

# "desiree's baby" essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



' Desiree's baby', written by Kate Chopin, is one of the most anthologized and critically acclaimed short stories of the nineteenth century. First published in the year 1893, the story captures with vivid detail, the societal attitudes that prevailed during the dawning years of that century. It is set in the days where rich, White, plantation owners, had slaves working for them tirelessly, yet did not have the heart or will, to treat the blacks equally, despite the many laws that legally abolished slavery. African Americans were not the only ones, being discriminated and marginalized, but the society of Kate Chopin did not treat women kindly either. Chopin's stories, like ' the story of an hour' and ' the storm', mainly deal with a woman's search of identity. Though brief, her stories conveyed emphatically how the women of the nineteenth century were making sacrifices in the name of family and honor. This essay aims at discussing at length, the author's use of various literary elements in conveying the story's main themes - race and gender oppression.

The plot of ' Desiree's baby' revolves around a girl called Desiree, who is found as an infant, lying near a stone pillar by Monsieur Valmondé. He and his wife immediately accept the little girl as their own and take her into their family. Growing in the wealthy estate of the Valmondé, with love and affection from her foster parents, Desiree grows up into a beautiful and gentle lady. Years later, standing near the same stone pillar, Desiree is seen by Armand Aubigny, son of a nearby wealthy estate owner, and he immediately falls head over heels in love with her. Monsieur Valmondé clearly explains about her mysterious parentage before marrying her off to Armand, and the two have a dreamy first year of marriage, which is made

even more perfect by the arrival of a baby boy.

But fate plays its hand, and the baby shows signs of black ancestry. Armand immediately stops seeing his wife in the eye. Saddened by this treatment, Desiree writes to Madame Valmondé seeking her advice, who asks her to come back to the Valmondé estate with her baby. Armand also wishes her to leave, so Desiree leaves, not to the Valmondé estate, but goes in another direction. The ending of the story is the highlight of the entire plot, whereby Armand discovers, it is not his wife who has a black ancestry, but it is he who has a mother with African American ancestry.

The two most important themes that come into view throughout the story are racial discrimination and gender stereotypes. Armand's character in the story acts as a reflection of the antebellum society of that era. Yes, President Lincoln had signed the emancipation act and the civil war was won by the Union forces, but these changes meant little in the ground reality. Blacks were still treated as slaves and not as equals. There are many places in the story, where the author has talked about Armand's attitude towards the black. Despite the brevity of the story the author has written at length about this characteristic of Armand, which clearly demonstrates that she wanted to throw light on the racial discrimination, which took place during that era. She says

“ Young Aubigny's rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.” (Chopin, 1893)

On other occasion, Desiree says to Madame Valmondé that Armand was so happy with child birth that he is even soft with the slaves. Thus, it is crystal

clear that Armand had only contempt and anger towards the slaves, who toiled in his plantations and attended to all his whims and wishes submissively.

As James Trotman observes, Chopin employs various symbolisms to explain the treatment of slaves. (Trotmann, 2002) The half nakedness of the quadroon boy, the burn wounds of Negrillon, and the mention about the part of Satan in his dealing with the slaves, all are symbolic representation of the cruel treatment bestowed on the slave community. The half nakedness indicate how the blacks were stripped of their pride and dignity, the burn wounds are allegory to their sufferings, and Satanic dealing represents the attitude of the White conservatives, who showed no humanity or compassion towards their fellow human beings.

According to Melissa Adams, Kate Chopin has always criticized the Victorian order of women living content in their domestic sphere and opined that it destroyed their self - realization capacity. She further states, ' the story of an hour' was one of Chopin's strongest anti-marriage message. (Adams, 1999) But we can see that, as far as messages about gender oppression is considered, the ' Desiree's baby' is not too far from the ' the story of an hour'. Though this story does not make any explicit statements about the freedom a woman gets, when she is released from the marital bond, it clearly throws light on the sufferings of a woman bound in a bond. Though her husband seemed to love Desiree initially, the love evaporated the moment Armand saw the black resemblance of the baby. She is unceremoniously asked to leave her house by her own husband, thus highlighting how fickle the position of a woman in a marriage is. It is explicit

that Armand never loved her for the person she is, and cared more about the color of her skin than her heart. Women of that period were considered to be dispensable objects once they threaten the social standing of their husbands.

Chopin also uses various metaphors that offer the narrative, an element of foreshadowing. Armand's attraction towards Desiree is compared with a pistol shot - instinctive and fast. The avalanche and prairie fire, are metaphors used to describe the passion of Armand, that swept Desiree off her feet. The gloominess of the Aubigny estate is another such metaphor, which represents the nature of the Armand's personality. He has a dark heart, which makes him treat his slaves with cruelty, and cease loving his wife the moment, he nurtures a suspicion about her ancestry.

Suspense is another element which keeps the reader engrossed in the story. It starts with Desiree's parentage. The reader does not know who her parents are, later the reason for the reaction of Madame Valmondé when she first sees Desiree's baby and for the change in Armand's treatment towards Desiree keeps the suspense going, and the identity of Armand's mother heightens the suspense factor of the story. (Gibert, 2005)

Though today interracial marriages are common, few writers were daring enough, to touch such sensitive subjects, during the period in which Chopin lived in. Most of her works were met with criticisms during her life time, and due credit was given to her works only after the 1970s, almost a century after her stories were first published. This story, through the character of Armand, reflects sadly on, how the Southern society viewed miscegenation in the nineteenth century. To sum up, it would be appropriate to quote Susan

Gubar, who says,

“ The black baby proves that Armand (in effect the nineteenth century society) defines family not in terms of the reproduction of children but in terms of production of whiteness. (Gubar, 2000)

## **References**

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