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*Kate Chopin and  
the Fiction of Limits:  
“Désirée’s Baby”*

*By Cynthia Griffin Wolff*

For many years, “Désirée’s Baby” was the one piece of Chopin’s fiction most likely to be known; even today, despite the wide respect that her second novel has won, there are still readers whose acquaintance with Chopin’s work is restricted to this one, widely-anthologized short story. Rankin, who did not feel the need to reprint “Désirée’s Baby” in *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Tales*, nonetheless judged it “perhaps . . . one of the world’s best short stories.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Rankin left future critics a terminology with which to describe the value of this and the other studies in *Bayou Folk*: it had the “freshness which springs from an unexplored field—the quaint and picturesque life among the Creole and Acadian folk of the Louisiana bayous.”<sup>2</sup> In short, it was excellent

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1. Daniel S. Rankin, *Kate Chopin and her Creole Stories* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1932), p. 133.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 136-37.

“regional” work—hence limited to certain circumscribed triumphs.

Critics’ tendency to dismiss Chopin’s fiction as little more than local color began to diminish by the late 1950’s; nevertheless, old habits died hard. “*Désirée’s Baby*” continued to be the most frequently anthologized of her short fictions, and while the comments on it strained after some larger tragic significance, the definition of that “tragedy” was still formulated almost exclusively in “regional” terms. Claude M. Simpson introduces the tale in his collection with a brief essay on the local color movement and concludes that the story draws its effect from a reader’s appreciation of the impartial cruelties of the slave system.<sup>3</sup> Several years later, in another anthology of American short stories, Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick give Chopin credit (again as a regionalist) for daring to touch upon the forbidden subject of miscegenation; and, of course, the story they select to illustrate Chopin’s particular talent is “*Desiree’s Baby*.”<sup>4</sup>

Other critics, still acknowledging the importance of regional elements in the tale, seek to discover the reasons for its persistently compelling quality by examining the structure. Thus Larzer Ziff observes that “the most popular of Mrs. Chopin’s stories, while they make full use of the charming lilt of Creole English and the easy openness of Creole manners, concern themselves, as do Maupassant’s, with some central quirk or turn in events which reverses the situation that was initially presented.”<sup>5</sup> He cites the conclusion of “*Désirée’s Baby*” as an example: “So, characteristically, does the Chopin story depend on a twist.”<sup>6</sup> Taking a similar view, Per Seyersted remarks the “taut compression and restrained intensity” of the tale and then notes (with some asperity) that “the surprise ending, though somewhat contrived, has a bitter, piercing quality that could not have been surpassed by [Maupassant] himself.”<sup>7</sup> Yet, in the

3. See Claude M. Simpson, ed., *The Local Colorists: American Short Stories 1857-1900* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1960).

4. See Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick, eds., *American Short Stories, 1820 to the Present* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1964).

5. Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890’s* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 297.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969), p. 94.

final analysis, these judgments are no more satisfactory than those that grow from the more narrow definition of Chopin as “local colorist”: if significant effects are seldom achieved merely through a deft management of dialect and scenery, it is also the case that a “trick” or “surprise” conclusion is almost never a sufficient means by which to evoke a powerful and poignant reaction from the reader.

Thus “*Désirée’s Baby*” remains an enigma. We still tend to admire it and to demonstrate our admiration by selecting it to appear in anthologies; yet the admiration is given somewhat grudgingly—perhaps because we cannot fully comprehend the story. The specifically Southern elements of the story seem significant; however, the nature of their force is not clear. The reversal of the situation that concludes the tale is important (although to a discerning reader it may well be no surprise), but, contrary to Seyersted’s remarks, the story’s full impact patently does not derive from this writer’s “trick.” And while the story has been accepted as characteristic of Chopin’s work, it is in several ways unusual or unique—being the only one of her fictions to touch upon the subject of miscegenation, for example. We might respond to this accumulation of contradictions by assuming that a mistake has been made somewhere along the line—that the tale has been misinterpreted or that it is not really representative of Chopin’s fiction. Yet such an assumption would not explain the force of those many years of readers’ response; in the end, it would not resolve the persistent enigma of “*Désirée’s Baby*.” Alternatively, we might try to understand why critics’ judgments of the story have been so different, presuming such judgments to be insufficient but not, perhaps, fundamentally incorrect. But more importantly, we must expand our vision of the story in order to see precisely those ways in which it articulates and develops themes that are central to other of Chopin’s works.

