

## Textual, Contextual and Critical Surprises in “*Désirée’s Baby*”<sup>1</sup>

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Elements of surprise play a crucial role in “*Désirée’s Baby*,” a short story which was widely acclaimed upon publication in 1893, has often been anthologized and remained extremely popular over the years, while the rest of Kate Chopin’s work went out of print and was virtually unavailable.<sup>2</sup> A major reason which may account for the sustained and almost unanimous praise received by this particular short story lies in what H. Porter Abbott claims is one of the keys to the success of all narratives of any length: the author’s ability to build up “chains of suspense and surprise which keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification” (53). What is unusual in the case of “*Désirée’s Baby*,” and therefore deserves close critical analysis, is the number and the intensity of the surprises that provoke astonishment in the highly condensed prose of a text of only 2,152 words, culminating with a stunning final twist which catches all readers unaware.

Although it is almost impossible to summarize the plot of “*Désirée’s Baby*” in a satisfactory way, because the richness of this concise text is based on the accumulation of significant details, it could be defined as the story of *Désirée* (a beautiful foundling raised by the rich Valmondés on their Louisiana plantation) who marries Armand Aubigny (the wealthy Creole slave-owning master of L’Abri), and is rejected by him when their baby boy shows physical features of black ancestry, supposedly inherited from his mother, but actually derived from his paternal grandmother. The textual surprises in this brief narrative are located at near intervals, because its action moves very fast. The chain of surprises is formed by the following events: (1) Monsieur Val-

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mondé's fortuitous discovery of a little girl asleep at the entrance of his estate, (2) Armand Aubigny's sudden infatuation with Désirée, eighteen years after her prodigious appearance at Valmondé, (3) Madame Valmondé's amazement at the sight of Armand and Désirée's infant son when she sees him again four weeks later, (4) Désirée's abrupt recognition of her baby's black traits, (5) Armand's vehement rejection of his wife and son, (6) Désirée's ultimate disappearance into the bayou carrying her baby, and (7) the totally unexpected final twist provided by a letter in which Armand's mother discloses her black ancestry.

Readers who have enjoyed the *textual surprises* provided by the aforementioned speedy sequence of acts and events may feel encouraged to reexamine this piece of fiction more carefully, placing it in its social and political context. When considering its historical background, such readers will come across some new *contextual surprises* that are offered by an encoded subtext which calls into question the surface meanings of the text itself. Finally, since this short story has been repeatedly analyzed in the light of various theoretical frameworks, even rather experienced readers are likely to be taken aback again and again by the divergent interpretations that reviewers and scholars have suggested through the years.<sup>3</sup> Learning about the different perspectives from which the text has been appraised over a century leads to various *critical surprises*. Indeed, when one is acquainted with the critical reception of "Désirée's Baby," one comes to the conclusion that studying this deceptively simple narrative may in fact become an intricate process, for not only does it allow the discovery of multiple possibilities of authorial meaning, but it also leaves room for the generation of multiple possibilities of significance on the part of each individual reader.<sup>4</sup>

The text of "Désirée's Baby" undermines readers' expectations of what the story will be like, and enhances the effect of surprises through the following rhetorical strategies:

1. creating suspense through foreshadowing devices, and by dropping subtle hints while avoiding obvious clues, playing with ambiguous statements and devising a dynamic system of informational gaps,
2. upsetting the established systems of meaning through an exploration of the theme of "appearance vs. reality,"
3. subverting the conventions of traditional local-color fiction,
4. combining the seemingly incompatible features of two juxtaposed frames of reference, that of the old fairytale with that of the modern realist short story, and
5. concluding with a sudden twist or ironic reversal which paradoxically resists easy narrative closure with the help of an unexpected open ending to the story.

### 1. Suspense

The foreshadowing devices used by Kate Chopin at the beginning of "Désirée's Baby" presage a sad, violent ending while not allowing readers to make direct inferences about it. For instance, at an early stage of the story, after giving an account of the speculations about the origin of the foundling who was eventually brought up by the Valmondés as if she had been their own child, the narrator concludes the third paragraph stating that Désirée "grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé" (240).<sup>5</sup> This metaphor recalls the biblical idols or graven images crumbling from the pedestals where they had been erected by their adorers.<sup>6</sup> Near the end of the story, when Désirée is waiting for her husband's reaction to Madame Valmondé's note, the unfortunate young lady is explicitly portrayed by the narrator as if she were a statue: "She was like a stone image; silent, white, motionless" (243). At last, it becomes clear that turning Désirée into the recipient of Armand's immoderate desire leads to her destruction: the lot of the effigies is to be first converted into objects of divine adoration and subsequently demolished.

Likewise, the similes used in the first page to depict both Armand Aubigny's swift falling in love with Désirée and the gloomy atmosphere of his house are far from being merely decorative: they convey a sense of impending doom, and thus perform an important function in the tragic development of the story. In the fourth paragraph, Armand's intense feelings are described in destructive terms: he "fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot" (240), like all the Aubignys; his passion "swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles" (240). As for Armand's house, it is pictured as "a sad looking place" (241) which made Madame Valmondé shudder when she approached it, for its "roof came down steep and black like a cowl" (241) and the far-reaching branches of the solemn oaks which grew close to it "shadowed it like a pall" (241). Thanks to these ominous similes, readers get a glimpse of a setting appropriate for the terrible events that will ensue. However, not until the end can they realize that the French name of the sinister house, L'Abri, is ironical because it will turn out to be the opposite of a safe shelter for Désirée, whose name also becomes ironical when she ceases to be considered a prized possession and is marked as undesirable.

Apart from using metaphors and similes as foreshadowing devices, Chopin plays with her readers' expectations by creating some narrative ambiguities that are resolved at the end of the story, when its conclusion casts a light back on the episodes in which such ambiguities occurred. For example, in the first dialogue of the story, Madame Valmondé expresses her surprise at the sight of the baby, which she has not seen for four weeks. Madame Valmondé's amazement is explicitly acknowledged in the following terms: "'This is not the baby!' she exclaimed, in startled tones" (241). But the cause of her bewilderment remains unexplained at this stage, for the cheerful young mother does not interrogate Madame Valmondé about her ambiguous statement, which she simply accepts as an enthusiastic compliment on the growth of the infant. Désirée's unsuspecting reaction is summed up as follows: "I knew you would be astonished,"

laughed Désirée, 'at the way he has grown'" (241). Without taking her eyes off the boy, Madame Valmondé takes him to the window that is lightest, scans him narrowly, and then looks as searchingly at the nurse, who keeps silent contemplating the fields. Madame Valmondé comments that the baby "has grown, has changed" (241) and asks Désirée about Armand's attitude. Désirée answers that Armand has become "the proudest father in the parish" (242), and emphasizes how delighted she is with her present situation as a wife, for her husband's behavior seems to have been positively affected by the birth of their son. The ambiguity of Madame Valmondé's two phrases "This is not the baby!" (241) and "Yes, the child has grown, has changed" (241) is finally resolved when we reread the story. Then, we are able to understand that she was surprised literally by *the way* the baby had grown rather than referring to *how much* he had grown, as both Désirée and most readers wrongly assume.

