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Semiotic Subversion in "Désirée's Baby"

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I

AT first "Désirée's Baby," published in 1893 by Kate Chopin, seems no more than a poignant little story with a clever twist at the end.¹ Yet that does not fully explain why the tale is widely anthologized, why it haunts readers with the feeling that, the more it is observed, the more facets it will show. In "Désirée's Baby" Chopin, best known as the author of *The Awakening*, has created a small gem, whose complexity has not yet been fully appreciated. As I explore that complexity, my broader goal is a theoretical one: I plan to show not only that a semiotic and a political approach can be combined, but also that they must be combined in order to do justice to this story and to others like it, stories that lie at the nexus of concerns of sex, race, and class.

A semiotic approach to the work reveals that, despite its brevity, it offers a rich account of the disruption of meaning, and that the character largely responsible for the disruption is Désirée Aubigny, who might on a first reading seem unprepossessing.² She is a catalyst, however, for the subversion of meaning. When the semiotic approach is supplemented by a political approach, it can be seen that, in particular, Désirée casts doubt on the meaning of race, sex, and class.³ In this drama of misinterpretations, she undermines smugness about the ability to

¹ "Désirée's Baby," in *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*, ed. Per Seyersted (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1969), I, 240–45. I would like to thank Robert D. Arner, William Bush, Gillian C. Gill, Margaret Homans, and Gila Safran-Naveh for their comments on this paper.

² I am using "semiotic" to refer to the study of signs in the broad sense, to the study of the systems by which we create signification, decipher meaning, and gain knowledge.

³ I am using "political" in the broad sense to refer to concern with societal power relations, not just electoral politics.

read signs, such as skin color, as clear evidence about how to categorize people.

The disruption culminates when Désirée, whom everyone considers white, has a baby boy who looks partly black. When she is rejected by her husband, Armand, she takes the infant, disappears into the bayou, and does not return. Armand later finds out, however, that he himself is black, on his mother's side. Désirée, though unintentionally, has devastated him by means of these two surprises, one concerning her supposed race and one concerning his own.

Using a combined semiotic and political approach, my analysis consists of four steps: I trace how the surprises to Armand disrupt signification; question whether they are actually as subversive as they first appear; shift the focus more definitively to Désirée to show how the story associates her with certain enigmatic, subversive absences; and, finally, discuss how the story criticizes, yet sympathetically accounts for, the limitations of Désirée's subversiveness.

The story takes place in an antebellum Creole community ruled by institutions based on apparently clear dualities: master over slave, white over black, and man over woman. Complacently deciphering the unruffled surface of this symbolic system, the characters feel confident that they know who belongs in which category and what signifies membership in each category. Moreover, as Emily Toth has observed, in the story the three dualities parallel each other, as do critiques of their hierarchical structures.⁴

Within this system of race, sex, and class, the most complacent representative is Armand Aubigny. Confident that he is a white, a male, and a master, he feels in control of the system. In order to understand how his wife challenges signification, we must take a closer look at the surprises that Armand encounters.

The tale begins with a flashback about Désirée's childhood and courtship. She was a foundling adopted by childless Madame and Monsieur Valmondé. Like a queen and king in a fairy tale, they were delighted by her mysterious arrival and named her Désirée, "*the wished-for one*," "*the desired one*." She, like a fairy-

⁴ "Kate Chopin and Literary Convention: 'Désirée's Baby,'" *Southern Studies*, 20 (1981), 203; and see Robert D. Arner, "Kate Chopin," *Louisiana Studies*, 14 (1975), 47.

tale princess, "grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé." When she grew up, she was noticed by Armand, the dashing owner of a nearby plantation. He fell in love immediately and married her. She "loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God." They were not to live happily ever after.

Soon after the story proper opens, Armand meets with the first surprise. He, other people, and finally Désirée see something unusual in her infant son's appearance. She asks her husband what it means, and he replies, "It means . . . that the child is not white; it means that you are not white." Désirée writes Madame Valmondé a letter pleading that her adoptive mother deny Armand's accusation. The older woman cannot do so but asks Désirée to come home with her baby. When Armand tells his wife he wants her to go, she takes the child and disappears forever into the bayou.

Thus, Armand's first surprise comes when he interprets his baby's appearance to mean that the child and its mother are not white. What seemed white now seems black. Désirée, with the child she has brought Armand, has apparently uncovered a weakness in her husband's ability to decipher the symbols around him.

