

The glass ceiling in relation to happiness



“ The Yellow Face,” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and “ Désirée’s Baby,” by Kate Chopin, both touch on themes such as racism, gender equality, hypocrisy, and identity. These stories can best be understood through one another and, when juxtaposed, reveal a greater theme. In these stories the female character is seeking approval of the male character, in order to foster her own happiness.

One similarity is that both stories involve secret pasts. In “ The Yellow Face,” we know that Effie was previously married and has a child from said marriage. Supposedly, both the husband and child passed away due to yellow fever, and their death certificates were burned in a fire shortly thereafter. Effie fled America to escape from the heartache. It was there in England that she met Mr. Grant Munro. We learn that they have been happily married for three years, yet something has recently caused Effie to become distant. That something is Effie’s daughter, who is not actually deceased, but rather living in the house down the road. Désirée also lacks a definite history in “ Désirée’s Baby.” The Valmondés adopted her, after finding her sleeping near the front porch of their estate, without knowing of her parents or any other family. After she grew up, she married Armand Aubigny and together they had a child. The problem with their child, however, is that he shares the skin color of many of the quadroon boys on the plantation. This causes a strain on the relationship of the couple, whom both happen to believe that they are purely of white descent.

Irony is a prevalent characteristic of both Doyle and Chopin’s stories. It is puzzling as to why Lucy wears a yellow mask in “ The Yellow Face,” as opposed to a white one. She is merely trying to cover the color of her skin

with complete disregard to what color she becomes and what that will imply about her. Lucy's inner struggle with her racial identity most likely stems from the fact that her mother is hiding her from the world, because she neglected to mention that she was married to an African-American. We can also examine the paradox of Lucy's name. "Lucy" is often associated with things such as light, and air, as well as white-ness or pure-ness. Lucy, in contrast, is part African-American, and not only is her skin dark, but she is kept in the dark as well.

Furthermore, in "Désirée's Baby," Armand forces his wife to leave because of her bloodline, only to find out that he also has African-American lineage. The stigma of inter-racial marriage can be explored here in both stories. During the time period that these stories are set, interracial marriage was an uncommon practice. Therefore, from "Désirée's Baby" we can understand why Effie is afraid to share the news of her child's survival with her husband in "The Yellow Face." She is concerned that he will abandon her because her child is not white.

Désirée's greatest desire is to please her husband, and she even tells her mother that she is so happy that it scares her. She describes the feeling as, "When he frowned, she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God" (Chopin 178-179). Effie also shares this desire, which can be seen when she says to her husband, "God forgive me, I feared that I should lose you, and I had not the courage to tell you. I had to choose between you, and in my weakness I turned away from my own little girl" (Doyle 385). Both stories highlight the fact that the women are most

concerned with pleasing their husbands in order to maintain their own happiness.

After the birth of the child, Désirée pleads for her husband not to send her away because she is in love with him, and he is the source of her happiness. Chopin writes, “ He absented himself from home; and when there avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse ... Désirée was miserable enough to die” (Chopin 179). Désirée’s happiness varies jointly with that of her husband. Effie’s reaction is not as volatile as Désirée’s; however, we can see the downward progression of her sadness and depression as she continues to keep the secret of her daughter from her husband. The more listless and upset Mr. Munro becomes, the more timid Effie is in speaking with him.

“ The Yellow Face” ends quite pleasantly, whereas “ Désirée’s Baby” does not. At the end of the story, Doyle writes, “ He lifted the little child, kissed her, and then, still carrying her, he held his other hand out to his wife and turned to the door” (Doyle 386). They then proceed to go home, where they can discuss their new situation as a family. On the contrary, Désirée is sent away at the end of “ Désirée’s Baby.” She takes the child with her, but is still severely upset and hurt by her husband’s disapproval and newfound anger. She writes a letter to her mother after Armand confronts her about not being white, saying, “ I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live” (Chopin 180). Désirée experiences a much more passionate range of emotion in her response to her husband’s emotions; however, upon comparison we can see that Effie experiences similar emotions as her husband.