

Désirée's Baby



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATE CHOPIN

Kate Chopin was born as Katherine O'Flaherty to an Irish father and a French mother. Her father was a well-respected businessman and her mother a well-connected woman among the French community in St. Louis, Missouri where Chopin grew up. Chopin was one of five children, but the only one of the children to live into adulthood. While her father died in 1855, Chopin maintained a close relationship with her remaining family members—her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother. Chopin was an enthusiastic reader from an early age, and her love of poetry, fairy tales, and religious stories showed her literary passion. She married at age 20 and moved with her husband, Oscar Chopin, to New Orleans. The couple had six children, the last of which was born when Kate was 28. She was a young mother, and her early adulthood was devoted to married life. After the births of her children, Chopin's family moved to Cloutierville, a tiny community in Louisiana. This setting became the source of inspiration for much of Chopin's writing, particularly her exposure to and interest in the Creole culture that features in her stories. Oscar Chopin died in 1882, and while Kate attempted to run his business, which was drastically in debt, she abandoned the attempt after two years and moved her family back to St. Louis to rejoin her mother. Unfortunately Chopin's mother died a year later, and Chopin suffered from depression after this succession of losses. Chopin turned to writing as a solace and a way to process her experiences, and by the 1890s she was writing and publishing frequently. She received little critical success during her lifetime, despite the recognition she has received posthumously. Her work was overlooked due to its local ideas and imagery, or resulted in controversy for its portrayal of women's roles. Most criticized was her 1899 novel [The Awakening](#), which is now recognized as an important early feminist text. Chopin died in 1904 at the age of 54 from a brain hemorrhage.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chopin's work is directly influenced by Southern Creole culture. This culture is the product of the immigration of French and Spanish immigrants into Louisiana prior to the Louisiana Purchase (1803). Later immigrants have contributed to the culture and traditions of this region, but the term "Creole" arose to refer to person born in the colonies rather than their mother country. This culture was influenced by slavery in the United States. Prior to the Civil War, the American South was culturally organized around slavery as a racial caste system.

White-skinned Creoles became wealthy plantation owners and also participated in the culture slavery produced. The Creole culture is often identified with a distinct language, which is a French and West African hybrid, demonstrating one aspect of the impact of the transportation of numerous African slaves into the region. Another historical aspect of Chopin's work is its feminist themes. Many of Chopin's progressive ideas and her exploration of the roles of women in society were rejected by the socially conservative environment in which her work was received. In this way, Chopin was ahead of her time. Feminism as a movement gained ground in the early twentieth century, accompanied by the publication of texts and works of fictions which explored many themes which had interested Chopin: gender inequality, the limited roles and opportunities available to women, the pressures of society's expectations for women. Despite Chopin's limited acceptance in her day, later literary critiques and feminist scholars have recognized both her creative genius and her progressive thinking on women's issues.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Chopin's work is normally identified as American Realism and Naturalism. Realism describes an ideology that became prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century that literature should strive to depict events as they really are. This included selecting common subjects and placing poor or working-class characters at the forefront of stories. A later offshoot of Realism, Naturalism appeared in the 1880s through the 1930s. This literary movement focused on not only the realistic aspects of human experience, but on the role of the environment in shaping these experiences. Naturalism posits that humans are irreversibly impacted by their environmental conditions, whether urban, rural, economic, or psychological. Naturalism deals with stark realities, and often engages themes of poverty, racism, illness, and a variety of forms of corruption. Critical and influential Naturalistic texts include Emile Zola's literary accounts of human sexuality and the stark novels of Thomas Hardy in which human fates are directed by the tragedies of nature and the weather. The Naturalistic aspects of Chopin's work are clear. She deals explicitly with the brutal impacts of racism and how this culture shapes her characters. Some aspects of her work do differentiate from Naturalism, though. For example, the ominous descriptions of L'Abri and Armand in *Désirée's Baby* give the story Gothic undertones. Gothic literature consisted of an earlier movement (mid-eighteenth century) that prioritized horror stories as a form of the popular Romanticism. Romanticism, another literary movement, focused on heightened human experience both in the form of terror and pleasure, and Gothic literature was able to achieve

both extremes. Influential gothic texts include Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Chopin's affinity for poetry, religious accounts, and fairy tales may have influenced the fatalistic quality of her work. Her stories tend to resolve with a sense of necessary completion, or an ironic twist, as in *Désirée's Baby* when Armand's discovery of the truth comes too late, which seems to be a moralistic punishment for his crimes.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Désirée's Baby*
- **When Written:** 1892
- **Where Written:** St. Louis, Missouri
- **When Published:** 1893
- **Literary Period:** American Realism and Naturalism
- **Genre:** Realistic fiction
- **Setting:** Louisiana, mid-nineteenth century
- **Climax:** *Désirée* and her baby set off into the Bayou never to return. Too late, Armand discovers a letter from his mother to his father that reveals his, rather than *Désirée's*, black heritage.
- **Antagonist:** The prevailing prejudice of the racist and sexist culture of the setting; Armand as a figure who holds these prejudiced beliefs
- **Point of View:** third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

The Story of a Farm Girl. *Désirée's Baby* bears interesting resemblance to a short story called "The Story of Farm Girl" by popular French writer Guy de Maupassant. In this story, a young farm girl has a child with a lover who abandons her. Years later, she and her husband cannot have children, but are able to adopt her long lost child as their own. Chopin's work is considered an intentional transposition of this text.

Vogue Magazine. *Désirée's Baby* was initially published in *Vogue Magazine*. While contemporary readers might identify this publication primarily with popular fashion, *Vogue* was founded in 1892 (just before Chopin's inclusion) as a publication to celebrate "the ceremonial side of life." It catered primarily to New York aristocracy.



PLOT SUMMARY

Madame Valmondé travels from her home on a Louisiana plantation to the neighboring plantation to visit her recently married daughter, *Désirée*. *Désirée* has given birth to her first child, and Madame Valmondé reflects that it seems not so long ago that she first held *Désirée* herself as a baby. *Désirée* was

found by Monsieur Valmondé as an infant abandoned in the shadow of the **stone pillar** at the gate of their plantation. The Valmondés accepted the girl as their own, and Madame Valmondé believed the child had been sent to her by Providence because she couldn't bear children of her own.

Eighteen years later, *Désirée* was standing near the same stone pillar where her adoptive father found her when Armand Aubigny, the young heir of the neighboring plantation **L'Abri**, rode past and fell in love with her at first sight. Armand fell in love suddenly and deeply, and nothing could persuade him to give up *Désirée*, despite Monsieur Valmondé's cautions about her mysterious past. Armand ordered *Désirée* **fine clothes** and gifts from Paris, and the wedding took place.

Madame Valmondé arrives at L'Abri for her visit. She shudders at the foreboding appearance of the plantation house, which is cast into shadows by large oak trees and a low roof. The plantation has grown bleaker under Armand Aubigny's strict rule, compared to the ownership of his father.

She greets her daughter and her daughter's baby where they are reclining inside on a couch in soft muslin and lace. Upon seeing the child, Madame Valmondé says, "This is not the baby!" *Désirée* exclaims over how much the child has grown and changed in a few short weeks. She says that he cries so loudly that Armand can hear him as far away as La Blanche's cabin. Madame Valmondé examines the child closely, and then, slowly, asks her daughter what her husband says about the child. *Désirée* reports that Armand is immensely proud and in great spirits. She shares with her mother that Armand has not punished any of his slaves, as he used to do, since their baby was born. He even laughed about a slave who feigned injury to avoid work. Marriage and fatherhood has softened Armand's character. *Désirée* loves him regardless of his moods and his temper.