Ironically, Désirée's power comes from the fact that she seems malleable. Into an established, ostensibly secure system she came as a child apparently without a past. As a wild card, to those around her the girl appeared blank, or appeared to possess non-threatening traits such as submissiveness. Désirée seemed to invite projection: Madame Valmondé wanted a child, Armand wanted a wife, and both deceived themselves into believing they could safely project their desires onto Désirée, the undifferentiated blank screen. Actually, however, her blankness should be read as a warning about the fragility of representation.

One aspect of Désirée's blankness is her pre-Oedipal namelessness. As a foundling, she has lost her original last name and has received one that is hers only by adoption. Even foundlings usually receive a first name of their own, but in a sense Désirée also lacks that, for her first name merely reflects others' "desires." In addition, namelessness has a particularly female cast in this society, since women, including Désirée, lose their last name

at marriage. Namelessness connotes not only femaleness but also blackness in antebellum society, where white masters can deprive black slaves of their names. Although Désirée's namelessness literally results only from her status as a foundling and a married woman, her lack of a name could serve figuratively as a warning to Armand that she might be black.

But he sees only what he desires. Before the wedding he "was reminded that she was nameless. What did it matter about a name when he could give her one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana?" On this virgin page Armand believes he can write his name, the name he inherited from his father or, more broadly, the patriarchal Name of the Father. In addition, as a father, Armand wants to pass on that name to his son. Before he turns against his wife and baby, she exclaims: "Oh, Armand is the proudest father in the parish, I believe, *chiefly because it is a boy, to bear his name*; though he says not,—that he would have loved a girl as well. But I know it isn't true. I know he says that to please me" (emphasis added).

The approaching downfall of Armand's wife, and hence of his plans for his name, is foreshadowed by the relationship between Désirée's blankness and another name, that of the slave La Blanche. The mulatta's name refers to the whiteness of her skin, but "*blanche*" can also mean "*pure*" or "*blank*," recalling Désirée's blankness. La Blanche is Désirée's double in several ways. Neither has a "proper" name, only a descriptive one. During the scene in which Armand rejects his wife, he explicitly points out the physical resemblance between the women:

"Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," [Désirée] laughed hysterically.

"As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly. . . .

The story also links the two women through their children, for the mistress first notices her son's race when she compares him to one of La Blanche's quadroon sons. And perhaps Armand is the father of La Blanche's son.⁵ The two women—and even their sons—may have parallel ties to Armand because of the possible sexual connection between slave and master. So

⁵ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "Kate Chopin and the Fiction of Limits: 'Désirée's Baby,'" *Southern Literary Journal*, 10 (1978), 128.

much doubling hints that the slave's racial mix has foreshadowed that of the mistress.

Because La Blanche's name refers to her in the visual but not the racial sense, her appearance illustrates the contradiction of a racial system that is based on color but does not consider visual evidence conclusive. In this discourse a person who looks white but has a "drop" of black "blood" is labeled black. As Joel Williamson says, the "one-drop rule" would seem definitive but in fact leads to the problem of "invisible blackness."⁶

Miscegenation, which lies at the heart of the contradiction, marks the point at which sexual politics most clearly intersect with racial politics. Theoretically either parent in an interracial union could belong to either race. Nonetheless, "by far the greatest incidence of miscegenation took place between white men and black female slaves."⁷ Even when the white man did not technically rape the black woman, their relationship tended to result from, or at least be characterized by, an imbalance of power in race, sex, and sometimes class. Ironically, descendants of such a union, if their color was ambiguous, embodied a challenge to the very power differential that gave birth to them.

"*Désirée's Baby*" calls attention to the paradoxes that result from miscegenation and the one-drop rule. La Blanche and *Désirée* look white but are considered black, while "dark, handsome" Armand—whose hand looks darker than theirs—is considered white. *Désirée's* entry into the symbolic system forces Armand to confront the contradiction he ignored in La Blanche, another white-looking woman. A form of poetic justice en-

⁶ *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (New York: Free Press-Macmillan, 1980), p. 98. To avoid confusion, I generally follow the terminology of the society shown in the story, using the one-drop rule in deciding how to refer to characters' race. I refer to "mulattoes" only when the context demands it. Important parallels exist between Chopin's story and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which Mark Twain published the next year. Eric Sundquist puts Twain's novel in historical context, explaining that the work both grows out of and protests against growing racism in the United States in the late nineteenth century, an era that sought to redefine "white" and "black" by concepts like the "one-drop rule" ("Mark Twain and Homer Plessy," *Representations*, No. 24 [1988], 102-28).

