

## Kate Chopin's *Desiree's Baby*: A New Historicist Approach

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### Abstract

In this study, New Historicism, a contemporary literary theory, has been used to examine Kate Chopin's short story *Desiree's Baby*. The author of this short story illustrates the racial prejudice, insults directed at women, and social discrimination that existed in America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus fictitious characters and the fictional environment effectively depict the historical aspects of this century. When *Desiree's Baby* is analyzed in the context of this theory, it is clear that the historical context of the time when the short story was written can be visualized. This is because the new historicist viewpoint emphasizes that literary works are the means to reach the historical and ideological conditions of a specific time. The objective of the present study is to analyze Chopin's short story using a New Historicist approach. To that end, a literature review was used to compose the study and a qualitative research method was used. It is clear from the short story being handled that a white person unable to have a child who looks like a member of a different race. The place of a person in society is thus determined by their origin, which is very important. Only white plantation owners who are affluent and of a certain race are permitted to possess slaves. As a consequence of the study, it was discovered that Chopin genuinely wrote about the reality of American society in the nineteenth century, thereby accurately depicting historical facts.

**Keywords:** Desiree's baby, new historicism, historical context, Kate Chopin, new historicist approach

### 1. Introduction

Inequality of race and gender predominated in nineteenth-century American society, where individuals of color were seen to be the only ones who could hold a position of servitude. The literary works that depict this time period reflect the numerous forms of social inequality that this century saw. Oppression was inevitable for both women of color and white or black women since the white, wealthy men exploited their authority on black people. The oppressed people lacked the freedom to act on their own, and a white man could not even conceive a black child

since it would foster prejudice against him or his wife's race. The oppressed people had no right to act independently.

In her short story *Desiree's Baby*, one of the most famous American writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Kate Chopin, depicts the prejudice, despising, and inequality that exist in American society in the light of the aforementioned facts. Her short story illustrates historical details from a period when slavery was pervasive. Oppression at the hands of the wealthy and white was a reality, and the way the short story handled it made that truth quite evident. The objective of the study is to illustrate historical aspects of the period when *Desiree's Baby* was written using a New Historicist perspective in the light of nineteenth-century truths and how these truths were represented in literary works. Since the short story addresses issues of inequality, prejudice and discrimination on the basis of race, it is thought that the New Historicist approach is the appropriate theory to exemplify these issues in American society during the nineteenth century.

## **2. New Historicism**

The 1980s saw the emergence of New Historicism as a literary theory for modern era. The proponents of this theory consider that understanding a piece of literature requires knowledge of its historical setting. A literary text is not a stand-alone piece of literature; rather, it is linked to everything that is part of the culture of a specific society and time. As Lyu states (2021, p. 1075), "new historicists pay more attention to the historical and cultural context of the literary text." In actuality, New Historicism views a literary work as a depiction of a worldview from a certain time period. Literary works so serve as examples of both historical knowledge and cultural change.

A literary work is comprehended by focusing "more on history that is nuanced, imbued with emotion, and written from the perspective of ordinary people" (Hickling, 2018, p. 55) in order to understand it as a product of its period. It is impossible to say that a literary work can be understood in the same way regardless of the chronological period because cultural, social, and political features of a particular moment and society are reflected through it. As Serdaroğlu emphasizes (2017, p. 787), "New Historicism deconstructs and reconstructs the truth-ness of history as well as its universal and traditional representation." The world's social existence is investigated by New Historicism, which can be interpreted from several angles. "New Historicism provides a representation or revisionism of historical facts based on the belief in history as having a discursive nature underscoring power relations" (Ramadan, 2019, p. 32). The notion that "events, places, and culture within a society affect or influence a written work" is thus supported by the New Historicists (Mojdegani, 2016, p. 13).

### **3. Kate Chopin and *Desiree's Baby***

Kate Chopin, a notable American writer born in 1850, is well-known for her literary works, particularly her novel *The Awakening* and short stories. “She began writing short stories around 1890, using Creole settings and often the patois of her characters” (McInerny, 2005, p. 1). Chopin’s literary career ended in 1899, following criticism of her final novel. Most of her literary works feature female heroines that are strong enough to deal with the evil surrounding them. She seeks to demonstrate what females may do outside of their patriarchal society in order to achieve independence, which piqued the interest of feminists. Chopin, according to Al-Shalabi (2015, p. 277), “draws people’s attention to the restrictions that marriage imposes on women. She seems to be saying that marriage divests women of their independence and keeps them oppressed by men.” Chopin is particularly skillful in her description of women’s survival in a male-dominated world because she is a literary character who illuminates “the inner lives of sensitive, daring women” (Monika, 2020, p. 1).

*Desiree's Baby*, one of the short stories, was written in 1897. It describes numerous forms of racial and ethnic prejudice in nineteenth-century America. Furthermore, it depicts the consequences of racial discrimination and the societal tensions that emerge from it. *Desiree's Baby* is also about love and rejection. It is made apparent that throughout the time period depicted in the short story, there was no racial equality in the town, nor were there enough rights for women. In addition, the short story depicts a class distinction. As Guo and Du (2021, p. 28) point out, *Desiree's Baby* clearly demonstrates the culture in America “in which racism and gender discrimination penetrated into the fixed mindset of people”; thus, historical context can aid comprehension of the theme and what is being told through the fictional characters.

