

Depiction of the lives of women in the south in the novels desiree's baby and abs...

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An Understanding Women In the South

William Faulkner is a renowned author of American literature who created a county rooted in the deep south, portraying the real life hardships of living in that part of the U. S. One major concern Faulkner paints in his plotlines, is the theme of racism. His story lines have harsh truths about that time, which can also be discovered in works other than Faulkner's that are set in the same southern area and time frame. While it is a distinguished feature in Faulkner works that mixed race characters are discriminated against, white men and their " design" continuously belittles mixed race women which can be looked at closer while comparing the characters in a short story by Kate Chopin Desiree's Baby and Faulkner's Absalom Absalom. To understand the characters placement in their respective stories, one must first understand " the south." Both stories are written based on southern cultures which has particular rules and certain ways of life. Along with the rules of the south, the role of women was different especially in Mississippi, where Absalom Absalom takes place, and in Louisiana, the setting of Desiree's Baby, of which are set during the Civil War. While looking at discrimination in the south at the time and focusing particularly on women, the prejudices run deeper towards women of color.

Beginning with Faulkner's Absalom Absalom, the character's interactions allow the tensions to be examined and critcised. To examine the image of women closer, a quote by Mr. Compson in Absalom Absalom helps to make sense of how men thought of women at the time: " The other sex is separated into three sharp divisions, separated (two of them) by a chasm

which could be crossed but one time and in but one direction—ladies, women, females—the virgins whom gentlemen someday married, the courtesans to whom they went to while on sabbaticals to the cities, the slave girls and women upon whom that first caste rested and to whom in certain cases it doubtless owed the very fact of its virginity...”(Faulkner 87).

This quote can be interpreted to be a man’s idea of how women are categorized, leaving any woman who is mixed in the lowest category. “ Mr Compson presents us with a fantasy figure who becomes the vehicle through which he expounds his views concerning women, sexuality, and race.”(Li 88). This fantasy figure is the octoroon mistress who is talked about very little, except when Judith finds a picture of her and the child she had with Charles Bon. Although Charles himself is a mixed race, he created a version of himself that would be accepted in the white man’s world. Bon creates the character of his mistress basing her on the fact she was easy for procreation. “ For a price, of course, but a price offered and accepted or declined through a system more formal than any that white girls are sold under since they are more valuable as commodities than white girls, raised and trained to fulfill a woman’s sole end and purpose: to love, to be beautiful, to divert...”(Faulkner 93). Additionally, while Henry talks to Charles about his octoroon mistress he says the marriage does not count because she is black and has no rights, therefore no say about the relationship. Due to him being the one who portrays this mistress, the male again has the power. “ Neither Sutpen nor Bon envisions a world to which their children can belong. Both create fantasies exclusively for men like

themselves, with the requirement, at least on the part of Sutpen, that their heirs be exact versions of themselves.”(Li 89). Charles portrays these scenarios with his own reputation in mind, having control over the situation proving the point that this woman is evermore expendable and “othered.”

Kate Chopin’s character in *Desiree’s Baby* is introduced as a character with unknown genealogy, having the readers infer she is of a mixed race, causes speculation and prejudices which her husband abuses when he is worried his genealogy will be found out and risk losing his “design.” In an article by Dagmar Pegues “Fear and Desire: Regional Aesthetics and Colonial Desire in Kate Chopin’s Portrayals of the Tragic Mulatta Stereo”, he points out an obsession with using a black woman’s body in narrative and stories: “examining one plateau of the sexualized stereotype of the dusky-eyed, exotic quadroons and octoroons, i. e. the desirability of their bodies for their white masters, which paradoxically underlies the perpetuation of the white southern hierarchy, as well as by examining portrayals of (sexual and non-sexual) violence and victimization of the black body.” This obsession with the darkness of the body is shown when Desiree is describing Armand, but she did not realize what she was describing. “But Armand’s dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her”(Chopin 402). Armand who takes pride in his the inheritance of his wealth, land, and home, has to think about the lineage of his family therefore wanted a male heir, only using Desiree for this. Armand likes to be in control, which is shown when the slaves say how he runs the plantation differently than his father. By using Desiree for a test trial of how his children for look