Chopin's foreshadowing techniques tend to disquiet her readers just as her hints arouse their curiosity, but she always takes care not to make her clues so obvious that her audience might lose interest by prematurely envisaging the answers to the questions posed throughout the story. For example, in the above-cited dialogue between Madame Valmondé and Désirée, the latter naïvely mentions two circumstances whose importance may be easily overlooked. Désirée tells her foster mother that Zandrine, the baby's "yellow" nurse, has cut the infant's nails. Since Kate Chopin's contemporary audience was familiar with the then current assumption that fingernails would clearly indicate people's black ancestry no matter how white they might look, most nineteenth-century readers would grasp the semiotic load of this detail.<sup>7</sup> When the race of the child becomes an issue, Désirée's casual remark can be fully understood. Madame Valmondé looks as searchingly at Zandrine because she thinks that, having cut the boy's fingernails, the nurse must have detected his racial origin.

In the same dialogue, Désirée also tells her foster mother that the baby cries in such a deafening way that "Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin" (241). This is the first of the

three references to La Blanche which appear throughout the story, the other two being the observation that the slave is the mother of some quadroon boys on the plantation, and Armand's "cruel" comparison of Désirée with La Blanche when the former insists on the whiteness of her own skin. Retrospectively, the three references to La Blanche illuminate each other so that a new surprise arises from linking them together.<sup>8</sup> In the light of the other two allusions to La Blanche, Désirée's cursory remark can be interpreted as a subtle indication that Armand paid regular visits to the slave's quarters in order to have sexual intercourse with the mixed-blood woman, and that he had probably fathered her quadroons, one of whom was fanning the baby when Désirée discovered a resemblance that could have been not only racial, but also due to the fact that the two boys were half-brothers.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of these two pieces of information inadvertently given by the unsuspecting protagonist—Zandrine's cutting the baby's nails and Armand's visit to La Blanche—can only be tested once we finish reading the whole text and go back to the beginning in order to search for the clues that we feel we have missed. Furthermore, bearing in mind that every detail counts in this short story, there is an additional hint which proves that the conversation between Madame Valmondé and Désirée is far from being as trivial as it may sound, for it closes with a fearful premonition on the part of the protagonist. Although the narrator has been placing great emphasis on the young woman's initial happiness, Désirée herself expresses a certain anxiety at such bliss when she tells her foster mother at the end of their dialogue: "Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me" (242). What seems to be a trite phrase at first glance eventually becomes a prophetic utterance, for Désirée's ultimate fall into despair would substantiate her own precocious intimation.

Kate Chopin manages to stir our pleasure when she purposely delays the resolution of uncertainties by means of a dynamic system of temporary informational gaps.<sup>10</sup> By withholding relevant information instead of offering it in chronological order within a linear sequence of events, she heightens suspense and enhances the effect of the sur-

prises experienced by her characters and her readers alike. For example, she prepares us to learn about Désirée's great surprise, but keeps us in a state of tension by postponing our knowledge of the kind of surprise it will turn out to be. Thus, the narrator begins by stating that Désirée "awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her peace" (242), "an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors" (242), and "an awful change in her husband's manner" (242) made her "miserable enough to die" (242).

Then, we are told that one hot afternoon, when looking at her baby while it was being fanned by a quadroon boy, she was suddenly left aghast. The narrator does not reveal why her breath has been taken away, but concentrates instead on the effects of the shock:

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. (242)

At this point we may wonder what is the impromptu discovery which Désirée has made by alternately looking at her own baby and at the quadroon child, but the narrator prefers to continue focusing our attention exclusively on her stupor: "She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright" (243). Once more, the narrator does not immediately satisfy the readers' desire to understand the reasons of such a startled reaction.

At last, the narrator explains that while Désirée is still paralyzed, Armand enters the room and she questions him about their baby. It is Armand's reply that finally discloses why Désirée is awestruck: "'It means,' he answered lightly, 'that the child is not white; it means that you are not white'" (243). And it is at this very moment that readers finally discover what the oddity is that everybody else had already noticed yet Désirée herself has ignored, and even now she is (and readers also are) still completely unable to comprehend. The question that must be tormenting her to the extreme, one that she cannot even

formulate using her own words is why she has given birth to a baby who looks so similar to the quadroon boy. This is the question that readers ask themselves, but will only be able to answer (albeit partially) at the end of the story. At this stage, they only get the feeling that the author has a bigger surprise in store for them, but are compelled to remain quite puzzled, anticipating enlightenment.

Apart from using metaphors and similes as foreshadowing devices, dropping subtle hints, playing with ambiguous statements uttered by her characters, and delaying the resolution of uncertainties, Kate Chopin manipulates her readers' expectations by means of a number of permanent informational gaps. Only at the end of the story do we realize that many crucial details have been entirely withheld from us.

After the opening sentence of a text that begins as if it were a straightforward fairytale, the third-person narrator presents us with two brief paragraphs told through the consciousness of Madame Valmondé, who becomes the focalizer of the introductory flashbacks. Madame Valmondé's fond memories of Désirée are then mingled with some fragmentary knowledge about Armand and his parents. Since readers are never provided with an accurate account of Armand's family background, the story ends without allowing them to fully and definitely fill in the narrative gaps that exist in this respect.

