much more than an examination of a distinct cultural place. Though brief, the story raises important issues that still plagued Chopin's South, particularly the pervasive and destructive yet ambiguous nature of racism. The story also questions the potential fulfillment of woman's identity—a subject that fascinated the unconventional Chopin. In her portrayal of Désirée, a woman whose self-worth and self-exploration is intrinsically linked to that of her husband, Chopin opened the door to her lifelong query into a woman's struggle for a place where she could fully belong.

Vocabulary List

- **Beneficent:** Characterized by or performing acts of kindness or charity. Producing benefit; beneficial.
- **Corbeille:** A sculptured basket of flowers or fruits used as an architectural ornament. Also a wastebasket, or satchel. (translated from French websites)
- **Parish:** An administrative subdivision in Louisiana that corresponds to a county in other U.S. states.
- **Imperious:** Arrogantly domineering or overbearing. Urgent; pressing.
- **Quadroon:** An offspring of a Mulatto and a White parent; a person who is one-quarter Black.
- **Sombre:** dull; dusky; somewhat dark; gloomy; as, a somber forest; a somber house; Also somber.
- **Pyre:** A heap of combustibles for burning a corpse as a funeral rite. A pile of combustibles.
- **Layette:** A set of clothing and bedding for a newborn child.
- **Espousal:** A Betrothal. A wedding ceremony.
- **Cowl:** The hood or hooded robe worn especially by a monk. A draped neckline on a woman's garment. A hood-shaped covering used to increase the draft of a chimney. The top portion of the front part of an automobile body, supporting the windshield and dashboard.
- **Pall:** A cover for a coffin, bier, or tomb, often made of black, purple, or white velvet. A coffin, especially one being carried to a grave or tomb. A covering that darkens or obscures; a pall of smoke over the city. A gloomy effect or atmosphere: "A pall of depressed indifference hung over Petrograd during February and March 1916" (W. Bruce Lincoln).
- **Bayou:** A body of water, such as a creek or small river, that is a tributary of a larger body of water. A sluggish stream that meanders through lowlands, marshes, or plantation grounds.
Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is the meaning of the phrase "He was reminded that she was nameless." in the context in which it appears?

2. The answers to the following questions can be found in the text:
   a) Where had Madame Valmonde found Desiree for the first time when she was a baby?
   b) Why had Armand's mother never left France?
   c) What was Madame Valmond's reply to Desiree's letter?
   d) During which month were they picking cotton at L'Abri?
   e) What did Armand have put on the bonfire?

3. In your own words:
   a) Describe Desiree.
   b) Describe how Desiree and Armand met and fell in love.

4. Describe and explain the changes in Armand Aubigny's behaviour as the story unfolds.

5. Why do you think there was an "air of mystery among the blacks" and frequent visitors to L'Abri about three months after Desiree's baby was born?

6. Why would it matter that Desiree's background was unknown?

7. Why did Madame Valmonde look at the child in the best light available? Why did she focus her look at Zandrine?

8. Explain why Chopin uses the word "her" in this line:
   "He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse."

9. How did Desiree feel about slavery? About the way Armand treated the slaves? What makes you think this?

10. "One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys--half naked too--stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers." From this, what do you deduce that La Blanche is?

11. "A quick conception of all this accusation meant for her..." What do you think it meant? Why was it important?

12. Why didn't Desiree go back to Valmonde? Why does she accept her fate without fighting? What does that tell you about her role as a woman, and her place in society?

13. What would be the consequences to Armand and the plantation if it were found that he had African ancestry?

14. Why was it assumed that Desiree was the reason her child was not white?

15. Why do you think "La Blanche" had that name?

16. Why do you think Armand did not consider Desiree's origins before marrying her?
17. Before the last few lines of this story, are there any clues given by the author which hint at the true cause of the baby's appearance?

18. Continue the story, describing what became of Armand, Desiree and their baby. Do you think Armand burnt the last letter together with the rest?

19. Why did Desiree ask her husband if he wanted her to go and then act on his decision? Do you think this merely reflected her character, or society at the time of the story?

20. Discuss Desiree's, Armand's or Madame Valmonde's knowledge of the situation through the story and how it affects their actions or lack of action. You may like to consider the following:
   - When Armand reads the letter at the end, is this new knowledge? How can you explain his changing attitudes towards Desiree and the slaves?
   - What does Madame Valmonde realise about the child's origins? Why would she not take action early on?
   - Is it likely that Desiree had realised that her child was of mixed race before seeing the quadroon boy fanning the baby?

21. Discuss the relationship between Armand's mother and father.

22. How would you write a contemporary version of “Desiree's Baby” in a different part of the world?