⁷ James Kinney, *Amalgamation! Race, Sex, and Rhetoric in the Nineteenth-Century American Novel* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985), p. 19; see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 138; and Judith R. Berzon, *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1978), p. 9.

sures that the same one-drop rule that enables him to keep La Blanche as a slave causes him to lose Désirée as a wife. After the first surprise, Armand sees Désirée's blankness as blackness, not *blanche*-ness.

It is crucial to note that Désirée is disruptive, not because she *produces* flaws in the signifying system but because she *reveals* flaws that were already there. Long before her marriage, for instance, Armand was considered white and La Blanche was considered black. In a sense, Désirée acts as a mirror, revealing absurdities that were always already there in the institutions but repressed. Her blankness has reflective power.

In another sense, Désirée's potential as a mirror was one of her attractions for Armand, for he wanted her to bear a child that would replicate him—in a flattering way. Armand blames and smashes the mirror that has produced a black reflection. An outsider observing Armand's generally harsh treatment of slaves might, however, see his baby's darkness as another instance of poetic justice, the return of the oppressed.

Similarly, if the baby's darkness comes from his mother, whom Armand dominates, then the child's appearance represents the return of another oppressed group, women. To reproduce the father exactly, the child would have to inherit none of his mother's traits. In a metaphorical sense the first surprise means that Armand learns that his son is not all-male but half-female. The infant is an Aubigny but has inherited some of Désirée's namelessness as well, for we never learn his first name (nor that of his double). More generally, paternal power, the name of the father, seems to have failed to compensate for the mother's blackness or blankness.

To blame someone for the baby's troubling appearance, Armand has followed the exhortation, "*Cherchez la femme.*" In particular, he is looking for a black mother to blame. He is right to trace semiotic disruption to Désirée, but the trouble is more complex than he at first realizes.

The end of the story brings the second surprise—black genes come to the baby from Armand, through his own mother. Early on, readers have learned that old Monsieur Aubigny married a Frenchwoman in France and stayed there until his wife died, at which point he brought eight-year-old Armand to Louisiana. Only after Désirée and her baby have disappeared and her hus-

band is burning their belongings, do he and the readers come across a letter from his mother to his father: ". . . 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." As Joseph Conrad suggested, the "heart of darkness" lies within the self: the letter unveils Armand's "dark, handsome face" to himself.

At this point, several shifts occur. One takes place between wife and husband. For Armand, his wife was originally a screen onto which he could project what he desired. When he found a black mark on the screen, he rejected it. Now he has learned that the mark was a reproduction of his own blackness. The mark, which he considers a taint, moves from her to him.

Another shift takes place between sons and fathers. As Robert D. Arner implies, Armand at first rejects his baby for being the child of a white man and a black woman but then finds that the description fits himself.⁸ With blackness, the half-female nature attributed to the baby has also moved to Armand. An intergenerational shift occurs between women as well as men, for the role of black mother has gone from Armand's wife to his mother.

Thus two surprises have profoundly disturbed Armand. As in the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave, these two surprises have shaken the structure of white over black, male over female, and master over slave. Armand, the figure who seemed to belong to the dominant race, sex, and class, is shown to be heir to blackness and femaleness and to belong to the group "cursed with the brand of slavery." The repressed has returned and drained meaning from the established system of signification.

II

Nevertheless, these surprises are less subversive than they first appear. The fact that they shake Armand's concept of meaning and punish his arrogance does not mean that they actually change the inequality of power between the sexes, between the races, or between the classes, even on his plantation. Armand might be less sure of his ability to tell black from white, but

⁸ "Pride and Prejudice: Kate Chopin's 'Désirée's Baby,'" *Mississippi Quarterly*, 25 (1972), 133.

he probably will not free his slaves. Moreover, through the traumas experienced by Armand, the story invites readers to pity the suffering caused by inequalities of power but not to wonder how those inequalities could change. In other words, the surprises are more disruptive in a *semiotic* than a *political* sense; they endanger the system of *signification* more than the system of *domination*.

The text directs sympathy less toward black characters than toward characters on the margin between black and white. The story urges us to consider it a pity that Désirée and Armand, brought up as white, must undergo the trauma of receiving the news that they are black. But we are hardly urged to pity the much larger number of people who have lived as enslaved blacks since birth. The implication is that being black might deserve no particular sympathy unless a person was once considered white. The broader effects of race and its relation to slavery remain unexamined.