The area in which the author has chosen to play the most important trick of concealment, so as to enhance the striking effect of the final surprise, is the space occupied by Armand's mother. Early in the story, in the fourth paragraph, we are told that Armand's "father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there" (240). Two paragraphs below, the narrator adds some more information about Armand's mother when describing L'Abri: "It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it" (241). This last remark proves to be misleading, for at the end of the story we may suspect the ulterior reason why Madame Aubigny never became the mistress of L'Abri. According to the



Louisiana Civil Codes of 1808 and 1825, her marriage would have been illegal, and Armand would have been an illegitimate mixed-race child with no rights of inheritance.<sup>11</sup> At that time, white men who wanted to legally marry black women usually did so in Cuba or France, although such marriages were declared null and void in Louisiana. Taking into account this historical context, the most plausible motive for Madame Aubigny's not moving from France to Louisiana would have been her wish to avoid risking Armand's position as heir to his father's estate.

Apart from the two fleeting references to Madame Aubigny in paragraphs four and six, she is not mentioned again until the very last paragraph, which is a short excerpt from a letter she once addressed to her husband: "'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'" (245). Thus, the story ends abruptly without letting us know when and where the letter was written, two data which would have shed light not only on the correspondents, but also on their son.

Given the minimal information concerning Madame Aubigny, readers may feel free to speculate about this character by asking various questions that arise from her enigmatic role in the story. For instance, they may wonder whether she had been a slave, or had just belonged "to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (245) without ever being in bondage herself; whether she was visibly black, or could easily pass for a white; whether she was a native of France or a French colony in Africa, or was born in America and later came to treat her adoptive country as her own;<sup>12</sup> whether Monsieur Aubigny, during his "easy-going and indulgent lifetime" (241), fell in love with one of his "yellow" slaves "the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot" (240), and consequently, whether the couple was constrained to elope from Louisiana. Nor is it clear in what ways she thought that God had arranged her life and that of her husband so that Armand might not know about his own racial origin, or even

whether she had really died and was buried by her husband in Paris before he returned to America—perhaps she remained in France long enough to send the mysterious letter to her husband once he was back on his plantation. To the many questions that we are compelled to pose about Madame Aubigny throughout our reading-process no pat explicit answers are to be found in the text.

## 2. Appearance vs. Reality

Another important source of surprise in "Désirée's Baby" consists in Kate Chopin's disruption of conventional systems of meaning through the deliberate exploration of the theme of appearance vs. reality that exposes the extent to which prejudice may be delusive, since any quick turn in events might reverse situations. The key issue at stake is being labeled either black or white, a circumstance which was as significant for the characters of this short story set in antebellum Louisiana as it continued to be for Chopin's contemporary readers in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In a society that drew color lines and classified human beings according to predetermined constructions of race, being placed on one side or the other of the racial boundary was no light matter. As the "one-drop rule" required 100 per cent white ancestry, the public discovery of any black genealogy was essentially damaging for the future lives of the individuals who were 'passing.' Since other American writers of the Gilded Age were attracted by the topic of racial ambiguity, Chopin's first readers could hardly be surprised by her choice of such a fashionable theme. They must have been acquainted with narratives in which a baby who looks white at birth gradually displays black features. A minor character such as La Blanche, a white-looking female slave to whom her master pays visits in her cabin and who gives birth to quadroon children, must have seemed equally familiar. Nonetheless, readers must have been astonished by the sudden narrative switches concerning the racial identity of the two main characters of this particular story.

Désirée is initially seen as white, then for some time she is considered black until she is perceived as white again. Her predominant association with whiteness is symbolically reinforced by the circumstance that in the first scene she is wearing “soft white muslins and laces” (241), and in the last episode she is still clad in a “white garment” (244).<sup>13</sup> But she is chiefly categorized as white because of her physical appearance, which is vividly evoked when she is presented “listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders” (242). Later on, Désirée herself draws attention to her own bodily features when her husband tells her that she is not white: “‘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” (243). Moreover, in her last confrontation with Armand, the narrator describes her as being “silent, white, motionless” (243). Close to the end of the story, when Désirée leaves L’Abri for good, the narrator suggests her whiteness again by noting that “the stubble bruised her tender feet” (244) and that “her hair was uncovered and the sun’s rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes” (244).

In fact, the only reason that makes readers temporarily doubt Désirée’s whiteness arises from “the girl’s obscure origin” (241), a source of risk that Monsieur Valmondé conveniently warned the impassioned Armand about before the hasty wedding took place.<sup>14</sup> When the baby’s black traits are discovered, Armand’s paternity is not questioned, because adultery is ruled out by both the young wife’s childlike innocence and her guileless perplexity at the turning point of the story, when she has to face the racial entanglement. As for Armand, in spite of his “dark, handsome face” (242), his aristocratic background prevents readers from suspecting that he will eventually be found to belong “to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery” (245). Therefore, at the climax of the story, the single alternative that seems to be left to explain the riddle of the baby’s mixed racial heritage is its mother’s status as a foundling, which implies her being

"nameless" (241), a connotation of blackness in antebellum American society. It is the final letter which reverses the racial identities of the two characters, for at the exact time when Armand turns out to be black his wife is presented as white again. Upon reflection, however, Désirée may not be wholly white in the terms established by the "one-drop rule" because at the end of the story we remain ignorant about her origin; the possibility that she might also have black ancestors cannot be completely dismissed.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout this short story, physiognomy and skin color are shown to be unreliable markers of racial identity, for visual evidence proves to be far from conclusive when it comes to establishing a clear duality in order to classify people as either black or white. In this sense, both Armand and Désirée have the potential to subvert racial categories by demonstrating the falsity of the black and white racial binary.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, as it has convincingly been argued, the disruption of meaning that takes place in "Désirée's Baby," where readers are pressed to admit their inability to unequivocally decipher racial signs, may be more subversive in a semiotic than in a political way.<sup>17</sup> The fact that numerous scholars have chosen "Désirée's Baby" to express diametrically opposed ideas about Chopin's construction of interracial marriage and miscegenation makes evident that her treatment of race issues in this particular story is unclear. Actually, this text, which has been labeled racist by some critics and anti-racist by others, may well illustrate the author's ambivalence in such matters.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Subverting the Conventions of Local-Color Fiction

When "Désirée's Baby" first appeared, it was printed in an issue of the ladies' fashion magazine *Vogue* alongside "A Visit to Avoyelles" under the heading "Character Studies: The Father of Désirée's Baby—The Lover of Mentine." Written in 1892, the two stories were set in Louisiana and featured compliant wives, but they were antithetical in most other respects. Unlike its companion piece, "A Visit to