A majority of Chopin’s fictions are set in worlds where stability or permanence is a precarious state: change is always threatened—by the vagaries of impassive fate, by the assaults of potentially ungovernable individual passions, or merely by the inexorable passage of time. More generally, we might say that Chopin construes existence as necessarily uncertain. By definition, then, to live is to be vulnerable; and the artist who would capture the essence of life will turn his attention to those intimate and timeless moments when the

comforting illusion of certainty is unbalanced by those forces that may disrupt and destroy.<sup>8</sup> Insofar as Chopin can be said to emulate Maupassant, who stands virtually alone as her avowed literary model, we might say that she strives to look “out upon life through [her] own being and with [her] own eyes”; that she desires no more than to tell us what she sees “in a direct and simple way.”<sup>9</sup> Nor is Chopin’s vision dissimilar to Maupassant’s, for what she sees is the ominous and insistent presence of the margin: the inescapable fact that even our most vital moments must be experienced on the boundary—always threatening to slip away from us into something else, into some dark, undefined contingency.<sup>10</sup> The careful exploration of this bourne is, in some sense, then, the true subject for much of her best fiction.

8. The list of stories that might fit this description is too long to give. A few major ones might be: “Caline,” “The Story of an Hour,” “Lilacs,” “At the ‘Cadian Ball,’” “The Storm,” “Athénaïse,” “A Vocation and a Voice.” It is worth remarking that slipping over the edge into another, hitherto unexplored, state is often portrayed as disastrous—or at least potentially so—it is not always a necessarily negative movement. Thus in “Athénaïse” the heroine is jolted into womanhood—experiencing an awakening to her full sensual self as a result of pregnancy—and finds the adventure exhilarating and gratifying.

9. Kate Chopin, *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted, 2 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969), II, 701. Hereafter this work will be cited as *Works*.

10. One of the first effective intimations of this theme may be found in an early (1891) short story, “Beyond the Bayou.” The tale is concerned with a madwoman, “La Folle,” who, in her youth, was jarred out of sanity by a severe shock. The narrator’s introduction is immensely suggestive: “The bayou curved like a crescent around the point of land on which La Folle’s cabin stood. Between the stream and the hut lay a big abandoned field, where cattle were pastured when the bayou supplied them with water enough. Through the woods that spread back into unknown regions the woman had drawn an imaginary line, and past this circle she never stepped. This was the form of her only mania” (*Works*, I, 1975). Several elements are of interest here. Initially, of course, there is the quite self-conscious use of the “line” between sanity and madness—a boundary that assumes quite palpable dimensions here as a geographical entity, that bourne between bayou and civilization. Second, perhaps even more arresting, is that utterance: “This was the form of her only mania.” It is a way of construing the situation, a way of delimiting the fictional world, that suggests the possibility of many dangers—many “manias,” perhaps—and offers a splendid insight into the direction that Chopin’s interest will take with increasing confidence. The theme is articulated even earlier—in *At Fault*—as we shall presently see, and it is developed with virtuoso finesse in *The Awakening*.

Certainly it is the core subject of “*Désirée’s Baby*”—a story that treats layers of ambiguity and uncertainty with ruthless economy. Indeed, the tale is almost a paradigmatic study of the demarcating limits of human experience, and—since this subject is so typically the center of Chopin’s attention—our continuing intuition that this story is a quite appropriate selection to stand as “representative” of her work must be seen as fundamentally correct. What is more, if we understand the true focus of this fiction, we are also in a position to comprehend the success of its conclusion. The “twist” is no mere writer’s trick; rather, it is the natural consequence—one might say the necessary and inevitable concomitant—of life as Chopin construes it.