Weeks later, *Désirée* wakes up one morning with a sense of fear and foreboding, as if her happiness and peace will come to an end. Strange things begin to occur: neighbors visit with little explanation, the slaves seem aware of a secret, and Armand grows distant and angry. He does not meet *Désirée's* eyes and stays away from home as much as he can. He returns to his brutal treatment of his slaves.

One afternoon, *Désirée* sits in her room watching as her baby is fanned by one of La Blanche's boys, who is holding a peacock feather. Suddenly, *Désirée* looks from the boy to her child, and cries, "ah!" Her blood seems to freeze and she breaks into a cold sweat.

Désirée dismisses La Blanche's boy from the room and gazes on her baby with fear. Armand enters the room and *Désirée* asks him to look at their child. "What does it mean?" She questions. Armand responds coldly, "it means that the child is not white; it means that you are not white."

Désirée cries out that this is a lie and compares the skin of her

hand to Armand's, pointing out that it is even whiter than his. Armand retorts, "as white as La Blanche's."

In despair, Désirée writes to her mother explaining what has happened. Her mother tells her to come home to her because she loves her daughter, and to bring her child.

Désirée brings her mother's letter to Armand's study and presents it to him. He does not speak. She asks him if she should return to her home, and he tells her, yes, he wants her to go. Armand believes that God has unjustly punished him by giving him this child and he strikes out at his wife as if against God. He no longer loves his wife because she has brought shame into his house and to his name.

Désirée leaves, hoping that Armand will ask her to stay. She says, "good-bye, Armand," but he does not respond. Désirée finds her baby with the nurse Zandrine. She walks outside holding her child. It is October, and the slaves are harvesting cotton. Désirée walks in the thin clothes and slippers she has on across an empty field. She disappears into the bayou and is not seen again.

A few weeks later, Armand builds a **bonfire** to burn Désirée's possessions at L'Abri. He commands a dozen of his slaves who do the work of moving Désirée's belongings into the fire. Armand orders burned the fine clothes, the bonnets and gloves, the various gifts he had purchased for Désirée. He is about to add Désirée's love letters to him into the bonfire when he notes a letter from his mother to his father that was in the back of the same drawer. The letter thanks God for her husband's love and for her son's ignorance: he will never know that she, his mother, is one of the members of the race "cursed with the brand of slavery."

love for her. In despair at her husband's subsequent abandonment, Désirée walks off into the Bayou wilderness with her baby to their deaths.

Armand – The rich heir to the Aubigny plantation and fortune. Armand is a strict and cruel master and manager of his plantation. He falls desperately in love with Désirée at first sight and woos her with extravagant gifts, including **fine clothes**. When he realizes that their baby appears black, he abandons his love for Désirée, as well as his kindness toward her, assuming that she also has black heritage. The end of the story reveals that Armand's mother, Madame Aubigny, was black, and so the appearance of his child is due to his heritage and not to Désirée's mysterious background.

Baby – The child of Désirée and Armand. The child's appearance, which reveals his black heritage, is the catalyst for the conflict in this story. Armand, ashamed to have such a child, blames Désirée for the child's appearance and Désirée, losing hope, takes the baby with her as she leaves **L'Abri** and heads into the bayou.

La Blanche – One of Armand's slaves. La Blanche is mentioned several times in the short story in ways that imply a sexual relationship between her and Armand. Armand visits her cabin, and her child's resemblance to the baby is what causes Désirée to realize his black heritage. It is suggested that La Blanche's skin is as white as Armand's or Désirée's, which of course makes the idea of racial hierarchy and separation that motivates Armand's actions and Désirée's suicide seem even more ridiculous and artificial.

Madame Aubigny – Monsieur Aubigny's wife and Armand's mother. This French woman is revealed to be black through a letter written to her husband, which is uncovered by Armand at the end of the story. The couple resided in France where an inter-racial relationship was more socially acceptable. Her heritage is what impacts the baby's appearance. She kept Armand ignorant of his heritage out of her love for him, though of course with disastrous consequences.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Monsieur Valmondé – A childless man who finds a baby abandoned at the gate of his plantation in Louisiana. The child cries and calls for "Dada" when he picks her up. With his wife Madame Valmondé, Monsieur Valmondé raises the child, Désirée, as his own.

Zandrine – The wet nurse who cares for the baby. She is a slave.

Monsieur Aubigny – Armand's father who has passed away before the short story begins, passing **L'Abri** onto his son. Monsieur Aubigny lived with his wife and son in Paris until his wife died and he and his son returned to Louisiana.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Madame Valmondé – A childless woman who adopts a baby abandoned at the gate of her husband's plantation in Louisiana. The Valmondés raise the baby, who they name Désirée, as their own child, and Madame Valmondé considers the child's arrival to be an act of Providence. The short story begins with Madame Valmondé's visit to a grown and married Désirée who has recently had her first child. Madame Valmondé's love for her daughter is boundless (in stark contrast to Armand, even after it appears that Désirée may have a mixed racial heritage).

Désirée – A child found abandoned at the Valmondés' gate in the shadow of a **stone pillar**. She is raised in the relative luxury of the Valmondés' home, and marries Armand Aubigny, a wealth plantation owner from one of the oldest and most established families in Louisiana. Désirée gives birth to a baby boy and eventually realizes that the child's physical features reveal its black heritage. Armand assumes that Désirée is the one who passed that heritage on to her child, and abandons his



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SLAVERY AND RACISM

Set in Louisiana in the mid-nineteenth century on two white-owned plantations some time before the Civil War, the story explores the psychological impacts of slavery and racial inequality. The violence and physical abuse that was so much a part of slavery exist only on the fringes of the story, implied in Armand's "strict" treatment of his slaves and his ambiguous but likely sexual relationship with La Blanche, which makes sense given that all of the major characters of the story are the *owners* of the plantations. Put another way, the story explores the way that racism shapes and distorts the psychology and lives of the white slave owners who control and benefit from it.

The story shows several examples of how white perceptions of black inferiority, and in fact even how internalized *black* perceptions of black inferiority, lead to race being a taboo subject that causes characters to act in morally corrupt ways and to feel guilt, shame, and fear about their actions and identities. Without racial prejudice and the shame it generates, the story's tragedy would never have unfolded. Madame Aubigny would not have felt the need to hide the truth of her own background. Armand would not have turned against Désirée and their baby when their son's appearance identified him as a mixed-race child. Madame Valmondé would not have kept the reality of the child's background from Désirée despite recognizing the truth herself. And Désirée, once she realized the significance of her child's features and was accused by Armand of being part-black herself, would not have responded with such overwhelming shame that she walked into the bayou with her baby, killing herself and the child.

But the story pushes further in its condemnation of racism, by showing how the racism of its white characters causes them to see a person's *race* as more important than that person's self. Because, fundamentally, other than the fact that the child of Désirée and Armand reveals that it has a racial heritage that is both black and white, nothing else has changed. Désirée is still the same woman with whom Armand fell in love and who brightened his life, her baby is the same baby she adored, and she is still the daughter of her loving parents. And yet the mere fact of her racial history causes Armand to reject her and the baby, to cease to see her as the woman he loves and instead to see her as simply black and therefore beneath him. And for Désirée, essentially, to reject herself and her baby out of

shame. The twist ending of the story makes obvious the idiocy and tragedy of this way of seeing the world, with racial background as its most important feature, since it becomes evident that one's racial background isn't obvious at all, and thus nothing to base assessments of oneself or of others.



INTERSECTION OF CLASSISM, SEXISM, AND RACISM

"Désirée's Baby" depicts the ways in which the gender and economic inequalities present in mid-nineteenth century Southern society reinforced and intermingled with the inequalities of racist slave culture. Often these three issues are interconnected, as in the role of La Blanche, a slave of Armand's, who also seems to have a sexual relationship with him. Armand's position as a wealthy, white male allowed him to exercise complete control over his possession: a poor, black woman.