Avoyelles" had an uneventful plot and portrayed the picturesque life of stereotypical Cajun folk characters, sentimentally focusing on their emotions and using dialect speech.<sup>19</sup> Its theme, setting, style and complacent ending must have provided what late-nineteenth-century readers expected from a regionalist or local-color narrative printed in a periodical primarily targeted at a middle-class female audience. Accordingly, this story contributed to Chopin's reputation as a local-color writer in her own time, although it has recently been considered less typical of that literary movement than many other tales by the same author.<sup>20</sup> If the two stories are read immediately one after the other, the contrast between them is striking, since Chopin's quaint depiction of Cajun manners in "A Visit to Avoyelles" is not paralleled by a symmetrically optimistic representation of Creole mores in "Désirée's Baby." Actually, the Cajun story is not a replica of the Creole story, as the general title of "Character Studies" (which was probably added by the editor of *Vogue*) would lead one to believe. "A Visit to Avoyelles" broadly follows the conventions of local-color literature, whereas "Désirée's Baby" departs from them to a considerable extent. The deviation from the paradigmatic models of this popular genre presumably amazed Chopin's contemporaries much more than it may astonish us nowadays, because they approached the text with a set of generic expectations that we no longer share.

After *Vogue's* publication, when "Désirée's Baby" was included in *Bayou Folk* the following year, readers must have noticed how it diverged from the majority of the stories collected in the volume regarding both form and content, for it was neither about the loyalty of blacks to whites, nor concluded by cheerfully emphasizing the benefits of altruism, the transforming power of affection, or the triumph of love. As Bernard Koloski pointed out in his 1999 Introduction to the Penguin edition of *Bayou Folk and A Night in Acadie*, the joy expressed in the earlier tales tends to vanish, and other stories on the last pages of the 1894 book also have a gloomy atmosphere, but none has an ending as calamitous as "Désirée's Baby." The only story that comes close to it in pathos is the embedded narrative of "La Belle

Zoraïde," the bitter tale about an unfortunate mixed-race slave who takes to cuddling a bundle of rags after she is deceitfully told that her baby died during delivery. Poor Zoraïde falls into despair and madness to the point that, when her own child is returned to her, she rejects it because she prefers to go on clasping the bundle of rags, which she keeps into her old age, claiming that it is her baby. "La Belle Zoraïde" together with "Désirée's Baby" are the sole stories in *Bayou Folk* which are set in antebellum rather than in postbellum Louisiana, and the only two where adversity is not countered by a positive twist. Moreover, they are the only two stories in the collection which may be interpreted as vividly illustrating the destructive effects of racism and exposing the cruelty of slave-masters, rather than condoning a social order that promoted racial discrimination and supported a system that kept people in bondage. The horror underlying both short stories broke the standard pattern of so much fiction that idealized slavery in the context of a glorified South, effacing the violence which had played a central role in maintaining the "peculiar institution."<sup>21</sup> In this sense, "Désirée's Baby" and "La Belle Zoraïde" subverted the conventions of local-color fiction, a genre which Kate Chopin first absorbed and then transcended by transforming its design to suit her own purposes.<sup>22</sup>

In her first critical essay, written in the same year the collection of short fiction *Bayou Folk* was published, Kate Chopin expressed her impatience with the Western Association of Writers, deploring their "clinging to past and conventional standards" and their "singular ignorance of, or disregard for, the value of the highest art forms" (*Complete Works* 691). She attacked this group of writers of regionalist fiction for a provincialism that prevented them from perceiving "human existence in its subtle, complex, true meaning, stripped of the veil with which ethical and conventional standards have draped it" (691).<sup>23</sup> In her review of *Crumbling Idols*, a book by the local-colorist Hamlin Garland, Chopin reasserted her attitude toward the movement with the remark: "And, notwithstanding Mr. Garland's opinion to the contrary, social problems, social environments, local color and

the rest of it are not *of themselves* motives to insure the survival of a writer who employs them" (*Complete Works* 693). In a diary entry of the same year (May 12, 1894) Chopin wrote: "I have no objection to a commonplace theme if it be handled artistically or with originality" (*A Kate Chopin Miscellany* 90). With these words she praised George Washington Cable for his effective use of the theme of the "tragic mulatto" or the "tragic octoroon," while she disparaged her neighbor Mrs. Hull's rendering of it. Less than two years earlier, when writing "Désirée's Baby" in November 1892, Chopin herself had already tried to put into practice the theoretical principles she would later defend so articulately in her non-fiction writings. From her critical comments on local-color fiction it may be inferred that, when she wrote "Désirée's Baby," she sought to transcend the limits of the specific locale to which the then popular literary genre would have confined her writings, and to address more universal concerns.

Artistry and originality were the two main qualities Chopin strove for when she composed "Désirée's Baby," a narrative in which she innovatively dealt with the "commonplace theme" she would discuss afterwards. In accordance with her own beliefs about literature, Chopin here deliberately avoided the didacticism she had denigrated in the works of some of her fellow Southern writers. "Thou shalt not preach" was the eleventh commandment she tried to observe, much to the antipathy of recent critics who blame her for not condemning racial discrimination more explicitly.<sup>24</sup> Although her primary purpose may not have been to critique the social system of antebellum Louisiana, her story can be construed as a showcase of the catastrophic consequences of racism. It can be argued that, since Chopin undermined the "tragic mulatto" or "tragic octoroon" stereotype by alternately making Désirée and Armand conform to it, her audience should at least become aware of the difficulties (if not also of the dangers) of classifying people along color lines. First characterizing Armand as a gentleman full of genealogical pride and then suddenly revealing his secret black ancestry can be understood as a strategy to challenge a myth which Chopin herself had endorsed in her early

fiction writings, that of the Creole "purity of blood," an illusion based on the ingenuous notion that French descent guaranteed whiteness.<sup>25</sup> Whether the author intended to or not, in fact "Désirée's Baby" dismantled Chopin's previous consistent presentation of the Creole as a distinct ethnic category of indisputably white identity. Even though other elucidations of the text are possible, from a deconstructive critical perspective it can be argued that, while still making extensive use of the typical elements of local color, Chopin caused wonder by challenging a genre which nostalgically advocated the preservation of traditional models of gender and racial identity, and served the interests of hegemonic reactionary ideologies. Despite some dissenting voices, a substantial part of Chopin's present audience assumes that the sad conclusion of her story questions the conservative discourse of local-color fiction regarding the vulnerable position of both women and non-whites (and particularly that of non-white women) in American society.