The problem arises in part because Chopin is using the Tragic Mulatto convention, which appears repeatedly in American literature.⁹ It is often easy for white readers to identify with the Tragic Mulatto, because she or he is typically raised as white and only later discovers the trace of blackness. Yet the invocation of "tragedy" introduces problems, partly because it implies resignation to the inevitable. The very idea of a Tragic Mulatto also suggests that mulattoes may be more tragic, more deserving of pity, than people of purely black ancestry.

Moreover, the very notion of pity is inadequate as a political response and can even have a conservative effect. The limitations of pity are best observed by looking at the traces of sexism that, like traces of racism, appear as a residue in the text. The parallel between racism and sexism in the story is complicated, because *insufficient* concern for blacks and slaves corresponds to *excessive* concern for women. Excessive concern can be debilitating for women by defining them solely as victims.

When Désirée walks away, apparently to her death, the tale most strongly urges readers to show such concern for women.

⁹ For more information on the Tragic Mulatto, see Berzon, pp. 99–116; Toth; Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon, 1985), pp. 3–4 and passim; and Jules Zanger, "The 'Tragic Octoroon' in Pre-Civil War Fiction," *American Quarterly*, 18 (1966), 63–70.

This arises because of the sympathetic way in which the entire story has represented her. She is good: "beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere." She is appealing: "'Armand,' she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human." She is vulnerable: "Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. . . . She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds." This doe-like character joins a long line of women who, by dying at the end of a story or a novel, call forth readers' tears. In particular, Tragic Mulattoes tend to be *mulattas*.

But scrutiny of such endings raises the discomfiting possibility that they rely on feminine vulnerability in order to move readers. A strong, rebellious, surviving heroine might not provide such tidily tragic closure. I am not suggesting that *Désirée's* pain should be presented less sympathetically; rather, I am questioning the implication that a less vulnerable woman would deserve less concern.

The connection of pity with race, class, and sex is noteworthy in the double of *Désirée's* baby—La Blanche's quadroon son. In contrast to *Désirée's* bruised feet, his bare feet are described merely as coming in contact with a polished floor, for the story presents only *Désirée* as suffering from the lack of sturdy shoes. Here the stress on feminine vulnerability combines with the acceptance of black slavery, as if it were a pity for a person such as *Désirée* to suffer: a member of the weak sex, someone who at least used to belong to groups that do not deserve such treatment—the race with "a golden gleam" in their hair and the class with the right to "tender feet."

For these reasons, even though the meanings of race, sex, and class are threatened by Armand's surprises, those two events do not seriously disturb the system of power relations. The story invites sympathy for *Désirée* partly on the sexist grounds that feminine women are weak and on the racist grounds that white members of the master class do not deserve to be treated like black slaves.

Twentieth-century readers may be troubled to find that Armand's surprises have a less subversive effect than at first seemed possible. The ideologies behind them can be better understood if placed in historical context. Because the story is set in the

era of slavery, its verisimilitude would falter if Armand suddenly reformed and freed his slaves. We must also consider the era in which the story was written and originally read, for the late nineteenth century in the United States was marked by a rebounding prejudice against blacks. Attitudes towards women also differed substantially from those of the late twentieth century: even the women's movement drew on notions of female purity and martyrdom that sound strange today but were part of nineteenth-century discourse. Thus it would be anachronistic to expect more subversiveness from the traumas experienced by Armand.

III

Some of these problems can be mitigated, however, by thinking more carefully about the text—or rather about what is missing from the text. Shifting the focus more definitively to Désirée discloses certain enigmatic, disruptive absences.

Almost everyone who has written on the story has mentioned, favorably or unfavorably, the concluding revelation about Armand's mother. This final twist recalls the surprise endings of Guy de Maupassant, who strongly influenced Chopin.¹⁰ While evoking sympathy for Désirée, the twist essentially turns backward to tradition and male power: the very presence of a plot twist may reflect Chopin's inheritance from de Maupassant, a literary forefather; in the ending the focus of narrative point of view is Armand, upholder of conservative values; and the female character earns sympathy largely through a sentimental convention—through powerless, victimized innocence. In fact, my discussion itself has so far concentrated on surprises undergone by Armand, a figure of male conservatism. I agree with Cynthia Griffin Wolff that we should cease analyzing the surprise ending and look elsewhere.¹¹

Instead of concentrating on the ending, with its conservative, male orientation, we should turn to Désirée, who is absent from the ending. Although submissive, the young woman does have some power. Her boldest action is disappearance, but she

¹⁰ Per Seyersted, *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), p. 73; Wolff, p. 126.

