



Désirée's Baby

Kate Chopin

Key Facts

Life

- Born 1850 (St. Louis, Missouri, USA)
- Died 1904 (St. Louis, Missouri, USA)

Genre

- Novel
- Short Story

School (type)

- Feminism
- Realism

Themes

- Many focus on themes related to women's search for selfhood, for self-discovery or identity.
- Many also focus on women's revolt against conformity, often against gender conformity or against social norms that limit women's possibilities in life.
- Others focus on women's understanding of feminine sexuality or women's experience of motherhood, pregnancy, or childbirth.



Major Works

"The Storm"

"At the 'Cadian Ball" (prequel to "The Storm")

"Désirée's Baby" (published 1893)

"A Pair of Silk Stockings"

"A Respectable Woman"

"Athénaïse"

"Beyond the Bayou" (a children's story)

"A No-Account Creole" (Chopin's first short story)

"Lilacs"

"Fedora"

"A Point at Issue!" (an early Chopin short story)

"Madame Célestin's Divorce"

"Ripe Figs" (a children's story)

"Her Letters" (now being filmed)



"Désirée's Baby"

Genre and Movement

Genre

Short story

Movement

Social realism



"*Désirée's Baby*"

Historical Context

Although Chopin wrote all of her fiction well after the Civil War had emancipated African-American slaves, the setting of "*Désirée's Baby*" draws on the well-known histories of plantation life in the antebellum South. Prior to the Civil War, the Southern economy relied on slave labor to work the many plantations and smaller farms. Cotton was the staple crop, and cotton plantations stretched from North Carolina all the way to Texas. Sugar cane and rice were also grown throughout much of Louisiana. Despite the fact that by 1860, less than 12 percent of the South's planters held more than twenty slaves, these wealthy people dominated Southern society. The richest planters lived in elegant mansions, often purchased fine goods from abroad, and much of their wealth went to brokers, who bought their crops and sold them household goods and farm equipment.

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Historical Context (cont.)

The bulk of the work on the plantation was performed by slaves, though the plantation owner managed the plantation, assigned tasks to supervisors or slaves, kept records of business transactions, and worked with ship owners, bankers, and brokers. The plantation mistress also supervised the spinning, weaving, mending, housecleaning, and food preparation. More than 75 percent of African-American slaves worked on southern plantations. Adults and children alike worked long hours, both in the fields and in the slaveholder's house.

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Historical Context (cont.)

After the Civil War ended in 1865, the U.S. government embarked on a plan called Reconstruction to rebuild the South and reunite the nation. Reconstruction lasted from 1865 to 1877. During Reconstruction, the southern states set up new governments and revised their constitutions. All of the former Confederate states were readmitted to the Union by 1870, but many northern Republicans objected to the efforts made by the legislatures of southern states to restrict the freedoms of African Americans. Reconstruction governments, however, founded new social programs and organizations, such as public school systems. Southern states also spent a great deal of money repairing their infrastructure—railroads, bridges, and public buildings—which had been destroyed during the war.

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Historical Context (cont)

At first, African Americans were optimistic about their futures. In 1866, Congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment, which extended equal citizenship to African Americans, and a few years later, passed the Fifteenth Amendment, which guaranteed that the right to vote could not be denied because of race. African Americans took an active part in government, serving as delegates at state constitutional conventions and in Reconstruction legislatures.

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Historical Context (cont)

Despite this greater equality, as early as 1866, southern states began passing Black Codes, which were laws that greatly limited the freedom of African Americans. Many African Americans were also still tied to the land through the system of sharecropping, by which a sharecropper worked a parcel of land in return for a share of the crop. Under this system, most African-American sharecroppers (as well as white sharecroppers) remained in poverty. African Americans had few economic opportunities to better their lives. Many were also threatened by the Ku Klux Klan, which opposed African Americans obtaining civil rights and used violence to discourage them. By the late 1800s, many African Americans felt the New South was beginning to look very much like the Old South. As Democrats regained control of southern state governments, they began to overturn

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Historical Context (cont)

the Reconstruction reforms. For instance, they devised methods of keeping African Americans from voting by implementing poll taxes and literacy tests. Southern states also passed Jim Crow laws, which called for the segregation of African Americans. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that the standard of "separate but equal" facilities did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment—a ruling that would stand until 1954.