#### 4. Fairytale vs. Realist Short Story

In "Désirée's Baby" surprise arises also from the amazing juxtaposition of the two frames of reference which are combined in the story: that of the archetypal fairytale with that of the modern realist short story. The narrative begins with the well-known fairytale motif of the prodigious discovery of an infant who is lovingly brought up by a childless mother, thus creating the regular expectation that the foundling will turn out to be of high-class parentage, perhaps even a princess.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, readers are puzzled when doubts about Désirée's racial ancestry lead to her misery, and later on they become even more confused because the story ends without revealing her origins. Furthermore, most fairytales which feature a young beautiful heroine courted by a handsome aristocrat wind up reassuring readers with the certitude of a prosperous future life for the married couple. Even the fairytales in which childbirth disturbs the stability of a joyous matri-



mony usually end up with all kinds of difficulties overcome and every problem successfully solved, with the virtuous characters rightfully rewarded and the villains deservedly punished. But, in this case, readers are astonished once more when they are denied the conventional happy ending they may have expected. Again, the tragic ending of "Désirée's Baby" departs from that of a typical fairytale masterplot, since little hope is left for the innocent victims (Désirée and her baby) whereas the future of the wicked Armand remains undetermined.

Apart from introducing fairytale features, Kate Chopin also provides enough realistic elements to convey an accurate portrayal of the complex gender and race relations of the antebellum Louisiana society.<sup>27</sup> The sudden switch of the *proairetic code* of one archetypal narrative genre (that of the fairytale) to a completely different one (that of the realist short story) constitutes a main source of bewilderment.<sup>28</sup> In spite of the foreshadowing devices mentioned above, the first sentences of the text, written in the "charming" style which was unanimously praised by the early reviewers of *Bayou Folk*, prepare us to be entertained with a happily-ever-after tale intended for our mere delight, whereas the conclusion of the actual story abruptly forces us to confront genuine social problems and makes us gain new insights into human nature.<sup>29</sup>

## 5. The Surprise Ending

Kate Chopin finishes "Désirée's Baby" by astounding her audience with the unexpected outcome of two poignant scenes. In the first of them, Désirée shows Armand a short note she has received from Madame Valmondé in which her foster mother encourages her to go back to Valmondé with the baby, rather than reassuring her about her whiteness in the way she has expected. In anguish, Désirée asks her husband whether he wishes her to go away, and as he tells her twice that he wants her to leave, she bids him farewell while still hoping that he would call her back, but he keeps silent. Then, Désirée takes

the baby, and instead of returning to her former home where she would have been warmly welcomed by Madame Valmondé, she disappears "among the reeds and willows that [grow] thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she [does] not come back again" (244). Although this sentence could have provided a suitable ending to the story, on reaching it readers notice that the text is not finished yet, since four paragraphs are still left on the last page, separated by one extra line space in some editions, and by a series of asterisks in others. At this point, what every reader wants to know for certain is what happens to Désirée and her baby. But, instead of disclosing the much-awaited details about the fate of the protagonist and her son, the last four short paragraphs shift our attention to Armand Aubigny, an unpredictable character whose mood changes have surprised us before and who will baffle us one more time.

In the final four paragraphs of the story, the narrator explains that, some weeks after Désirée's disappearance, Armand has his slaves light a great bonfire and throw everything that once belonged to his wife and their baby into the flames, including a bundle of letters "that Désirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal" (244), and that "back in the drawer from which he took them" (244) there was the remnant of one which "was not Désirée's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father" (244). The very last paragraph of the narrative is an excerpt from Madame Aubigny's letter, which contains an amazing revelation about Armand's racial heritage. Thus, the story ends making readers conclude that, after all, the baby's black features come from Armand himself rather than from Désirée.

The quality of this ending has been the subject of extensive dispute: some critics have praised it as a powerful epiphany, whereas others have deplored it for being a contrived, overdone, or artificial trick.<sup>30</sup> The final ironic reversal of "Désirée's Baby" is reminiscent of a technique employed by Guy de Maupassant, whom Chopin greatly admired and eight of whose short stories she translated from French into English.<sup>31</sup> Surprise endings in Maupassant's manner also appear in other works of fiction by Chopin, such as "A Rude Awakening,"

also included in the collection *Bayou Folk*. In this typical local-color short story, everyone believes that Lolotte is dead, but at last it is discovered that she had been rescued and hidden. In this case, the conclusive sudden ironic twist provides a happy ending which is at odds with the disheartening reversal that ends "Désirée's Baby."

Perhaps Chopin's best-known surprise ending is that of "The Story of an Hour" (1894), a short piece in which the author also constantly plays with her readers' expectations. In this story, Chopin first focuses our attention on the protagonist's, Mrs. Mallard's, running the risk of a heart attack once she learns the news about her husband's death in an accident. Then, when we are ready for a detailed description of the sad emotions she is likely to experience while mourning, we are confronted with an astonishing passage about the sense of relief and freedom enjoyed by the woman during the hour when she mistakenly thinks she is a widow. And it is precisely when Mrs. Mallard discovers that her husband is still alive (for he was far from where the accident had occurred), that she dies of a heart attack.

In the course of "The Story of an Hour," Kate Chopin confounds us several times and leaves us totally disconcerted at the end in a way that may be considered quite similar to that of "Désirée's Baby." However, there are important differences between the two stories not only concerning their surprise endings themselves but also regarding the surprise-generating mechanisms used by the author to create suspense throughout each of these texts. The basic difference between the surprise methods employed in the two short stories is that in "The Story of an Hour" Chopin stuns us basically by making her protagonist react in an unforeseen way, whereas in "Désirée's Baby" she carefully deploys much more complex techniques of suspense that cover a longer sequence of events. In "The Story of an Hour," the plot ends simply and straightforwardly, thus achieving narrative closure, for the mystery is resolved in the last stage: Mrs. Mallard is dead and her husband is alive. By contrast, "Désirée's Baby" is marked by an absence of narrative closure for two main reasons: 1. the fate of Désirée and the baby remains uncertain, and 2. the sudden discovery

about Armand's racial heritage, rather than clarifying the story altogether with a definitive explanation, further complicates the plot by opening up a range of possibilities of interpretation. After all, perhaps the most surprising aspect of "Désirée's Baby" is that a number of enigmas remain unraveled at the end of the story.