¹¹ Wolff, p. 125.

does act. While she neither desires nor anticipates the havoc she wreaks, she does catalyze the entire plot.¹²

Through Armand, we have already started to see how the meanings of race, class, and sex are crumbling. *Désirée* offers two greater challenges to meaning, because she may not be wholly white and because she may not die in the bayou. These are enigmas, in the sense used in *S/Z*,¹³ and they remain inconspicuously unsolved, both for readers and, apparently, for other characters. The enigmas are silent, formless absences that cannot be found in any specific location.

To begin with, *Désirée* may be black—and thus a black mother—after all. If she is black, that mitigates some of the racism I discussed earlier. Instead of being a white character who deserves sympathy for unjust treatment that includes the accusation of being black, she is a black character whose unjust treatment, minus the accusation, on its own account deserves sympathy. Whether or not *Désirée* is black, the impossibility of knowing her race reveals the fragility of meaning more than Armand's knowable race does. The *presence* of a traditional, *male*-oriented twist *located* at the end of the story veils a troubling, *female*-oriented *absence*—of knowledge based on skin color or on writing—that has *no particular location*.

Désirée is troubling in another way as well. The tale says, "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," but it never actually says she dies. Just as it is possible that she is partly black, so it is possible that she (with the baby) is alive. If so, that survival mitigates some of the sexism I discussed earlier. *Désirée* deserves sympathy even if she does not pay for it with her life. In addition, if she does not kill herself, she is saying in effect that life is worth living even if she is black and has lost Armand's love. Indeed, by escaping she has freed herself from those who once projected their desires on her. Even if she does kill herself and her child in the bayou, it is significant that the deaths are absent from the text, because in this way the work allows some hope, however slight, for the

¹² Arner makes a similar point ("Pride and Prejudice," p. 137).

¹³ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang-Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), pp. 209–10.

race, class, and sex the characters represent. Like the impossibility of knowing Désirée's race, the impossibility of knowing her death offers a challenge to complacency about knowledge.

As the two unsolved enigmas suggest, the challenge to meaning, like Désirée, tends to operate negatively, through non-sense. She sometimes cries out unconsciously and involuntarily or remains completely silent. These traits appear in the scene where she notices her baby is black:

"Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. . . .

She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door.

She at first seemed no threat to the signifying structure she had entered, but the very inarticulateness of this blank card reveals that the system of signification sometimes breaks down.

By creating Désirée's enigmas—the possibility that she is black and the possibility that she and her baby are alive—Chopin to some extent resists the racism and sexism to which she was urged by much in her historical moment. It is important that the enigmas are not just difficult but decipherable puzzles that, when solved, would clearly state that Désirée was black and alive. Instead, the enigmas have the elusive indeterminacy typical of Désirée.

As we have seen, Armand first thinks his wife is white, but he decides he has misinterpreted her. He thinks his wife is black and solely responsible for their son's blackness, but again Armand finds he has misinterpreted. Although unsettling, both incidents leave intact the hope that knowledge can correct misinterpretations. Yet the absences associated with Désirée erode some of that semiotic hope. Because the readers—and probably the characters—never know whether she is partly black and whether she survives the bayou, the story throws into question the very possibility of knowledge, at least in some cases.

IV

It would be satisfying to end on that note, but I must add that Désirée still disrupts the practice of domination less than semiotic practice. While sympathetic to her, Chopin reveals the limi-

tations of some of the character's values. Of course the author does not hold twentieth-century beliefs; yet she is far enough from Désirée's antebellum era to present a critique indicating that the young woman, as a product of her society, has internalized so many of its values that she can never fully attack it. Chopin subtly indicates that, in spite of the disruptiveness of Désirée's enigmas, her subversiveness remains limited, for three main reasons.

To begin with, Désirée is excessively dependent on the unconscious. She is "unconscious," in the sense that she is unaware. For example, Désirée is the last to realize that her child is not white, and it never occurs to her that her baby's blackness comes from her husband. On another level, she often seems unaware of herself, driven by her own unconscious. Her actions after discovering the baby's race seem trancelike, as if in a dream—or nightmare. And, as has been shown above, she sometimes cries out involuntarily. On still another level, Désirée's lack of political consciousness could also be seen as a kind of "unconsciousness." None of this detracts from her raw power, but uncontrollable power can be as dangerous to those who wield it as to others.

The second restriction on Désirée's subversiveness comes from a certain negative quality. Through her silence (and inarticulateness), through the story's silence about her enigmas, and through her final absence, she disrupts her society's signifying system by revealing its contradictions and meaninglessness. She does destroy complacency about knowledge. Yet all this is not enough. Destruction often must precede creation but cannot in itself suffice. Désirée creates nothing but a baby, whom she certainly takes away, and perhaps kills.

