

# Colorism in the african american society

[History](#), [African American](#)



Racism has been a very prominent issue most commonly between black and white people. Although it is the most acknowledged; it is not the only example of race discrimination. Race discrimination occurs among other ethnicities and backgrounds of people. Sometimes race discrimination can transpire because of people's point of views on certain things, such as religion, color, age, or even gender. In the stories, "The Wife of His Youth" and "Desiree's Baby" racism and some other forms of discrimination are present, but surprisingly it isn't one race opposing another.

It is black on black racism, or more specifically "colorism;" this is discrimination based on skin color (Nittle 1). "Wife of His Youth," a short story by Charles Chesnutt addresses the tussles of race as a light skinned and dark African American subsequently to the American civil war, through the characters Mr. Ryder and Liza Jane. While equally black; the lighter skin (Mr. Ryder) had a social advantage during segregation eras. Kate Chopin's story "Desiree's Baby" has a comparable theme in despite of its setting; it took place previous to the civil war.

It concerns Desiree and her husband Armand; who give birth to a darker skinned child. Their fear that society would discard them leads the story to a tragic ending. Although, Charles Chesnutt's story was written after the civil war and Kate Chopin's was written prior to the civil war, both stories show that discrimination still existed categorically within African American ethnic groups. A gross amount of Charles Chesnutt works exemplifies the hardships he endured in the south as a light African American more specifically "Wife of His Youth," which is a short story that took place after the civil war.

Chesnutt satirically reveals not only the difficulties faced by racially blended individuals but also their intense prejudices against more darkly shaded African Americans. Chesnutt himself was a product of mixed marriage as well: indeed he was identified as an African American however he often referred to himself as white American too (Rossetti 1). Mr. Ryder who was the main character in the short story, "The Wife of His Youth" by Charles Chesnutt, had a similar biography as Chesnutt. Mr. Ryder was well respected by his society called the Blue Veins.

According to Fleischmann, "Their existence, as little society of colored persons [whose] purpose it was to establish and maintain correct social standard among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement" (Chesnutt 463). This Blue Veins society was a society within the larger society. The larger society also known as the "white powered society" had no place for African Americans. There was no room for middle ground where African American and Caucasians could prosper.

The Blue Veins society was created so that lighter skinned, colored people whose skin appeared so white that their veins showed like Mr. Ryder, could have significant membership in this white society. (Chesnutt 1) They did not want to be categorized with the darker African American groups. In the short story, "No one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show Blue Veins" (Chesnutt 1). With this short story Chesnutt demonstrates that color matters within the race. The Blue Veins society does not emphasize culture of the race but how light their skin color appears.

People like Liza Jane, the wife of Mr. Ryder would not be qualified for membership in his society because she was exceptionally black and her social rank in society was a former as a plantation worker. As the reader's proceeds towards the end, some may detest Mr. Ryder true emotions. The reader may realize that although Mr. Ryder initially tried to abscond from his black ancestry through the Blue Veins society; he is conflicted with this guilt. Liza Jane suddenly shows up at Mr. Ryder's house with determination to find her husband (originally named Same Taylor but now known as Mr. Ryder). Unaware that she is indeed talking to Mr. Ryder; she starts telling him her story, and how she has been scouring around town for her husband. Eventually, Mr. Ryder confesses that he is Liza Jane's long lost husband however it was not until he gained recognition from the Blue Veins Society. In the short story it says: My friends, what would the man do? I will suppose that he was one who loved honor, and tried to deal justly with all men. I will even carry the case further, and suppose that perhaps he had set his heart upon another, whom he had hoped to call his own.

What would he do, or rather what ought he to do, in such a crisis of a lifetime? " It seemed to me that he might hesitate, and I imagined that I was an old friend, a near friend, and that he had come to me for advice; and I argued the case with him. I tried to discuss it impartially. After we had looked upon the matter from every point of view, I said to him, in words that we all know: 'This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man. Then, finally, I put the question to him, 'Shall you acknowledge her? '(Chesnutt 796) The Blue Veins society is so fixated on looks that, Mr. Ryder is almost afraid to

acknowledge his wife without the approval from their society. He knew that this society discriminated against darker complexion African Americans so he was unsure on whether or not they would admit Liza Jane. Charles Chesnutt demonstrates that racism within race exists and that color does matters. However, the challenge is for the person to understand their racial history and to mature from these understandings.

Another character that has been overpowered by his racial history is Armand Aubigny from the short story, " Desiree's Baby," written by Kate Chopin. " Of all her works Kate Chopin is perhaps best known for ' Desiree's Baby. ' It is the most Anthologized of all her short stories" (Cruz 430). Chopin tells the story about Desiree an adopted child whose parent's heritage was unknown. When she became a woman, her beauty attracted the attention of Armand Aubigny, a neighboring plantation owner. These two characters later get married and bear a son. As time goes by the child starts to appear more black than white.