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Important Names/Terms

1. La Blanche – “the white one”
2. Désirée – “the desired one”
3. L’Abri – “shelter”
4. quadroon – a person of $\frac{1}{4}$ African-American descent
5. Aubigny – from *d’Aubigny*, a family that came to the New World in the mid-1600s
6. bayou – a body of water typically found in flat, low-lying areas, and can refer either to an extremely slow-moving stream or river (often with a poorly defined shoreline), or to a marshy lake or wetland
7. creole – a descendent of original French settlers in Louisiana; the term comes from the Spanish word *criollo*, meaning “a child of the colony
8. high yellow – a term for very light-skinned persons of African-American descent. It is a reference to the golden yellow skin tone of some mixed-race people. The term was in common use in the U.S. at the end of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century.
9. pall – a cloth, often of velvet, for spreading over a coffin, bier, or tomb; a coffin
10. miscegenation – Interbreeding between members of different races; marriage or cohabitation between members of different races, especially in the U.S., between a black person and a white person

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Directions: As you read the story, look for key elements.

- Plot
- Setting
- Characters
- Point of view
- Conflict
- Foreshadowing
- Themes
- Symbols



"**Désirée's Baby**"

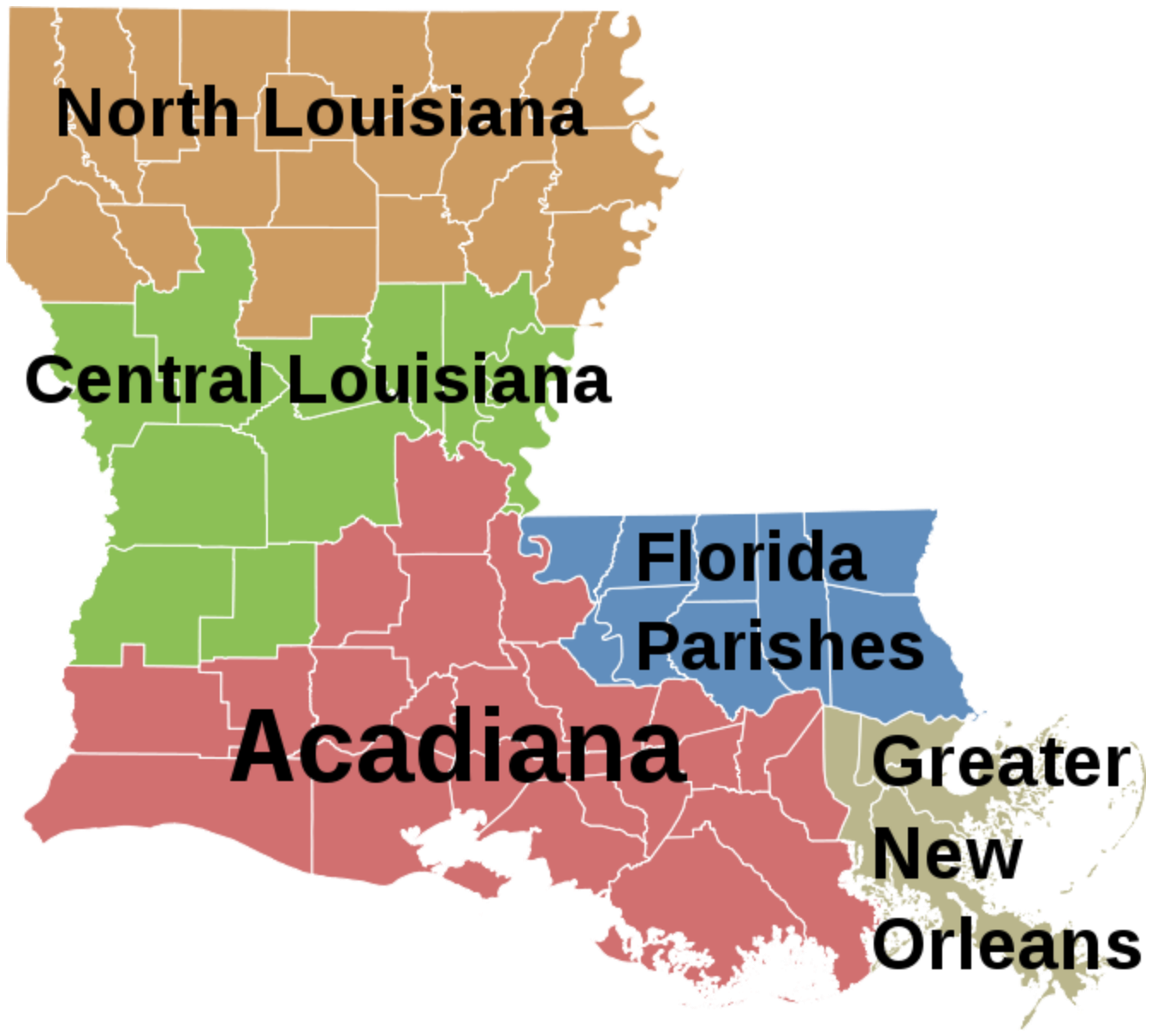
Plot

- Introduction – Désirée, whose origin is unknown, is found by Monsieur Valmondé. He and his wife adopt the child.
- Rising action – Désirée, now a young woman, marries Armand Aubigny, a passionate young man from an old creole family. Désirée gives birth to a son.
- Climax – By the time the baby is four weeks old, his African-American ancestry becomes apparent. Armand accuses Désirée of not being white.
- Falling action – Désirée takes the couple's baby and walks into the bayou. She and her child are never heard of again.
- Dénouement – Armand reads a letter from his mother. He discovers that he is of African-American descent.

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Setting

1. Place – The Aubigny plantation in Louisiana
2. Time – Before 1865
3. Social conditions
 - A. Many whites used the Bible to justify slavery.
 - A. Mark of Cain (Genesis 4) – Although some racists argued that the “mark of Cain” justified slavery, this belief died out by the 20th century. However, white supremacists still base their supposed racial superiority on this claim.