At the most superficial level in “*Désirée’s Baby*,” there are distinctions that attend coloration, differences of pigment that carry definitions of social caste and even more damning implications about the “value” of one’s “identity.” The problem of race is managed quite idiosyncratically in this tale: we have already noted that this is the only one of Chopin’s many stories to treat miscegenation directly or explicitly; however, we can be ever more emphatic—this is the only story even to probe the implications of those many hues of skin that were deemed to comprise the “negro” population.<sup>11</sup> Yet from the very beginning Chopin focuses our attention upon this element with inescapable determination: she chooses not to use dialect conversation; she reduces the description of architecture and vegetation to a minimum—leaving only the thematically necessary elements. The result is a tale where the differences between “black” and “white” remain as the only way to locate the events—its only “regional” aspects, if you will—and we cannot avoid attending to them.

Yet for all this artistic direction, Chopin is clearly not primarily interested in dissecting the *social problem* of slavery (as Cable might be); rather, she limits herself almost entirely to the personal and the interior.<sup>12</sup> Thus the dilemma of “color” must ultimately be construed

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11. One might suppose that “*La Belle Zoraïde*” proved an exception to this statement; however, a close reading of that tale will suggest that although Zoraïde is light-skinned (clearly the product of miscegenation) and favored because of her “white” appearance, the theme of inter-racial sexual congress is simply not at issue here. Zoraïde’s plight would be unchanged if she were deep black, so long as she enjoyed the favor of “Madame.”

emblematically, with the ironic and unstated fact that human situations can *never* be as clear as “black and white.”

In the antebellum South, much private security depended upon the public illusion that whites lived within a safe compound, that a barrier of insurmountable proportions separated them from the unknown horrors of some lesser existence, and that these territorial boundaries were clear and inviolable. The truth, of course, was that this was an uncertain margin, susceptible to a multitude of infractions and destined to prove unstable. At its very beginning, the story reminds us of inevitable change ahead: *Désirée* is presumed to have been left “by a party of Texans”<sup>13</sup> — pioneers en route to the territory whose slave policies were so bitterly contested when it was annexed that they proved to be a significant precursor to the Civil War that followed. Chopin’s touch is light: the implications of this detail may be lost to a modern audience, but they would have loomed mockingly to a reader in 1892, especially a Southern reader.

Even within the supposedly segregated social system there is abundant evidence of violation. “‘And the way he cried,’” *Désirée* remarks proudly of her lusty child; “‘Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche’s cabin’ ” (241). What color is La Blanche, we might wonder, and what was Armand’s errand in her cabin? “One of La Blanche’s little quadroon boys . . . stood fanning the child slowly” (242), and he becomes a kind of nightmare double (perhaps a half-brother, in fact) for *Désirée*’s baby — a visual clue to the secret of this infant’s mixed blood; eventually, his presence provokes the shock of recognition for *Désirée*. “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” (242). None of the “blacks” is referred

12. Chopin made an explicit effort in her few critical essays to deny the suitability of “social issues” as subjects for fiction. She excoriates Hardy’s attempts in *Jude the Obscure* to marry fiction and social criticisms (see “As You Like It, IV”), and even criticizes Hamlin Garland and his followers for striving too particularly after “local color” (see “The Western Association of Writers” and “‘Crumbling Idols’ by Hamlin Garland”). Her own true subject was always clear: “It is human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it” (*Works*, II, 691).

13. *Works*, I, 240. All other quotations from “*Désirée’s Baby*” will be cited in the text, giving page number to the first volume of the *Complete Works*.

to as actually dark-skinned; even the baby’s caretaker is a “yellow nurse” (241).