Chopin demonstrates that inequalities between the genders and vast disparities of wealth help enforce racism. Désirée, although white, is treated as a possession. Armand believes, correctly, that he can claim her by buying **fine clothes** and gifts for her. These marks of wealth reinforce Armand's status, as well as categorize Désirée as a controllable object. Meanwhile, the division of her maternal care duties to others demonstrates Désirée's wealth and position. The black nurse Zandrine cares for her baby. Her leisurely lifestyle reflects her wealth and position, which, although she is still subject to Armand's will as a woman, is reinforced by her white skin.

The vivid resolution of the short story, in which Armand has Désirée's possessions destroyed in a **bonfire**, shows how class, gender, and race interact culturally. Armand burns Désirée's possessions to rid himself of memories and marks of her. Because these memories are physical objects (gifts purchased by Armand), his actions are again reducing Désirée to a possession – he believes she can be destroyed in his memory and removed from his life by destroying *things*. Furthermore, only a wealthy person could afford the luxury of burning possessions, and the things themselves – silk gowns, lace, bonnets and gloves – are marks of stereotypical feminine beauty. Finally, Armand does not burn the possessions himself, but sits and watches leisurely while the manual labor is completed by a dozen of his slaves. The erasure of Désirée—a woman and a possession—also showcases Armand's wealth and his command of others on the sole difference of the color of his skin.



LOVE AND BLINDNESS

Love, both romantic and familial, is a powerful transformative force in "Désirée's Baby." Love primarily works to soften characters, allowing them to care for other individuals and for their fellow human beings

more broadly. Madame and Monsieur Valmondé are transformed when they discover an abandoned child and welcome her as their own despite her mysterious and, likely, impoverished background. Armand is also softened by his love for Désirée. Not only does he wish to marry a girl of mysterious origins, but he lavishes kindness and extravagant gifts on her. He is also changed (to a degree) in his treatment of other people, particularly his black slaves. Before his marriage he was considered a strict master, but after his marriage to Désirée, Armand ceases to punish his slaves. He even laughs when one man pretends to be injured to avoid work, as Désirée reports to her mother. Even Armand's physical features change under the influence of his love for Désirée: his countenance is lightened and he smiles instead of frowning.

Love also has another, more subversive, transformative power in this text, which is particularly revealed through Désirée's character—that of blindness to the truth. Désirée's love for Armand causes her to overlook his faults and his cruelty. Even when Armand's mood is sour, Désirée “trembled, but loved him.” Désirée's blindness takes a more extreme form with respect to her baby. Even though other characters, including Armand and Madame Valmondé, observe the child's features that indicate his black heritage, Désirée is initially blind to them.

While blindness is generally considered a negative thing, in “Désirée's Baby” one might actually consider it a positive. Because it is when love *isn't* enough to cause blindness that tragedy unfolds. Armand's mother and father enforce blindness of his own heritage on her son, to protect him out of love, but in doing so allow Armand to believe in the stereotypes and hierarchies that cause him to abandon his wife. And it is when Armand “sees” the racial heritage of his son in its features that he abandons his love; and when Désirée sees the same that she abandons her life. In contrast, Madame Valmondé stands as a model of love, telling her daughter to come home to her mother who loves her even after it seems that Désirée might have a black racial heritage. But in the racist Southern world of the story, even such powerful maternal love is not enough.



IRONY, MISJUDGMENTS, AND FATE

The story ends with a twist of situational irony: Armand discovers too late that it is he (and not his wife) who has black heritage. Armand acted upon the misjudgment that Désirée, and her unknown past, were to blame for the appearance of their baby. Armand's misjudgment reveals the prejudice that would cause him to blame his wife rather than himself. As a man, Armand sees himself as above women and is therefore inclined to blame his wife. As a wealthy man who owns and controls other people (both his slaves and Désirée), Armand sees himself as a source of mastery and truth, and so it never occurs to him to question his own past rather than that of his wife because she was presumably born

into poor circumstances before she was abandoned as a baby. Further, Armand considers himself above his black slaves and servants and yet, ironically, the story reveals his similarities to them and his own mother's identity as one of them. The wording of the mother's letter reinforces this irony, as Madame Aubigny refers to herself as black indirectly by saying she “belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery.” Armand, himself a strict master to his slaves, therefore perpetuates exactly the “curse” upon the race to which he partly belongs.

Fate and providence appear throughout this story. For example, Armand considers his dismissal of Désirée a strike against the cruel fate that has made him father of a black child. Madame Valmondé, meanwhile, considers Désirée's appearance at their gate as a baby as the act of Providence. Madame Valmondé could easily have seen what seemed to be a poor baby at her gate and brought it to an orphanage or made it a servant. But she saw the moment as an act of fate and responded with love. Armand, in contrast, responded to what he saw as fate with prejudice, and so destroyed his life, finding out the truth “too late.” In a way, then, Armand's actions are similar to those of the “misjudgments” that occur in Greek drama – for instance when Oedipus accidentally kills his father and marries his mother, only to find out too late. But while Oedipus was truly driven by fate, with the outcome of his life prophesied at his birth, Armand is driven to his misjudgments by his own prejudice regarding race, gender, and economic inequality. Put another way, Armand's misjudgments are, in a sense, fated by his acceptance of the culture of racial, gender, and economic inequality of the mid-nineteenth century South, and so the story condemns not just Armand but that culture as well.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



STONE PILLAR

Monsieur Valmondé discovers baby Désirée in the shadow of a stone pillar at the gate of his plantation. The baby's position in the shadows of this pillar symbolizes her mysterious origins. Her past is shadowed because little is known about who she is or where she comes from. Désirée is standing near this same stone pillar eighteen years later when Armand sees her and falls in love at first sight. The stone pillar is a marker of Désirée unexplained past, but also a marker of the estate of the Valmondés, which provides Désirée with care and love in her youth. Armand's encounter with Désirée at the same spot marks the beginning of a new type of love. The stone pillar, therefore, is the setting of the two

most important encounters in Désirée's life and symbolizes transitions and acts of love, but also the mysterious past that comes to color those loves.



FINE CLOTHES

Armand orders fine clothes and ladies' accessories for Désirée from Paris when he wishes to marry her. These fine objects symbolize Armand's wealth and influence, as well as the material transaction that is taking place through the marriage. Armand conceives of Désirée as one of his many beautiful possessions. He showers her with gifts, but quickly falls out of love with her when his faith in her is tested. At the end of the short story, Armand directs the burning of the fine clothes and gifts he has bestowed on Désirée. For Armand, these objects are symbolic of Désirée, and he uses the **bonfire** to remove his memories of her along with her possessions. The destruction of the fine clothes demonstrates Armand's position of wealth that allows for such an extravagance.



L'ABRI

The plantation house that belongs to the Aubigny family exhibits physical characteristics that symbolize the unhappiness that has occurred and will occur in the home. Madame Valmondé notices the house's somber appearance when she goes to visit Désirée. The house has a Gothic feel, with shadows cast by trees and a low roof. These physical indications of darkness and concealment symbolize the acts of darkness and concealment that have taken place in the home: Madame Aubigny has concealed the truth of her identity from her son and the world, and the wealth of the family has been built on the labor and enslavement of others. Armand's cruel treatment of his slaves has occurred on this estate, and he will turn this cruelty on Désirée during the story, leading to her despair and death. The house's appearance echoes the acts of physical and emotional cruelty that it conceals.