Even Désirée's destructiveness is limited, for she possesses another negative trait: she is "essentially passive."¹⁴ She is discovered by Monsieur Valmondé, she is discovered by Armand, she is filled with joy or fear by her husband's volatile moods, and, while lying on a couch and recovering slowly from childbirth, she is visited by Madame Valmondé. Désirée is immersed in her husband's value system and never stands up to him, not even to interpret the meaning of his dark skin or the baby's, much less to criticize his racism, his sexism, or his treatment of

¹⁴ Barbara C. Ewell, *Kate Chopin* (New York: Ungar, 1986), p. 71.

slaves. When she finally acts, she pleads ineffectually with her husband, writes ineffectually to her mother, and then takes the most passive action possible—she disappears. Like the suicide of Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, Désirée's disappearance is hardly a triumph.

The third weakness lies in Désirée's lack of a sense of political solidarity. She acts only individually or as part of a nuclear family, never as part of a broader group. She fails to acknowledge ties with anyone outside the family who belongs to her sex or to her newly attributed race and class. Her similarity to La Blanche, for instance, fills her with horror. In fact, in Désirée's final efforts to win back Armand she is seeking someone she thinks is her diametric opposite—a white male, assured of his place as master. The only exception to Désirée's final solitude is her baby. But even he cannot represent any kind of political bonding. Even if she does not murder him, nothing indicates that she sees him as linked to her in shared oppression.

Désirée's individualism resembles that of other characters.¹⁵ For instance, the general condition of blacks and slaves never really comes into question. Madame Valmondé, like Désirée, regrets that one individual, Armand, treats his slaves cruelly, but not that he or other people own slaves in the first place. Instead of recognizing the institutional nature of exploitation based on race, class, and sex, Désirée and others seem to feel that problems stem from the lack of certain personal qualities, such as pity or sympathy. "Young Aubigny's 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 easy-going and indulgent lifetime." Indulgence rather than emancipation is presented as the alternative to Armand's harshness. In a similar vein, individualizing love is shown as the "antidote to the poison of Armand's racial abstraction."¹⁶ His love for his wife and baby causes him to treat the slaves well for a while. This makes Désirée happy, but she does not question whether one man's moods should have such power over other people.

Chopin sympathetically but critically shows that her characters define problems in terms of the lack of individualistic quali-

¹⁵ Wolff makes a similar point (p. 127).

¹⁶ Arner, "Kate Chopin," p. 52.

ties such as love and mercy, not in terms of the subordination of one group by another. I do not mean to say that individual virtues totally lack value, only that they may not suffice to solve certain problems. In short, though some characters feel pity for slaves, blacks, and women, the assumption that they are inferior goes unquestioned.

In this ideology, superiors should have a sense of *noblesse oblige*, but they remain superior. Concerning sex, race, and class, *Désirée* upsets systems of meaning but—by failing to connect the personal with the political—stops short of attacking hierarchical power structures. Disruption of meaning could lead to, and may be necessary for, political disruption, but *Désirée* does not take the political step.

Instead of attacking the meaningfulness of racial difference as a criterion for human rights, *Désirée* takes a more limited step: she reveals that racial difference is *more difficult to detect* than is commonly supposed. In this view, suffering can result if people classify each other too hastily or if, having finished the sorting process, people treat their inferiors cruelly. But the system of racial difference, with its built-in hierarchy, persists. In this system, superiority is still meaningful; the only difficulty lies in detecting it. It is no wonder that those viewed as inferior do not unite with each other.

Chopin presents these three reasons—unconsciousness, negativity, and lack of solidarity—to help explain why *Désirée* does reveal her society's lack of knowledge but fails to change its ideological values, much less its actual power hierarchies.¹⁷ She poses so little threat to the dominant power structures that she holds a relatively privileged position for most of her life. Yet subversiveness need not be bound so tightly to traits such as unconsciousness that make it self-limiting.

Désirée's semiotic subversiveness should be taken seriously. Her disruption of meaning may even be necessary, but Chopin skillfully suggests it is not sufficient.

¹⁷ The force of just one of the three influences can be seen by comparison with *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Unlike *Désirée*, Roxana is conscious and takes positive action, but both characters lack unity with a group. Roxana, who suffers from only one of the three disadvantages I have explained, still cannot manage to bring about notable subversion.