Apart from raising the question of its literary merit, the absence of narrative closure in "Désirée's Baby" has incited scholars to turn the ending into a genuine crux. They have provided so many diverging interpretations that we may anticipate new critical surprises every time we find a book or an article dealing with this topic. Over the years, the conflicting or even mutually exclusive hypotheses about authorial intent have been entangled with conjectures which reflect many possibilities of significance. Désirée's final disappearance into the bayou is somewhat ambiguous and leaves room for speculation about the indeterminacy of her fate. Although the vast majority of readers take her death for granted, and consequently refer either to her suicide or to her martyrdom, others still hope for her survival and that of her baby.<sup>32</sup> Once we accept the verisimilitude of her marvelous first appearance at the entrance of Valmondé when she was only a toddler, an equally mysterious reappearance of the young mother with her beloved son in any other site, far from the doomed plantation, cannot be ruled out. After all, Zandrine saw the distressed lady go into the bayou carrying her baby, and it seems unlikely that the nurse herself would not have tried to rescue the unfortunate creatures, or at least called for help. As a result, readers intent on saving Désirée at all costs—even at the risk of overreading—may feel satisfied if they imagine her either hidden in Valmondé under the protection of her foster mother, or else leading a new life in an entirely different milieu.

Regarding Armand, though most readers interpret the ending of the story as showing the villain suddenly discovering the news about his parentage, Chopin does not actually state that he is reading the old letter for the first time—an unlikely circumstance, taking into account that such a letter was kept in a drawer with Désirée's pre-nuptial correspondence. The text does not make it clear if Armand learns

about his racial heritage while burning Désirée's effects, or if he had previous knowledge of his mother's race either because he had had prior access to that letter or because he had childhood memories of Madame Aubigny's physical traits.<sup>33</sup> The fact that Chopin abstains from giving an account of Armand's reaction to the letter has encouraged readers to hazard guesses not only about his future but also about his past. For instance, Margaret D. Bauer argues that Armand Aubigny has been aware of his own black heritage all along and that his marriage to Désirée was part of an unsuccessful plan to have legitimate children that would pass for white, as he himself was passing. According to Bauer, one of the most outstanding features of this particular story, compared with other examples of "passing literature" (162), would lie in Armand's ability "to pass for over a century" because readers "continue failing to see Chopin's hints about Armand's race and therefore continue to be surprised by her final disclosure" (170). But the theory propounded by Margaret D. Bauer in 1996 has not been universally accepted, as Brewster E. Fitz's critical response, published in 2000, patently demonstrates.

No matter how hard we may look for evidence to support our personal assumptions about the text, "Désirée's Baby" still remains inconclusive in spite of its two surprise endings, because Chopin effectively utilizes both of them in order to resist easy narrative closure as an aesthetic strategy. Far from asserting her authority by allowing her audience to make unequivocal inferences from a writer-sanctioned ending, she declines her privileged position and refuses to answer many of the questions she has raised, thus breaking the *hermeneutic code* that would help us extract a predetermined fixed meaning.<sup>34</sup> Instead, she startles us once again by refraining from wholly unveiling the mystery. Thus, she prompts us to fill in the narrative gaps that remain at the end of our reading-process, and even lets us decide what destiny may await the protagonists of her breathtaking story.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised version of the paper "Resisting Conventional Narrative Closure in Kate Chopin's Fiction: The Surprise Ending of 'Désirée's Baby'" which was presented at the 8th International *Connotations* Symposium held at Universitätskolleg Bommerholz, 24-28 July 2005. I express my gratitude to all the participants for their questions and suggestions in the lively ensuing debate, which enabled me to restructure and expand this contribution. Additionally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Connotations* for their thought-provoking criticism and careful editing. My sincere thanks also to the tutors and students enrolled in the American Literature course I teach at the UNED, because their long discussions of "Désirée's Baby" in the past five years have helped me understand in what ways and to what extent many different readers—and not only literary critics—may be surprised by this short story.

<sup>2</sup>"Désirée's Baby" was written on 24 November 1892. In his edition of *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, the Norwegian scholar Per Seyersted indicates that, when the short story was first published in *Vogue* (14 Jan. 1893), the magazine version was titled "The Father of Désirée's Baby" (1013). "Désirée's Baby" was included in Chopin's first collection of stories, *Bayou Folk*, a volume published in 1894 and reissued in 1895, 1906, and 1911. In *Kate Chopin*, Emily Toth observes: "Reviewers of *Bayou Folk*, *Vogue* noted, were 'nearly unanimous in singling out 'Désirée's Baby,' one of the *Vogue* series, as the most original and the strongest story of the collection which, as a whole, they enthusiastically praised'" (290).

<sup>3</sup>Among the scholars who have analyzed "Désirée's Baby" in detail are the following: Arner, Bauer, Elfenbein (117-31), Erickson, Ewell (66-72), Fitz, Foy, Koloski (1996: 24-26), Papke (26-30), Peel, Schneider, Seyersted (186-88), Sollors (66-72), Toth (1981: 201-8 and 1999: 144-74), and Wolff. See also the critical essays published by Korb and Miner.

<sup>4</sup>As I have argued elsewhere, "Désirée's Baby" has generated a wide range of diverging opinions because it is a deceptively simple text which illustrates maximum implicitness due to the following reasons: the prominence of multiple weak implicatures in literary discourse, the verbal economy inherent in the short fiction genre, the social constrictions of Chopin's time, and both a conventional and personal preference for deliberately ambiguous modes of expression that favor hinting or suggesting through indirect statements rather than expounding through plain blunt speech (Gibert 73).

<sup>5</sup>All quotations from "Désirée's Baby" are from *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (240-45).

<sup>6</sup>Kate Chopin used the words *crumbling*, *demolition* and *destruction* relating them to *idols* in the first paragraph of her undated review "'Crumbling Idols' by Hamlin Garland," first published in *St. Louis Life* (13 Oct. 1894), rpt. *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (693-94).

<sup>7</sup>Werner Sollors remarks: "In the case of the fingernail motif, the inspection of the nails is expected in most instances to yield clues to a character's nonwhite

racial ancestry, however remote it may be and how white the person in question may look" (146).

<sup>8</sup>Anna Shannon Elfenbein conjectures that La Blanche was once in the same position as Désirée (129).

<sup>9</sup>Cynthia Griffin Wolff queries "what was Armand's errand in her cabin?" and infers that the little quadroon boy and Désirée's baby may be in fact half-brothers (38), an interpretation later shared by Bauer (171). Emily Toth also comes to the conclusion that "Armand appears to have a sexual relationship with La Blanche" (1981: 207). Brewster E. Fitz refers to "Armand's own possibly incestuous relationship with the yellow La Blanche" (87), having previously stated that, since it is not possible to know who is responsible for La Blanche's whiteness, one may set in motion "the infernal whirling of speculation" and wonder if she was an aunt of Armand, or his half-sister, or his sister, or Désirée's sister (85).