THE BONFIRE

At the end of the story, Armand burns Désirée's possessions. The bonfire symbolizes both Armand's anger and desire to rid himself of Désirée, as well as his passion for his lost wife, which was described as "a prairie fire" at the beginning of the story. A bonfire destroys and erases. Yet this bonfire also brings to light the truth of Armand's past, as he discovers the letter from his mother that reveals her identity as a black woman. Therefore, the bonfire not only symbolizes Armand's desire to erase Désirée, but also acknowledges the great misjudgment that Armand has made. Before building the bonfire, Armand has already destroyed his marriage, his wife, and his child because of his prejudiced assumption. The bonfire,

which is created by Armand to destroy objects, shows that Armand has also created—and is responsible for—the destruction of his family.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classics edition of *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin* published in 1976.

Désirée's Baby Quotes

☹️ In time Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh.

Related Characters: Désirée, Madame Valmondé

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

When Monsieur and Madame Valmondé discover an abandoned baby at the gate of their estate, the wealthy couple decide to raise the child as their own. Despite the child's mysterious beginnings, Madame grows to love the girl as unconditionally as if she were her biological child. This unconditional acceptance of the child continues even through the challenges of the short story. This is notable, because Madame Valmondé does not exhibit the same prejudice as other white characters in the treatment of her daughter. When Désirée's racial heritage is called into question, Madame Valmondé continues to love her unconditionally. Love, for this character, trumps prejudice, even socially-ingrained prejudice.

Madame Valmondé's love is rooted in her faith and belief in a God who decides one's fate. She sees Désirée in the positive light of a gift from "Providence." She also refers to Providence as "beneficent," meaning that God intends good things to come to Madame Valmondé. She sees Désirée's appearance in her life not as the result of chance, but of divine intervention. It is her fate to *find* a daughter rather than to have a biological daughter. Other characters, most notably Armand, understand Providence and fate differently in this short story, but Madame Valmondé's character presents the most optimistic view of both love and fate. She sees God as entirely good, and her love for her daughter is untainted by the existing racial prejudices of this location and time period. In contrast to other characters,

Madame Valmondé shows the ideal versions of love and the "blindness" of love.

☞ It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her.

Related Characters: Armand, Désirée

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée grows into a beautiful young woman, and it is this beauty that attracts the attention of her wealthy neighbor, Armand Aubigny. Armand falls in love with Désirée at first sight, which this story presents as "no wonder" due to Désirée's great beauty. Armand sees Désirée's beauty as her defining characteristic. At this time, women were primarily valued for their beauty, rather than for their intelligence or character. This is one example of the sexist treatment Désirée and other women (for example, La Blanche) receive at Armand's hands.

Désirée's location at the moment when Armand first sees her is symbolic: this is the site where she was found as an abandoned baby. The parallel between these two events is clearly intentional, as the narrator explicitly reminds us in this passage that this is the very same place where Désirée was found by the Valmondés. This site is a place of transition for Désirée. She found her first home here with the Valmondés, and now she finds her second home here with Armand. In both situations, it's worth noting, Désirée is passive. She is quietly waiting, and other characters arrive and decide to claim her. Throughout the story, Désirée's passivity reinforces the powerlessness of women in this society. The stone pillar is also a symbol of the wealth of the Valmondés, and their solid position as members of the upper class, as the pillar stands at the gates of their estate. Désirée is marked as belonging to this upper class when she stands near the pillar.

☞ The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Related Characters: Armand, Désirée

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

Armand falls in love with Désirée when he sees her standing near the gates of the Valmondés' estate. Armand's character is captured in this passage that describes his instant passion for Désirée. Armand falls in love with her at first sight, and the basis for his love is Désirée's beauty, which appears against the backdrop of her family's wealth and the shadows of the mysterious stone pillar. This shows that Armand's love is strong, but also rather superficial. He is not interested in Désirée's personality or character. Throughout the story, he continues to see her as more object than person—she is a beautiful object that he wishes to possess. Thus when this beauty is tainted by questions about her race, it is easy for Armand to reject his superficial love.

This passage shows that not only is Armand's love superficial, it is also dramatic. The metaphorical language compares Armand's passion for Désirée to "an avalanche" and "a prairie fire," both of which are destructive natural disasters, and both "drive headlong over all obstacles." These similes give the reader a sense of Armand's destructive personality. He is strong-willed and unforgiving. But they also demonstrate the power of passion and love, which is repeatedly linked to "blindness to the truth" throughout this short story. Armand does not consider Désirée's mysterious background when he falls in love with her. He is initially blind to the risk of marrying a girl of unknown origin, despite the value he places on his family's good name. Yet this "blindness" is not strong enough in Armand's love, and the "prairie fire" of his passion later becomes a literal bonfire when he discovers what he thinks is the truth about Désirée's racial heritage.

☞ When she reached L'Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place....The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall.

Related Characters: Madame Valmondé

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Madame Valmondé travels to L'Abri, the estate of Armand, to visit her married daughter and the couple's new baby. This passage describes the physical appearance of L'Abri, as well as Madame Valmondé's negative reaction to it. The descriptive language characterizes L'Abri as a dark and forbidding place, reminiscent of the Southern Gothic genre. The roof forms the shape of cowl, a concealing hood, and the trees that surround it cast the house into perpetual shadow. For such a short story, significant descriptive time is spent characterizing L'Abri, which indicates the importance of the house and setting to the narrative of the story.

L'Abri is a place of wealth and extravagance for its white inhabitants, but this luxurious lifestyle has been built at the expense of the family's black slaves. The house also shows the relationship between classism and racism, because its wealth is possessed by one race of people at the expense of another race of people—at this time period, there *were* no wealthy African Americans. Blacks are subjected to ill-treatment, poverty, and slavery at the hands of the affluent (and even poor) whites.

Madame Valmondé shudders at the "sad-looking" L'Abri, but she is responding to more than the house's appearance. Its ominous appearance seems representative of the horrors that have happened there, where Armand is a strict master over his slaves.

☞ 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.

Related Characters: Armand

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Armand Aubigny is a different type of master of L'Abri than his father was. This passage contrasts the two men. Where the elder was "easy-going" and "indulgent," the younger is

"strict." This difference in temperament directly impacts the two men's treatment of their slaves, as this passage establishes. Under the older Aubigny's ownership, the slaves were "gay," happy and light-hearted. This implies that they are no longer happy because of Armand's "strict" and presumably cruel treatment. This is a difficult passage because it seems, at first glance, to praise the older Aubigny in comparison to the younger. The truth of both these men's lives, however, is that they were both slave owners. They treated their slaves differently, but they both participated in a culture and economic structure built on slavery. A kind slave owner might not be physically violent, but he is still someone denying basic humanity and self-ownership to human beings.

The ending of the story also reveals that the older Aubigny had a very different understanding of the relationship between blacks and whites than his son, as he married and supported a woman with black heritage, whereas Armand treats his wife cruelly when he suspects her heritage. But this does not change the truth of the elder's position in society as an Aubigny. He is an upper-class white man and a slaveholder, and the fact that he loved a light-skinned woman with black heritage does not erase the reality that he also owned black slaves. The mere fact that Armand does not know about his own heritage reveals the racism that pervades the Aubigny family, where both mother and father are ashamed to reveal their child's black heritage.

☞ "This is not the baby!" she exclaimed, in startled tones.