 - B. Curse on Ham’s descendents (Genesis 9:25) – This was a common claim made by the white elite to justify the slave trade.
 - B. A woman’s identity is determined by a patriarchal society.
4. Mood – Dark and ominous



North Louisiana

Central Louisiana

**Florida
Parishes**

Acadiana

**Greater
New
Orleans**

Louisiana bayou



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Characters

Major Characters

1. Armand Aubigny – Arrogant, proud, passionate, possessive, racist
2. Désirée Valmondé Aubigny – Affectionate, weak willed, dependent on others for own identity (similar to heroines in fairy tales)
3. Madame Valmondé – Maternal, loving, non-racist

Minor Characters

1. La Blanche – Victimized by Armand (implied)
2. Armand's mother – Loving, secretive
3. Négrillon – Destructive to self

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Point of view

Omniscient objective



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Conflict

- External
- Man vs. society



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Foreshadowing

Colors

1. white - purity
2. gold(en) – white race
3. yellow – mixed race
4. black – death; destruction
5. mahogany - mixed race



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Foreshadowing

Similes

1. Upon seeing *Désirée* at the gate of her home, Armand fell in love with *Désirée* instantly, "as if struck by a pistol shot." - death
2. The passion awakened that day "swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles." - tragedy
3. Armand's house has a roof "black like a cowl" and is surrounded by "big, solemn oaks ... [which] shadowed it like a pall." - death

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Themes

1. Race and racism

- Humans create the ideas of race.
- Racism harms both the racist and the victim of racism.

2. Love

- Love lasts whereas passion fades.
- Maternal love is steadfast.

3. Identity

- Identity is not necessarily a fixed trait; it is derived as much from how others perceive a person as from qualities intrinsic to that person.

"**Désirée's Baby**"

Symbols

1. Armand Aubigny – Racism harms the racist.
2. Désirée Valmondé Aubigny - Identity is not necessarily a fixed trait, but is derived as much from how others perceive a person as from qualities intrinsic to that person.
3. Madame Valmondé – A mother's love is enduring.
4. La Blanche – Appearances can be deceiving.
5. Négrillon – Racism harms the object of racism.