In the end, only Armand’s skin is genuinely colored—a “dark, handsome face” (242) momentarily brightened, it would seem, by the happiness of marriage. And if this description gives a literal clue to the denouement of the story’s mystery, it is even more effective as an index to character. Armand has crossed that shadowy, demonic boundary between mercy and kindness on the one hand and cruelty on the other. His posture towards the slaves in his possession has always been questionable—his “rule was a strict one . . . and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master’s easygoing and indulgent lifetime” (241). Little wonder, then, that when his wife’s child displeases him, “the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him” (242). His inhumanity towards Désirée and the servants alike bespeaks an irreversible journey into some benighted region; and the bonfire, by whose light he reads that last, fateful letter, is no more than a visible sign of the triumph of those powers of darkness in his soul. Thus when Désirée exclaims wonderingly, “‘my skin is fair. . . . Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand’ ” (243), her comment *may* be relevant to the parentage of each; however, within the context of the story, it figures more reliably as a guide to the boundaries of humane behavior.

Underlying this insistent preoccupation with the literal question of color, then, is Chopin’s ironic perception of the tenuous quality of such distinctions: it is simplistic to call “quadroons” and “yellows” “blacks” and “negroes.” And if we move from this overt level into the labyrinth of the human soul, we will discover a man who has become lost in the wilderness of his own “blackest” impulses—a master who reverts to tyranny and is possessed by Satan, by the only absolute darkness in the tale. The lesser existence into which Armand sinks stems not from his Negroid parentage, but from a potential for personal evil that he shares with all fellow creatures (as the leit motif imagery of salvation and damnation suggests). Thus the horror that underlies Chopin’s tale—and the ultimate mystery of “black and white” as she defines it—is not *really* limited to the social arrangements of the Southern slave system at all.

A world of evil is one sort of wilderness that lies along the margins of our most mundane activities, but it is not the only horror that lies



in wait. Our moments of most joyful passion, too, threaten us with a form of annihilation: to be open to love is to be vulnerable to invasions that we can neither foresee nor fully protect ourselves against. Thus Chopin's rendering of the love between Désirée and Armand is an insistent compression of opposites. Armand is supposed to have fallen in love at first sight: "That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. . . . 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" (240). The difference in Armand's life between love and some other force—something equally turbulent but more reckless and cruel—is no more than a hair's breadth or the fluttering of an eye. Linguistically, the two forces cannot be separated at all.

In Désirée's case, the peril of emotional entanglement has different origins; yet if anything, it is even more dangerous. She has been God's gift to her adoptive parents, the child of love as her name implies, helpless and delicate and unable to comprehend anything but love in its purest manifestations, "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé" (240). Of the other side of love—of violence and baser passions—she is entirely innocent. In fact, innocence is her most marked characteristic, a kind of childlike, helpless ignorance. "It made [Madame Valmondé] laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Désirée was little more than a baby herself". Repeatedly, Chopin displays her infantine charm: Désirée couched with her baby, for example, "in her soft white muslins and laces" (241), looking like nothing so much as a child herself. The vulnerability of such innocence is captured in her naive questions, in her trusting tendency to turn to her husband who has rejected her, even in the fragility of her garments that were surely intended only for one whose life might be protected from harsh contingencies. When Désirée married, she came to live at her husband's plantation, L'Abri (The Shelter); and such a home seems right, even necessary, for this delicate creature, even though the physical realities of the estate belie its name. "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 thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall" (241). However, Désirée must accept this refuge at mere face value: she

cannot bring herself to see the ominous possibilities in those ancestral trees that portend both life and death.

In the end, Désirée cannot withstand the shock of being forced to acknowledge the contingencies whose existence she has ignored for so long. When Armand’s love slips into cruelty, when L’Abri echoes with sibilant mockery, Désirée loses her own tenuous grasp on the balance of life. For her there seems only one choice, one final boundary to cross; and the alternatives are measured by the line between civilization and the patient, hungry bayou that lies just beyond. Madness, murder, death—all these wait to claim the love-child who could not keep her stability in the face of life’s inescapable contrarities. “She took the little one from the nurse’s arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches. . . . Désirée had not changed the thin white garments nor the slippers which she wore. . . . She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds. 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” (244).