Related Characters: Madame Valmondé (speaker), Baby, Désirée

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Madame Valmondé hasn't seen Désirée's baby in a while, and upon seeing the child she immediately recognizes his black heritage. She does not explain her suspicions to her daughter, but her surprise at seeing the child is apparent in this passage, as she exclaims with "startled tones." Presumably, Madame Valmondé is shocked to see a child who is so clearly part-black born of two parents who appear fully-white. She cannot believe this is the child, and her disbelief manifests itself as a rejection of this as the biological child of her daughter. Madame Valmondé's reaction is open to the reader's interpretation. When she

says "this is not the baby," does she speak from pure confusion that the child appears so unlike its parents? Or does she speak with more judgment, with disgust at the child's clearly black appearance? Madame Valmondé exists in a context that is explicitly racist. Slavery is a part of everyday experience. Yet, she obviously seems more compassionate than Armand.

Madame Valmondé's startled reaction shows how obvious the child's heritage is, and yet the truth has not been recognized nor acknowledged by Désirée. Désirée's overwhelming love for her child blinds her to the truth. She does not look at her child with a critical eye, because she sees her child as perfect. This blindness seems to indicate that Désirée would think blackness in her child an undesirable thing, and that she does not see this "negative" attribute because she is overwhelmed by love.

“...he hasn't punished one of them—not one of them—since baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work—he only laughed, and said Négrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me.”

Related Characters: Désirée (speaker), Madame Valmondé, Baby, Armand

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée speaks to her mother about the change that has come over Armand since the birth of their child. She measures this change in terms of the treatment of his slaves, and his notable kindness reveals that in the past he has been far from kind toward his slaves. Désirée says that Armand "hasn't punished one of them" and includes an example of a man, Négrillon, who once might have been punished for evading work, but who was now only laughed at. The fact that one of Armand's slaves would feign injury to take a break from work—and that this behavior would once have been punished—is a telling revelation. It is clear that Armand (like most slaveowners) sees his slaves as less than human because of their blackness, and he takes his ill temper out on them. If he is more indulgent after the birth of his child, this seems to be a change based on his own whims and moods, not any fundamental change of heart or worldview on his part. The slaves are not treated fairly, but subjected to Armand's caprice.

Désirée does not criticize Armand. She sees the change in him and praises him, and she describes her current state as one of almost frightening happiness. She sees Armand's change as permanent, and as the result of his love for her and their child. Her love for Armand blinds her to truth about his character, which is that he is cruel and erratic. She does not imagine that he could turn this cruelty on her, and instead remains hopelessly idealistic about his nature.

☝ Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Désirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God.

Related Characters: Baby, Désirée, Armand

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée's comments to her mother about how Armand has changed in his treatment of his slaves are strongly biased in Armand's favor, but the narrator also states the change that has come over Armand since the birth of his son. Armand's nature is "imperious" and "exacting." His need to control others is clear from his introduction into the story, in which he falls obsessively for Désirée, and overcomes all obstacles to "have" her. Désirée, on the other hand, is "gentle" and in love. Her soft personality and love cause her character and her emotions to be shaped by Armand's moods. Armand fluctuates from anger to happiness, and Désirée fluctuates in response.

Désirée's subservience to Armand show the inherent sexism of this story's setting. At this time period, a woman was expected to shape her life around her husband's needs and desires, and Armand and Désirée exhibit this to an extreme degree. Désirée's love for Armand blinds her to anything other than his needs and moods. She does not have an external source of happiness or fortitude other than her husband. This dependence then prepares the reader for the extreme impact that Armand's rejection will have on Désirée. Not only is Armand more powerful than Désirée as a man in this sexist society, but he is more powerful than her as a *wealthy* man. Armand is the source of Désirée's happiness, but also the source of her livelihood. All her possessions were purchased by him. At this point Désirée is still seen as white, and thus has far more privileges and

rights than non-whites in her society, but at this point her life is still almost entirely controlled by Armand.

☞ Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Désirée was miserable enough to die.

Related Characters: Baby, Désirée, Armand

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée is closely attuned to Armand's whims and moods, and so she immediately observes when her husband begins to change in his behavior toward her. She sees him avert his eyes when she speaks to him, and she feels that he is intentionally avoiding her. In contrast to his earlier kindness toward his slaves, he begins to treat them with extreme hostility and cruelty. This new phase of unkindness makes Désirée "miserable enough to die." Armand's true nature is revealed, in contrast to Désirée's loving hopes for his character. When he was happy and pleased with his wife and child, he was kind. But when he is unhappy, he is vicious. Désirée does not know the reason for his unhappiness, but she deduces that it has to do with her and her child. Armand's ability to punish Désirée and his slaves shows the power he has over the people around him.

Armand's power is threefold: he is white, male, and wealthy. When he is unhappy, his mistreatment of others shows the intersection of these three sources of power. He has power over his wife as a man in a sexist society. He has power over his slaves as a white in a racist society. And he has power over both his wife and his slaves as a wealthy man in a class-based society, in which both wives and slaves do not have a source of income. Because Armand controls his wife and his slaves' livelihoods, he is free to treat them however he would like. They don't have alternative options for survival other than dependence on him.

☞ One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys—half naked too—stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her. She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face.

Related Characters: La Blanche, Baby, Désirée

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée finally realizes the truth about her child's appearance when she observes him near one of La Blanche's little boys. The similarities and differences between these two children is apparent in this moment. Both are "half naked," which emphasizes the similarities between them in the moment when Désirée realizes how much they look alike. Despite their racial similarities, however, their different social classes are clear. The baby lies in expensive wraps on the bed, while the older boy works for the baby's comfort by fanning him. One lives a life of luxury, emphasized by the extravagance of a peacock feather fan, and the other lives a life of labor.

A further connection between the boys can also be inferred by the story's context: it is possible that the two are half-brothers. A sexual relationship is implied between Armand and one of his slaves, La Blanche—and this boy is the child of La Blanche. Could he also be the biological child of Armand? This would highlight the two children's physical similarities in the moment that Désirée realizes how much they look alike.

Désirée's reaction to this realization is one of shock and horror, as "the blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face." That her child appears black and must have some black heritage is a painful realization. Despite the prejudice Désirée has faced as a woman, she is not any more tolerant or open-minded than others when it comes to race. She is deeply ingrained with a racist worldview, which shows in her disgust with her child and unhappiness with herself when she believes Armand's assumption that she is part-black.

“Armand,” she panted once more, clutching his arm, “look at our child. What does it mean? tell me.”

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. “Tell me what it means!” she cried despairingly.

“It means,” he answered lightly, “that the child is not white; it means that you are not white.”

Related Characters: Armand, Désirée (speaker), Baby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée speaks to Armand after she sees that her child looks surprisingly like the little black boy working in her home. She confronts Armand with distress and confusion. Does Désirée truly not understand what her child's appearance means? Or is she simply unwilling to speak the truth aloud? Or is she so guided by her husband's words and authority that she does not accept the truth until she hears it from him? Regardless of her motives, Désirée's unhappiness is clear as she clutches Armand's arm and cries "despairingly." Armand's words and actions are equally negative, as he "coldly" removes her hand from his arm. The actions of both parents express horror at their child's appearance. This shows the inherent racism of characters who are deeply unhappy to have a black child.

Armand's choice of words reveals his sexist (as well as racist) thinking. He states first that "the child is not white," and follows this with the immediate assumption that Désirée is not white. His words are an accusation, as he places the blame for the child's appearance entirely on his wife. He sees his wife as less important than himself and his wealthy, seemingly well-established (meaning "pure" white) family. His own family seems to him to be beyond reproach or suspicion, so instead he accuses Désirée for her past and her heritage without any proof. The irony of this, of course, is that it is actually *Armand's* heritage that is black. His false assumption shows the faults of his judgment and character that are shaped by racism and sexism—but also the inherent absurdity and stupidity of the very idea of a rigid racial hierarchy, since no one is "pure" anything, and no race is "inferior" to any other.