he is in control of his heir. " In the context of the examination of the work of Kate Chopin, the fetishization of the black body, i. e. the fear of the racial Other and a coexistent desire projected toward the body of the tragic mulatta, embodies the complex and paradoxical nature of stereotype as a confluence of knowledge and power." (Pegues 6). Armand agrees to marry her while knowing her background may have octoroon blood in it, but if their child looked obviously black he would be able to direct the blame to the mother rather than himself, whom he knew was of mixed race. He tried to associate the blame on Desiree for the color of their child's skin. " That the child is not white; it means that you are not white." (Chopin 403). He knew she would be too embarrassed to stay knowing she was the reason he had a black child, thus she feels she has ruined his family. Pegues goes on to say " Désirée herself, who is " literally lost"; and she further describes the source of Désirée's tragedy " not to her assumed ' taint' but to the system of racial and sexual oppression where the white patriarchal system is the ' taint' ," again explicitly saying Desiree's oppression due to her possible race but because her possible race does not fit into Armands system which she thinks is pure.

In the south, having slaves during this period was not uncommon and are often incorporated in the stories. Thomas Sutpen worked with his slaves to create his plantation to add to his design. But he also had Clytie with a slave women returning to the idea that white man have a desire for their slaves bodies. Similarly, in Desiree's Baby, La Blanche is a slave on Armands plantation who could possibly have a child with Armand. While Desiree is

coming to terms with her sons skin color, she compares is to one of the slaves children, making another connection between Armand and La Blanche. La Blanche is often compared to Desiree even by Armand. Ellen Peel in " Semiotic Subversion" says " Neither has a " proper" name, only a descriptive one. During the scene in which Armand rejects his wife, he explicitly points out the physical resemblance between the women: " As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly. " While it does not clearly state that he is abusive to Desiree, Armand is not portrayed to be sweet loving towards her until after the baby is born making it seem that is the only reason he grows more loving.. This violence toward the black body is explicated within Desiree's Baby when it is known Desiree's husband is a violent slave owner, who also takes advantage of Desiree's unknown background." I believe, chiefly because it is a boy to bear his name; though he says not,- that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know this isn't true." (Chopin 402). Desiree admits she is scared of her husband's violence, possibly showing he has been violent towards her. She then goes on to say " He hasn't punished one of them-not one of them-since baby is born. Even Negrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work- he only laughed, and said Negrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mamma I'm so happy; it frightens me."(Chopin 402). Although Faulkner does not give the details about the relationship between Clyties mother and Sutpen, his character can be equivalated to Armand just the same. After dismissing Wash Jones, while sleeping with his granddaughter Sutpen's irresponsibility and cruelty is represented. Another time, is while Sutpen asks Rosa Coldfield to marry him, but only after they have a child so he can have an heir. Linda

Dunleavy in "Marriage and the Invisibility of Women in *Absalom, Absalom!*" examines the situation as Rosa being the only woman who can not give men the ability to belittle her, although she wants to be the woman or the lady that Mr. Compson earlier said gentleman will marry. "Aware that she is inscribing herself into absence, Rosa agrees to marry Sutpen because she wants to have a sexual life and wants to have access to the female experience." This specific event, correlates to the women's inability to have control over themselves and if Rosa would have agreed would have been in Sutpen's power.

To elaborate more, Thomas Sutpen in *Absalom Absalom*, tells General Compson that in order to achieve his design he would require the following things: money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family -incidentally of course a wife. Just as Armand required the same to be content with himself, both portraying the southern male ideals of success and happiness. After Desiree leaves Armand, he may decide to follow in Sutpen's footsteps and remarry in hopes that he has an heir that can be socially accepted. Thomas Sutpen needed to marry Ellen in order to produce heirs, and gain the towns respect to complete his design of becoming a true southern man with respect within the community, the same as Armand. His desire to marry Judith stems from that, and the hope to make Henry proud. Stephanie Li in the article "Resistance, Silence, and Placées: Charles Bon's Octoroon Mistress" talked about Bon and Henry's intricate relationship which added complications to Bon." Although Bon's mistress embodies a chaos of identities that overturns all pretense of order, Henry perceives her primarily through the lens of

sexual desire. For Henry, issues of race and class are irrelevant in a social order that grants white men the freedom of sexual dominance." From this it can be determined that both males feel a sort of dominance sexually, Henry liked to imagine Bon's previous wife as a sexual object, and Bon liked to arouse Henry with the fantasies of this. Turning back to the statement made about white southern hierarchy, the men who feel they need to make a place for themselves in the south feel a sense of dominance over the women and sexualize the idea of having an affair with black women. All the male characters throughout both *Absalom Absalom*, and *Desiree's Baby* look through the lens of a white male in the south, embodying the culture that sexualizes the black body, and uses women for personal growth within their own design.