Much of the effect of this tale derives from the understatement that Chopin employs to render Désirée’s annihilation and Armand’s inescapable, internal hell. Even more, perhaps, the effect comes from the economy with which she captures the precariousness of the human condition—the persistent shadow-line that threads its way through all of the significant transactions of our lives. This is, perhaps, the most consistent theme in all of Chopin’s fictions. We can see it in her choice of subject—preoccupation with marriage that may be either destructive or replenishing, the relationship between mother and child that is both hindering of personal fulfillment and necessary for full womanly development, and the convulsive effects of emergent sexuality. We can see it even more subtly (but more insistently) in her imagistic patterns.

As early as the first novel Chopin was already focusing on the implications of that margin between the bayou and the transient clearing of the domesticated plantation, although her management of this theme is less skillful than it will become in later works. Mélicent is charmed by Grégoire’s Southern passion and inclined to suppose that it is harmless—merely a game. Similarly, she is intrigued by the

tropical bayou and disposed to project her simple, uncomplicated imagination into its dark recesses: "The wildness of the scene caught upon her erratic fancy, speeding it for a quick moment into the realms of romance."<sup>14</sup> Very soon, M<sup>é</sup>licent realizes that there is an unknowable, primitive force in the bayou's depth—something that both frightens and repels her. "Nameless voices—weird sounds that awake in a Southern forest at twilight's approach,—were crying a sinister welcome to the settling gloom."<sup>15</sup> Eventually, she is shocked by a similarly ominous and irrational strain in Gr<sup>é</sup>goire's passion for her, the hint of a potential for blind destruction. In both cases, Chopin demonstrates M<sup>é</sup>licent's reluctance and innocence by showing her need to honor certain boundaries that society has drawn. She ventures out in the pirogue only once, shunning the bayou thereafter; eventually, she rejects the lover, too, by returning to the safety of her Northern home.

Much later, when she wrote *The Awakening*, Chopin would again employ this metaphor of margins (as she had throughout the many stories written between her first and second novels); and in this work the theme appears with consummate artistry. Here Chopin deals with the many implications of Edna Pontellier's emergent sexuality—both its positive and its destructive elements. The irresistible sensual call of the sun and sea echoes throughout the book to render the tidal pull of the heroine's nascent feelings; and throughout there is a linguistic insistence upon the significance of boundaries and of their violation. Indeed, the earliest descriptive passages announce the motif: we are at the beach where water meets land, sky meets water; and in the tropical white sun, demarcating lines waver uncertainly. "[Mr. Pontellier] fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at a snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon."<sup>16</sup> As the novel progresses, this initial statement of theme is expanded to include many paired possibilities—sleeping and waking, freedom and isolation, life and death—and the almost unendurable tension that is felt by all who

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14. *Works*, II, 750.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Works*, II, 882.

must maintain a balanced separation between the warring opposites in life is suggested by Chopin’s repeated use of the word “melting.”<sup>17</sup>

The vision in all of Chopin’s best fiction is consummately interior, and it draws for strength upon her willingness to confront the bleak fact of life’s tenuous stabilities. Read quite independently, “Désirée’s Baby” may be judged a superb piece of short fiction—an economical, tight psychological drama. However, seen in the more ample context of Chopin’s complete work, the story accrues added significance as the most vivid and direct statement of her major concern—the fiction of limits.

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17. Two essays touch upon this subject. Donald A. Ringe, “Romantic Imagery in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *American Literature*, 43 (January 1972), 580-88; and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, “Thanatos and Eros: Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” *American Quarterly*, 25 (October, 1973), 449-71.