“It is a lie; it is not true, I am white! Look at my hair, it is brown; and my eyes are gray, Armand, you know they are gray. And my skin is fair,” seizing his wrist. “Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand,” she laughed hysterically. “As white as La Blanche’s,” he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child.

Related Characters: Armand, Désirée (speaker), La Blanche, Baby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 192-193

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée attempts to argue against Armand's assumption that she is part-black by pointing out her own features. The light color of her hair, her gray eyes, and her fair skin are cited as evidence of her white heritage. These pieces of evidence are presented by Désirée as talismans to protect her from Armand's judgment and rage. The ironic moment of this passage is the comparison Désirée makes between her skin shade and Armand's skin shade. This moment subtly foreshadows the truth revealed at the end of the story: that the black heritage visibly expressed in the baby is from Armand's family, not Désirée's family. Armand's misjudgment and cruel treatment of Désirée after he assumes she is partially black are answered in a fatalistic way by the end of the story. Armand, who has profited from racism the most out of all the characters in the story, leading to an elitist understanding of his identity, must confront the fact that he is part of the very group of people he looks down upon.

Armand's parting statement compares Désirée's skin to La Blanche's skin. La Blanche, although she receives very little time and attention in this story, is presumably full-black and a slave belonging to Armand. Armand's statement implies that he sees no difference between a woman who is part-black and one who is full-black. Any blackness at all characterizes a woman as someone who is unworthy of being his acknowledged and loved wife—and is instead only his property.

“My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live.”

Related Characters: Désirée (speaker), Armand, Madame

Valmondé

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée pleads with her mother to protect her against the accusation that she is not white. This is treated as an accusation, of course, for it is clear that being "not white" is an extremely negative thing in this society. Désirée's plea of innocence seems like a plea from someone accused of a horrible crime, as she repeats variations of "tell them it is not true." Although the reader has only witnessed Armand's accusation, Désirée also refers to a generic "they" and "them." This pronoun seems to encompass all of white society. Désirée speaks collectively of a group that is now excluding her. Armand's exclusion and cruelty may be the most immediate, but Désirée's words are a reminder that any doors of white society would be closed to her now. Her social class will no longer accept her in a society in which blacks are perceived to be far less important than whites, no matter their gender or class (although at this point in history, all black people in America are of the same class).

Désirée's unhappiness is so extreme as to lead to her statements that she "must die." This is dramatic foreshadowing, as Désirée later walks into the bayou with her baby, never to return. At this point, her unhappiness might seem like overstatement, but the fact that she commits suicide because of her potential racial heritage confirms her statements in this passage. Her unhappiness is the direct cause of her death. This end result of Armand's accusation shows Désirée's complete powerlessness, particularly now that she is assumed to be black. As a woman and wife, her life revolves around Armand, and the only power or leverage she ever had with him was her beauty and her perceived whiteness.

●● He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him; and felt, somehow, that he was paying Him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife's soul. Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.

Related Characters: Désirée, Armand

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

Armand, in contrast to Madame Valmondé, has a negative understanding of God and believes Him capable of intentional and unjust harm. He sees the truth about his child as a cruel blow, and he has a sense of having been wronged by the powers that be. This shows Armand's twisted thinking. He sees a black child not as his responsibility, and not even as "punishment" for his wrongs, but as an uncalled-for injustice against himself. He is never critical of himself and immediately places blame on others, be this God, his wife, or blackness itself. Furthermore, he feels it necessary to strike back at God for his treatment, and does so by mistreating his wife. This twisted logic might occur because Désirée's goodness is easy to attack, or because he knows he has the power to make Désirée unhappy. Armand's true nature, if ever in doubt, is now clear.

In addition, this passage explains that Armand no longer loves Désirée because "of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name." Armand's love for Désirée is crushed by her having offended his family name. This shows where his priorities lie. Furthermore, this passage, and perhaps Armand himself, acknowledges that her offense was "unconscious." Désirée had no way of knowing her heritage, yet Armand treats her as if she had intentionally brought shame to his family. In this society, being associated with blackness brings shame upon whites, who see their superiority to blacks reinforced by their high social class and "good" family name.

●● She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again.

Related Characters: Baby, Désirée

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Désirée chooses death rather than living a life with the shame of being part-black. Shockingly, she also chooses this for her child, who she carries into the bayou with her. Désirée's death is not explicitly stated--perhaps she could have run away from Armand's home and survived--but the ominous language describing her disappearance indicates her death in the bayou. The bayou into which she

disappears is "deep" and "sluggish," and this is linked in the same sentence to "she did not come back again." This link implies a cause and effect relationship: the murky bayou prevents her from ever returning. Désirée's choice shows the pressures of a society that is deeply racist. She knows how painful it will be for her to live in this society and she knows how painful it will be for her child, which is why she chooses his death as well. Furthermore, she has internalized the racist ideas of her society—they aren't just external forces—and so even *she* feels that she is suddenly inferior and inhuman because she is part-black.

Désirée's death also shows her dependence on Armand. Madame Valmondé tries to convince her daughter to return home with her baby. Armand has fully rejected Désirée, but Madame Valmondé's love for her daughter transcends the pressures of a racist society. But Désirée does not choose this "blind" love. It seems that Armand's rejection casts her into a deep depression. Perhaps she also knows that her mother will not be able to protect her from the judgments of society, even if she could provide her with a place to live separately from her husband on whom she relied for happiness and livelihood.

☞ In the center of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze. A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless *layette*. Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the *corbeille* had been of rare quality.

Related Characters: Armand

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

Once Désirée and the baby have vanished from Armand's life, he removes all physical traces of them by burning their belongings in a bonfire in his yard. This is one of the most symbolic passages in the story, particularly because the bonfire that consumes everything echoes the initial

description of Armand's passion for Désirée, which was like "a prairie fire." Armand continues to live his life dramatically—just as he claimed Désirée by showering her with gifts and marks of his wealth, so does he reject her when she no longer has value, and he destroys the gifts he once gave her.

Only Armand, of all the characters in the story, has the luxury of destroying items like silk and velvet gowns or gloves and bonnets. He was obviously able to afford these luxuries, and the fact that he can dispose of them casually shows his privileged lifestyle. These items are also all distinctly feminine and associated with women's beauty. Armand, who saw Désirée as a beautiful object, gave her feminine gifts to enhance her allure. He confines her to the ornamental role of a woman in this sexist society and his chosen gifts highlight this.

Ironically, Armand is directing the work in the yard, but not laboring himself. The items are piled into the bonfire by his slaves. In this scene, Armand exhibits the intersectional relationship of sexism, racism, and classism in this society. He is in control of his slaves because of their race and his wife because of her gender, and he is able to destroy luxury items because of his wealth.

☞ "But, above all," she wrote, "night and day, I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives that our dear Armand will never know that his mother, who adores him, belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

Related Characters: Madame Aubigny (speaker), Armand, Monsieur Aubigny

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

The short story ends with this plot twist, in which Armand discovers a letter from his mother to his father that reveals the truth of his black heritage. His mother was part-black, a fact which she hid from Armand. This ending is dramatically ironic, because it reveals the misjudgment Armand made in accusing Désirée's heritage rather than suspecting his own. As a wealthy white man, he never considers that he could be anything less than perfect, according to his own standards and society's standards (which assumes that whiteness equals purity). This reveal of the truth seems to be Armand's ironic fate, and a type of justice is served when Armand, who mistreated others for the color of their skin,

must now confront his own black heritage.

The language of this passage reinforces the pervasiveness of slavery in this society and the incredible cruelty of this practice. Madame Aubigny is grateful that her son can live free from the shame of knowing his race. She refers to blacks as "the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery." She knows that the treatment of her race is a type of curse, and she sees Armand's "escape" from this as blessing from "the good God." Like Madame Valmondé, she loves her child and wants to protect him in an environment that is cruel

toward a whole race of people—but she makes no effort to help those who are actual slaves, or who have no option of "passing" as white.