<sup>10</sup>See Sternberg (50 and 245), Rimmon-Kenan (128), and Toker (1-19).

<sup>11</sup>In her detailed analysis of "Désirée's Baby," Margaret D. Bauer draws attention to several studies on antebellum Louisiana law in order to consider the marriage of Armand's parents in its historical context.

<sup>12</sup>Critics have answered this question in various manners. For instance, Marcia Gaudet postulates that Armand's mother may have been a Louisiana mulatto (49), whereas Bernard Koloski presumes that her "black blood" came to her "from Africa by way of France, not the United States" (1996: 25).

<sup>13</sup>Robert D. Arner has demonstrated how two major image patterns support the racial themes in "Désirée's Baby": the contrast between light and shadow, and the opposition between God or Providence and Satan (142-44). He has also underlined that yellow is the third important color in the story, for it is not only the color of Armand's house, but also explicitly that of Zandrine and implicitly that of other racially-mixed people mentioned in the story, so that yellow is associated with the Aubigny estate (142). Emily Toth has observed that, "Like the angelic feminine figures of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, Désirée is constantly seen in white" (1981: 206).

<sup>14</sup>Kate Chopin, who polished her literary works much more than she ever cared to admit, wrote "obscure origin" rather than "unknown origin" for reasons that may not have been accidental.

<sup>15</sup>Among the critics who have suggested that Désirée might have black ancestors are Marcia Gaudet and Ellen Peel. The latter expands on the political implications of the possibility that "Désirée may not be wholly white" (233).

<sup>16</sup>The permanent narrative gap that remains in the text concerning race may also be interpreted as an exploration of the novelists' ethical or epistemological beliefs in the sense that Leona Toker suggested when she discussed the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral elements in other literary works (129 and 186).

<sup>17</sup>Ellen Peel uses "a combined semiotic and political approach" in her analysis of "Désirée's Baby" and contends that in this short story "the surprises are more

disruptive in a *semiotic* than a *political* sense; they endanger the system of *signification* more than the system of *domination*" (230).

<sup>18</sup>According to Peggy Skaggs, the story concludes "with an ironic reversal that demonstrates the irrationality of racism" (25). Nancy A. Walker believes that here as elsewhere, Chopin illustrates the disasters that racism can cause (8). Bernard Koloski considers "Désirée's Baby" to be "among the most powerful condemnations of racism in American literature" (1996: 26) and states this view in his "Introduction" to *Bayou Folk and A Night in Acadie* (1999: xv). Suzanne D. Green notes that this tale calls into question Helen Taylor's notion that Chopin was "deeply racist" (Green 23, Taylor xiii). Among the critics who claim that "Désirée's Baby" reinforces racist definitions of blackness and whiteness is Werner Sollors, who forcefully rejects former interpretations that praise this short story for its progressive treatment of racial issues, and contends that its melodramatic closure leaves the reader "assured at the end that it is the evil, satanic character who is at fault; conveniently, he is also the one who definitely has the 'black blood'; by contrast, the one wrongly accused of blackness is perhaps really whitewhitewhite and innocent and good" (71). In my yet unpublished paper "Race Issues in Kate Chopin's Louisiana Short Fiction," I contend about Chopin's alleged racism: "If she were to be judged by present standards of political correctness, she would most likely be found guilty of sins of omission rather than commission. She was never explicitly racist, and arguably not racist at all."

<sup>19</sup>In her early Louisiana fiction, Chopin invariably presented Creoles and Cajuns as wholly white, and distinguished one ethnic group from the other in terms of class. No dialect is used in "Désirée's Baby," a story in which all non-English words are in standard French, including Zandrine's brief sentence.

<sup>20</sup>While acknowledging that "A Visit to Avoyelles" displays many standard features of local-color writing, Kaye Gibbons reckons that this story reveals progress in Chopin's movement away from local-color conventions, for it is less sentimental than many local-color works (xxxix-xxxii).

<sup>21</sup>Bauer sees "Désirée's Baby" "as Chopin's challenge to the postbellum plantation literature that idealized the Old South" (174).

<sup>22</sup>In her article "Kate Chopin and Literary Convention: 'Désirée's Baby,'" Emily Toth propounds the theory that Kate Chopin used certain literary conventions (e.g. the tragic octoroon) in order to attract her readers, and then went beyond such conventions to provide new insights. Elfenbein concludes that Chopin, together with George Washington Cable and Grace King, transformed some local-color stereotypes (in particular, the tragic octoroon) so as to challenge the prevailing ideology (ix). Likewise, Janet Goodwyn [Janet Beer] reads Chopin's fictions as "subversive documents" in which the apparently conventional surface meanings are undermined by processes of revelation that occur through her short stories (28). According to Sandra Gilbert, local color offered Chopin "both a mode and a manner that could mediate between the literary structures she had inherited and those she had begun" (16). Kate McCullough contends that "although Chopin had publicly positioned herself as a writer in relation to both Local Color and Realism, disclaiming the former and celebrating the latter, in her early work she concur-



rently exploited Local Color, using it to subvert the terms of middle-class models of womanhood, dismantling a monolithic image of America and American True Womanhood by representing various 'American' women whose identities are marked by a variety of ethnic, racial, regional, religious, and class identifications" (187).

<sup>23</sup>By analyzing the sketch "A Gentleman of Bayou Têche" in the light of Chopin's own critical writings, David Steiling convincingly demonstrates that the author's ambivalence toward the local-color school of American writing "goes deeper and is a reaction to the ethical and aesthetic problems of representing distinct ethnic and regional cultures" (197). According to Steiling, the sketch "shows that Kate Chopin could and did use the techniques of the local-color school to deconstruct and transcend the limitations of the genre" (200).

<sup>24</sup>When praising Maupassant's tales, Chopin wrote: "Some wise man has promulgated an eleventh commandment—'thou shalt not preach,' which interpreted means 'thou shalt not instruct thy neighbor.'" ("Confidences," *Complete Works* 702).