When Desiree confronts situation about the child's complexion; Armand holds her accountable because of her unknown parentage; not knowing that he too has some responsibility in the baby's complexion. " Desiree's Baby," takes place in the south prior to the Civil War. In fact, it is one of the few short stories written by Kate Chopin that is set before the Civil War (Kate Chopin " Desiree's" Baby 1) Around this era, many mixed blood children like Armand and Desiree leaned towards their white heritage to avoid difficulties that the dark African American had to experience such as: lynching, beating, theft, sexual humiliation, slavery, etc.

Armand Aubigny, one of the characters in this short story was forced by this era to suppress his past and keep his African American ancestry hidden. He knew being from a darker descent; it would bring complications and unfair treatment for him in the white society. Two ways he concealed his past and his ancestry was: after discovering that the baby's darker complexion; he threw Desiree and the baby out of his home. In the short story Desiree says to him " Shall I go Armand? " and he replied back, " Yes go" (Chopin 3).

He also confiscated all the things that reminded him of his African American ancestry, and burnt them; leaving no evidence of him ever being black. One of the items burnt was a letter from his mom to his father saying that, she " belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (Chopin 4). The reader is uncertain on whether Armand was successful with keeping his secret however such secrets are painful to hold. Oslin Reso Foy states in one of her articles that " Armand moved out of the conventions that have governed his life and Chopin strips him of the veils that have hidden his real self" (223).

Armand learns that it is important to embrace your own ethnicity instead of trying to affiliate with another. A different illustration of discrimination within the race in " Desiree's Baby" is the behavior towards of the baby's complexion. In the beginning of the story, Madame Valmonde had arrived for a visit at Desiree's Home. She was shaken by the baby and hesitated to believe that it was theirs. " This is not the baby! " Madame Valmonde exclaimed, in startled tone (Chopin 2). By the way she responded to the

baby's appearance validates her concern the outcome of the baby's appearance.

This leaves the audience with a matter of uncertainty on whether the baby would have gotten the same treatment; if it was a lighter complexion.

Armand actions too changed when he realizes the baby is dark skin. In the article, " Semiotic Subversion in " Desiree's Baby"" announces that " before he turned against his wife and baby, Armand was the proudest father...

Marriage and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny imperious and exacting nature greatly" ( Peel 226). Armand wanted a son however he preferred a white skinned baby instead of a dark skinned baby.

Not knowing Desiree's unknown heritage backfired on him and left him with a son whose complexion was darker than both of theirs instead of lighter. In today society racism, segregation, discrimination, etc. is generally publically terminated and against the law; we see ample amount of mixed couples especially in the media, who seem to disregard race or even skin color.

However this doesn't mean that " colorism" is nonexistent. This type of prejudice happens but it is so taboo that it is kept hidden from the society. A lot African Americans have to take on the hardships of being segregated from within their own thnic group. Ever since days of slavery prior to the civil war, many people felt that light skin color is better and more favorable than darker skin color. Time after time white Americans' view of authority and the violation of dark skin color have made the African American to dismiss and categorize one another. For example in the media now, we see less and less of the darker complexion actresses. In an article, called " What They Don't

Want You to Know," it says " In Hollywood, Black male characters are played by black actors while black female characters are played by actresses that are more often than no mixed" (2).

Although society has not made massive news headline on this specific topic, it does not mean it is not dually noticed as an issue. For instance in today's society, you are not considered as beautiful if don't have the same characteristics as the white people. The men in the short stories, " My Wife of His Youth" and " Desiree's Baby" were attracted some of these females characters because they favored white women. As mention before, Armand and Mr. Ryder wanted to escape their African American ancestry and all the tribulations that came with it.

In order to forget their past; they needed a woman that could give them a white skinned baby. Someone that can lower the chances of their child being dark skinned. In " Desiree's Baby, Desiree had long silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders, her eyes were grey and her skin was whiter than her husband, Armand (Chopin 3). All these characteristics which Armand considered to be beauty resembled of a white woman. In the story " The Wife of His Youth," before Liza Jane's arrival, Mr. Ryder was ready to propose to Mrs. Dixon.

In the story " Molly Dixon possessed many attractive qualities.... she was whiter than he" (Chesnutt 790). In retrospect, Charles Chesnutt and Kate Chopin works provide developing ideas of discrimination between races during and after the civil war. This theme is exemplified through their short stories particularly in " The Wife of His Youth and " Desiree's Baby. " In



conclusion whether or not you are of substantially a lighter skinned complexion or a darker skinned complexion, individuals in the African American community should not be treated differently by society due to this aspect.