Ironically, the similarity between Armand and the slaves he mistreated is not so great as he once supposed. This shows the incredible superficiality and arbitrariness of racism and classism, where one man wields ultimate power over others... but ultimately those "others" are people with whom he shares the same heritage.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

DÉSIRÉE'S BABY

On a beautiful day in mid-nineteenth century Louisiana, Madame Valmondé drives to the neighboring plantation to visit her adopted daughter Désirée and her daughter's new baby. She reflects that it seems but yesterday that her grown daughter was a baby herself. Her husband, Monsieur Valmondé, found the baby asleep in the shadow of the **stone pillar** at the gate of their plantation.

When Monsieur Valmondé picked up the abandoned baby, she cried "dada!" Various neighbors speculated about her origins: did she crawl or walk to the base of the **stone pillar** herself? Did the party of Texans who had crossed the river near the plantation that very day leave her behind? As Madame Valmondé grew attached to the child, she abandoned all concerns about the girl's past, believing, instead, that she had been deposited at their gate by Providence because she and her husband were unable to have children of their own.

The child, Désirée, grew up to be the pride and joy of the Valmondés. She became beautiful, kind, and loving. Eighteen years later, she was standing near the same **stone pillar** where she was found when Armand Aubigny rode by and fell in love with her at first sight. Like all Aubignys, young Armand fell in love dramatically. He had known Désirée for years—since he moved home from Paris at age eight after his French mother passed away—but at that moment he loved Désirée passionately, and would listen to no objections.

Monsieur Valmondé did not object, but he did try to caution Armand about Désirée's unknown past. When reminded that the girl had no true family or family name, Armand didn't care, for he could give her his name—one of the most respectable in Louisiana. He ordered **fine clothes** and gifts for her from Paris and the two were married.

The historical setting of Chopin's story develops the themes and the characters. The Valmondés, who are described as plantation owners, are established as wealthy and white. Their adoption of Désirée emphasizes their kindness, despite their economic prosperity.



Her adoptive father finds Désirée in the shadow of the stone pillar. This shadow symbolizes the uncertainty of her origins. The pillar is also an indication of the wealth and property of the Valmondés, and Désirée's appearance there introduces her into a world of privilege. Madame Valmondé's attribution of the girl's appearance to Providence introduces the theme of Fate into the story, while also suggesting that one's interpretation also helps to determine one's fate. Madame Valmondé could have responded to this abandoned baby of mysterious origin as a nuisance or curse rather than a blessing.



Désirée's physical appearance mirrors her inner character: she is kind-hearted, although naïve, as the story reveals. Her appearance is what draws the attention of Armand, which reveals the extent of his love for her to be surface-level, as the story will demonstrate. His sudden and dramatic passion for Désirée reveals his expectation that he will get what he wants, as he always has.



Monsieur Valmondé's caution foreshadows the concerns and questions that will be raised about Désirée's unknown past. Armand appears not to care about his wife's past, but does when problems arise. His gifts symbolize his wealth and his "purchase" of Désirée as a woman and wife.



Madame Valmondé has not seen her daughter or her baby in a month. She arrives at **L'Abri** and shivers, as she always does, at the shadowed appearance of the house. The house appears sad, for it has not had the gentle care of a mistress since Madame Aubigny died and was buried in Paris. Before that, Madame Aubigny had not wanted to move to Louisiana for she loved her homeland. The house has a steep roof and is overshadowed by large oak trees. Armand's rule has been different than his father's. Under the late Monsieur Aubigny's indulgent leadership, the slaves had been comfortable and happy. Young Armand is strict.

Madame Valmondé greets her daughter inside the house where Désirée and her baby are resting on a couch, dressed in muslins and lace. A nurse sits by the window. Madame embraces her daughter and turns to the child, exclaiming, in French, as she sees him, "This is not the baby!" Désirée laughs delightedly, and responds that the baby is much changed. She points out how much he has grown, and that even his fingernails needed cutting that morning. She appeals to the nurse at the window, Zandrine, who did this task. Désirée says that the baby's cry is very loud, so loud her husband heard him "as far away as La Blanche's cabin."

Madame Valmondé picks up the baby and carries him over to the light from the window where she examines him closely. She looks questioningly at Zandrine who is looking out the window. Slowly she says that the child has indeed grown, and then she asks her daughter what Armand says about the baby. Désirée's expression is one of pure happiness. She exclaims that Armand is the proudest father in the area to have a baby boy as his heir. She reports that Armand says he would have loved a daughter as well, but she feels he's only saying so to please her.

Désirée continues, lowering her voice, and confides in her mother that Armand has not punished any of his slaves since the baby's birth. She says that Négrillon, one of the slaves, pretended injury to avoid work and that Armand only laughed and called him a scamp. She confesses that she is frightened by her own happiness, as it is so extreme. Marriage and fatherhood has changed Armand. Armand is controlling and picky, but softened in his exacting ways. Désirée loves him, regardless. She trembles in fear when he is angry, but still loves him. And now that his moods have softened, she is incredibly happy.

Madame Valmondé's visit brings the reader to L'Abri through the older woman's observations and judgments of the place. These observations reveal the dark nature of the place through its dark appearance. Just as Désirée's beauty suggest her inner nature, the appearance of the house mirrors the internal characteristics of Armand. Armand's personality is established by comparing him, unfavorably, to his father. His father's open-mindedness becomes key late in the story.



Désirée and her baby appear in the story with physical indications of wealth. Désirée is not working, but resting. Even maternal work is handed off to the waiting nurse, who is a slave. Madame Valmondé's exclamation about the baby represents her recognition of that the baby's features indicate it has a mixed racial heritage, but Désirée in her innocence thinks her mother is just exclaiming about how the child has grown. La Blanche never appears in the story and yet is an important figure. Here the reference to Armand being at La Blanche's cabin implies that he has or had a sexual relationship with La Blanche, who is a slave and his "property." Note how, in a sense, Désirée is also his "property" as a wife whom he "bought" with gifts and wealth, though of course slavery is even more pernicious and awful than the "traditional" gender norms of the time.



Madame Valmondé looks closely at the baby because she observes something that she chooses not to reveal to her daughter. Her silence is may be guided by shame about the truth or a desire to protect her daughter in her innocence. Désirée is oblivious and blissful. Her praise of Armand shows her love for him, as well as how emotionally dependent she is on her husband. Because he is proud and happy, she is happy.



The change in Armand that Désirée describes further reveals Armand's natural character: he is cruel toward those within his power. His generosity of spirit, inspired by the joys of fatherhood, therefore is foreshadowed to be short-lived. Désirée's love for Armand is unconditional: she loves him in any of his moods. Armand's love for Désirée, on the other hand, is soon revealed to be entirely conditional.



Time passes. One day, when the baby is three months old, Désirée wakes up in the morning with the feeling that her sense of peace will not last. She has noticed the suspicious moods of the slaves as well as the unusual visits from unexpected neighbors. Then Armand undergoes a dramatic change. He no longer looks directly at Désirée and he goes out of his way to avoid her. He returns to his cruel treatment of his slaves, and exceeds his earlier cruelties as if “the very spirit of Satan” has taken hold of him. Désirée is miserable.