<sup>25</sup>In his Introduction to *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, Per Seyersted explains: "The Creoles were pure-blooded descendants of French and Spanish colonists" (22). Having analyzed Chopin's narrative construction of racial difference in her early fiction, Bonnie James Shaker maintains that "For Chopin, 'coloring locals' meant transforming non-Louisianians' general understanding of the Creole and Cajun as mixed-race people into 'purely' white folks" (xii) and notes that Chopin's later texts move away from her initial interest in whitening Creoles and Cajuns.

<sup>26</sup>In his essay "Fairytale Features in Kate Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby,'" Jon Erickson indicates that the virtually unmistakable fairytale features "are used in the story as a basis for its exploration of the theme of appearance versus reality" (57) and that such features complicate and enrich the basic realistic mode of the tale.

<sup>27</sup>Helen Taylor refers to "Chopin's strong identification with European, rather than American, realist writing" (157). Kate McCullough remarks that "Chopin was quite aware of the politics of Local Color—both the benefits and costs of being associated with it—and so chose to identify with Realism as a political strategy of self-authorization in the face of the threat of marginalization. At the same time, however, Chopin used both the conventions and the marginalized status of Local Color fiction as a cover: as a marginalized form it allowed Chopin to experiment with representations of American Womanhood, rejecting a kind of Northeastern Puritan tradition of non-representation of female sexuality and following Realism's move towards mimesis so as to dismantle models of True Womanhood as well as those of the Southern Lady" (190).

<sup>28</sup>In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes draws attention to the fact that readers bring to every narrative a set of narrative codes which are necessary to extract meaning from the text. In order to interpret Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes employs five codes, which he calls *hermeneutic*, *semantic*, *proairetic*, *symbolic*, and *cultural* (also called *reference code*). The *proairetic code* is a major structuring principle that builds interest on the

part of the reader and thus creates suspense. It stems from the recognition that each action in a text can be linked to nameable sequences operating in the text as a whole. In other words, the *proairetic code* works at the level of expectations because it refers to the anticipation of the resolution of each action.

<sup>29</sup>Five early reviews of *Bayou Folk* have been reprinted by Alice Hall Petry in the volume *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin* (41-45).

<sup>30</sup>Among the critics who have praised the ending of the story, Fred Lewis Pattee claimed that it typified Chopin's talent for providing unusually strong conclusions (326-27). In *Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories*, the first book-length work on Chopin, Father Daniel S. Rankin noted that "its superb final sentence is not a trick but an epiphany" (134). In 1937, Joseph J. Reilly commented that the closing sentence of "Désirée's Baby" "matches O. Henry's 'The Furnished Room' in the suddenness of its surprise and in the irony and the pathos of its devastating revelation" (73), and later qualified the conclusion of the story as "powerful" in *Of Books and Men* (135). When Per Seyersted discussed "Désirée's Baby" in *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography*, he expressed his dislike with the artificiality of its concluding quirk as follows: "The ending undeniably has intense dramatic value, but its artifice mars what is otherwise an excellent piece of writing" (122). In his Introduction to *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, Seyersted reaffirmed this opinion in the following words: "though the last sentence of such a story as 'Désirée's Baby' has a poignancy unsurpassed by Maupassant, it is nevertheless a trick ending" (31). Robert D. Arner disagreed with Seyersted and with other critics who had complained about the "contrived" ending of the story with the claim that Chopin was attempting to force on readers a conclusion she had not prepared them for, and argued that such a claim "rests on a too hasty reading of the story" (139). Cynthia Wolff explicitly contradicted Seyersted's disparagement of the ending of the story (36) and celebrated "the success of its conclusion" as follows: "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" (37). Although Barbara H. Solomon praised the story as a whole, she deplored that the ending was a bit overdone (xiv). Susan Wolstenholme said that the story is flawed because of its contrived conclusion (543). Barbara C. Ewell argued that the ending seems perfectly appropriate (69). According to Erickson, the story gains in complexity because of its second conclusion (57).

<sup>31</sup>Although in her lifetime Chopin only managed to sell the most conventional three, all of her eight translations of Maupassant's short stories have been made available by Thomas Bonner Jr. in *The Kate Chopin Companion*. Chopin acknowledged her debt to Maupassant in "Confidences" (*Complete Works* 700-05). Guy de Maupassant's influence on Kate Chopin has been studied by John R. Aherne and Richard Fusco. Among the various Maupassant's markings in Chopin's work, Bernard Koloski points to "a penchant for ironic endings" (1996: 6).

<sup>32</sup>Most readers conclude that Désirée and her baby die in the bayou. On this subject, see McMahan (34), Wolff (40-41), Koloski (1996: 25), Sollors (145) and Toth (1999: 145). Among the commentators who presume that Désirée has committed

suicide are Benfey (228), Erickson (63), Korb, Papke (55), and Taylor (50 and 166). Ellen Peel is more cautious when she states that "Désirée walks away, apparently to her death" (230) and even considers the implications that her survival would have in any evaluation of the story (233-34).

<sup>33</sup>Among the critics who assume that Armand discovers his black ancestry when he takes his mother's letter from the drawer in which he kept Désirée's correspondence are: Seyersted (122), Arner (140), Skaggs (25), Ewell (69), and Taylor (166). Thomas Bonner asserts that Armand left his mother "at the age of eight, not knowing that she was black" (9). On the other hand, Anna Shannon Elfenbein postulates that Armand "may vaguely remember his racially mixed mother" (126). Roslyn Reso Foy notices that "Armand was eight years old at the crucial turning point in his life when his mother died and he left Paris with his father," and concludes that his cruelty stemmed from his experiencing psychological confusion, because he "was certainly old enough to remember his mother, but circumstances have caused him to suppress his past" (222-23). Relying on psychological research about children's awareness of race, Margaret D. Bauer argues: "A mother of six children, Chopin would have probably realized the age her children were when they became aware of racial differences. Thus her including the detail that he was eight years old when his mother died was the means by which she intended her reader to realize, upon reflection, that Armand must have been aware of his mother's race" (166). Fusco notes how the ending leaves open the possibility that Armand may already have known of his mother's letter (152).

<sup>34</sup>According to Roland Barthes, the *hermeneutic code* sets up delays in the flow of the discourse, and refers to the questions which are raised by the elements that are not explained in a text, such as the *snare* (deliberate deception or evasion of the truth), the *equivocation* (the mixture in a single statement of truth and snare, that is, a statement that can be interpreted in two different ways), the *partial answer*, the *suspended answer*, and *jamming* (acknowledgement of the insolubility of the enigma, or apparent failure of the hermeneutic activity). See Richard Miller's translation of Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (19, 75-76 and 210).

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