One afternoon, Désirée is sitting in her room watching her baby who is asleep on her bed, which appears like an extravagant throne with its satin canopy. One of La Blanche’s boys is fanning the baby using peacock feathers. Désirée stares at her baby and then looks at La Blanche’s boy and then back again. Suddenly, she cries aloud, as if she could not help making a noise. Her blood seems to freeze and she breaks into a sweat. She tries to speak and cannot, but eventually speaks La Blanche’s boy’s name and points him to the door. He leaves quietly and obediently, and Désirée remains, staring at her baby with an expression of fright.

Armand enters the room, but does not acknowledge Désirée and begins looking through some papers on a table. Désirée calls his name in a voice that would have encouraged sympathy from any human, but Armand still ignores her. Désirée goes to him and grabs his arm, and asks him to look at their baby. “What does it mean?” She asks. Armand responds, as he coldly removes her hand from his arm, that it means that the child is not white, and therefore she, Désirée, is not white.

Désirée immediately senses all that this accusation means and leaps to deny it. She says that it is a lie, and points out her brown hair and gray eyes. She grabs Armand’s wrist and places her hand alongside his, pointing out that it is fair, and even whiter than his own. Armand responds bitterly, “as white as La Blanche’s,” and leaves the room.

Désirée senses the problem before she consciously acknowledges it. This speaks to the theme of Love and Blindness in the story. Because Désirée loves her son, it takes her longer than everyone else to acknowledge the truth. Armand does not confront her, but reverts to his cruel nature. This shows Armand’s immediate decision to blame his wife for their child’s appearance, as well as the way that racial issues were connected with such shame—because of the institution of slavery—that no one among the white plantation slave owners could even discuss it.



Désirée and her baby again appear in attitudes of extravagance and leisure. A slave boy does the work of fanning the baby. The irony of this moment—and the condemnation of the ridiculousness and tragedy of slavery—comes with Désirée’s realization that her child looks similar to a boy whose life will be one of slavery and not comfort (the similarity of the two boys also, again, suggests that Armand has had a sexual relationship with La Blanche and that this slave child might in fact be his son, and suggests that for Armand fatherhood is less important than race). The two boys, despite their similarities, are already playing their roles. Désirée’s reaction shows that she is afraid of having a child who appears black.



Armand’s treatment of Désirée shows that he is ashamed, on the one hand, and no longer sees her as a person worthy of respect on the other. He does not lash out at her, but ignores her, as if she has lost her right to sympathy and care. Désirée’s beauty made him not care about her “mysterious past” when he thought that past was one of poor parents; but when he believes it is in fact a poverty of mixed racial heritage it becomes overwhelmingly important and shameful to him.



Désirée, while the victim of Armand’s sexist assumption and unkind treatment, is equally ashamed of being grouped with the “lesser” black race. Her act of contrasting her skin color to Armand’s foreshadows the twist at the end of the short story. That Désirée and La Blanche are also equally “white” in color forwards the story’s critique of slavery and racism as nonsensical: La Blanche, the slave, is as white as her masters (and likely has had a sexual relationship with Armand just as Désirée has had), and yet because her racial heritage is known she is forced to be a slave. But as the story is showing, racial heritage in the South isn’t clear at all and so the foundation of slavery (to say nothing of the abhorrence of the practice) makes no sense.



Désirée writes to her mother and tells her what has happened—that her husband has told her she is not white. She pleads with her mother to convince everyone that this is not true. She tells her mother that she will die because she cannot live with this much unhappiness. Madame Valmondé responds with a short letter that asks her daughter to come home to Valmondé. She tells her daughter to come back to the mother that loves her and to bring her baby.

Désirée takes the letter from her mother into Armand's study and presents it to him. Armand silently reads the letter and does not speak. Désirée asks him, "Shall I go, Armand?" Her voice is sharp with suspense and pain. Armand tells her to go, and when she asks again if he *wants* her to go, he responds that he does. Armand believes that God has given him an unfair punishment in the form of his child and he turns his anger on his wife. He no longer loves his wife because he sees her as the source of the shame brought on him and his family name.

Désirée turns away and leaves, hoping at each moment that Armand will ask her to stay. She says good-bye, but Armand does not answer. He considers his silence another blow against his shameful fate. Désirée retrieves her baby from Zandrine, and, without an explanation, she takes the child and walks outside. It is October and the slaves are harvesting cotton in the fields. Désirée is wearing a thin white dress and slippers. Her hair is exposed and gleams in the sun. She does not walk down the road that leads toward Valmondé, but instead cuts across a field full of sharp stubble that destroys her slippers and her dress. She disappears into the bayou with her baby and is never seen again.

A few weeks later, a large **bonfire** is built in the backyard of **L'Abri**. Armand sits in the back hallway and gives instructions to a dozen slaves who tend and feed the bonfire. Armand directs a baby's cradle be added to the fire, and **fine clothes**; gowns of silk, velvet, and satin; laces; embroideries; bonnets and gloves follow this. These are all the expensive gifts Armand bought for Désirée upon their engagement.

Désirée is the same person she always was, but the idea that she might have black heritage fills her with shame. She wants "everyone" to know she cannot possibly be black. Madame Valmondé's response can provide no such assurance—she doesn't know Désirée's past. But her response also shows a true love missing in the other characters of the story: she accepts her daughter regardless of her lineage.



Désirée confronts Armand with the letter because she hopes that he will tell her to stay and show as much love and support as her mother has shown. Armand's willingness to blame God, a higher power, indicates that he never considers the possibility of his responsibility, either for the child's appearance or his cruel actions. His love for Désirée is conditional because it can be wiped away by shame. He wanted her for what she brought him, not for who she is.



Armand wants to strike out against what he sees as his cruel "fate" of having a black child, and he does this by striking out at his wife. Yet just as Madame Valmondé interpreted her "fate" of finding Désirée as a blessing, Armand's "fate" is defined by his acceptance of racist and sexist ideas. Désirée is exactly the same person she was before—she has done absolutely nothing wrong or cruel. So Armand seals his own fate as cruel by refusing to see beyond race. Meanwhile, Désirée's shame at being black is so great, meanwhile, that she chooses to throw away her and her child's life rather than return to her loving mother.



The bonfire symbolizes Armand's wealth as well as the intersection of classism, racism, and sexism. Armand can afford to destroy Désirée's possessions, which are the marks of feminine beauty. He himself doesn't do this work, but directs his slaves to do it. Both the gifts he gave Désirée and the idea that he can eliminate her from his life by burning them indicate how Armand always viewed Désirée as a possession rather than as a person.



The last thing Armand wants to add to the bonfire is a package of letters from Désirée to himself, written during their engagement. He removed the letters from a drawer and with them a letter that was not of the same set. He notices this letter, one written from his mother to his father. He reads the letter: in it, Madame Aubigny thanks God for her husband's love, and tells Monsieur Aubigny how grateful she is that her son, Armand, will never know that his mother, who truly loves him, is one of the "race that is cursed with the brand of slavery."

The twist ending! Armand is part of the race that he has treated as inferior; in rejecting his son and Désirée it was really himself he was rejecting. Armand's behavior stands in stark contrast to that of his father, who loved his mother regardless of her race. And yet it was his parent's choice to never reveals Armand's past to him—to protect him from that "shame"—that led him to accept racist beliefs and destroy Désirée's and his son's life. Put another way: in trying to protect Armand from that curse, his parent's ended up forcing him to experience it dead on. The story reveals the "curse" of slavery to not solely be a curse for the slaves (though of course it is that) but to be a curse upon everyone, a curse upon the land.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Champlin, Nikola. "Désirée's Baby." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Aug 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Champlin, Nikola. "Désirée's Baby." LitCharts LLC, August 26, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/desiree-s-baby>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Désirée's Baby* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Chopin, Kate. *Désirée's Baby*. Signet Classics. 1976.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Chopin, Kate. *Désirée's Baby*. New York: Signet Classics. 1976.