### **4. Method**

A literature review was employed to compose the study, and the qualitative research method was used to analyze of the literary work *Desiree's Baby*. The study provides references that support the New Historicist approach used to analyze the short story.

### **5. Analysis of *Desiree's Baby* through New Historicist Approach**

Kate Chopin’s short story *Desiree's Baby* can be seen as a literary work that embodies the New Historicists’ perspectives on literary works. While the advocates of New Historicism say that literary works reflect the realities of a specific time period, they also imply that the authors produce vital resources to reach certain aspects of the society in which she lived in. Similarly, the aforementioned short story might be viewed as a resource that demonstrates the facts of the time in which its author lived. In *Desiree's Baby*, Desiree is Valmondés’ adopted daughter. She falls in love with Armand, a wealthy Creole man. It is understandable that in the

nineteenth-century America, a wealthy man has the right to marry anyone, even if she is an adopted person. After having a child as a fruit of their love, Armand becomes glad as a plantation owner who should perpetuate his ancestry with his race member. However, the appearance of his son who looks like a black person, causes considerable prejudice on Armand's behalf as well as in the society. According to this point of view, anyone whose ancestry is unknown can be subjected to the degradation of her unknown genealogy at that time period.

Nobody can criticize the wealthy or question their lineage in this century. Desiree left her husband's house with her nameless child since a white person should not be of black descent. Her husband discovers that he is partly black, which demonstrate the reality of the period that even though a person is of white descent, they may have black parents. This is the issue of the nineteenth-century American society where the rich and the people color of black lived together in the same surroundings.

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. And mamma, she added, drawing Madame Valmonde's head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, "he hasn't punished one of them - not one of them - since baby is born. Even Negrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work - he only laughed, and said Negrillon was a great scamp. Oh, mama, I'm so happy; it frightens me. (Chopin, 2000, p. 195)

As understood, during that time, women were expected to bear children and carry their husbands' significant names at the period. The whites are proud of their children, and this pride influences how they treat their slaves. As Mayer also states (2010, p. 95), Chopin demonstrates the character "Armand Aubigny as a cruel, arrogant man who likely would never admit he was wrong. He is merciless with his slaves and his wife." Even though Armand mistreats his slaves, the significant problem of ancestry can have a favorable impact on this treatment. Indeed, his pride in his race exemplifies both his ideology and the true ideology of white race in the nineteenth-century America. From the standpoint of New Historicism, being white and having offspring of white race is crucial, and it is a source of pride, because it is a privilege to perpetuate a white man's lineage. However, in *Desiree's Baby*, it is seen that Armand's son appears to be of black descent, which forces the baby to live unnamed because his father refuses to give the baby a name. Furthermore, because blacks are slaves, it is impossible for a white to resemble a black who is born as a slave, exhibiting the ideology of the historical period. This issue also demonstrates the irrefutable reality of racial discrimination and disparity during the time period.

Fictional characters who are viewed as representatives of the real society of the aforementioned century, are biased regarding the origin of Armand's son, who is supposed to

be white yet grows to resemble people of black descent. Even among black laborers on plantations, racial prejudice becomes pervasive. Desiree's mother also has doubt about the baby remarking, "Yes, the child has grown, has changed" (Chopin, 2000, p. 194). At the time period depicted in the short story, this had been considered a dreadful incident for both the baby's father and society.

In society in which Desiree lives, prejudice begins to differentiate whether her baby is the result of her infidelity or her African ancestry. As a result, both scenarios will result in unfavorable outcomes for a nineteenth-century white man. This is the reality of the society and time, as portrayed by the fictional figure, Armand. Desiree being a female in patriarchal society, is aware that women did not have equal rights at the time and that whatever males said should have been agreed upon. "It means," he answered lightly, "that the child is not white; it means that you are not white" (Chopin, 2000, p. 196). As stated by the male character, having black ancestors or having a black baby was considered as a threat to society at the time, especially by those who were white and wealthy.

When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmonde. "My mother, they tell me I am not white. Armand has told me I am not white. For God's sake tell them it is not true. You must know it is not true. I shall die. I must die. I cannot be so unhappy, and live." (Chopin, 2000, p. 196)

As pointed out above, Desiree feels oppressed and wishes for assistance from her stepmother. The short story effectively depicts prejudice towards a female's race. The subjugation of women in the nineteenth-century is unbearable. Gender disparity existed in patriarchal society. "Do you want me to go?" "Yes, I want you to go" (Chopin, p. 197). As stated, Desiree faced rejection. When being analyzed from the New Historicist viewpoint, it is seen that women did not have the right to object to the terrible side of society throughout the nineteenth century in America. Furthermore, gender discrimination was unavoidable. Despite accusing his wife of racism, Armand discovers the truth about himself.

"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." (Chopin, p. 198)

As stated by Armand's mother, she was also of black heritage, which was associated with slavery at those times. His mother didn't want her son to learn about his real origin including both white and black. In the South, a plantation owner could not be black. When look from the New Historicist perspective, it is clear that the affluent white man who owns a plantation could not any relationship with any slave of a different race. As a result, the truth about the lineage could not be revealed in the hands of a prejudiced society. When Armand is compared to his father, one can observe that he treats his wife completely differently. After realizing his son's skin color, Armand despises Desiree and the baby. He would rather lose his wife and child than

tell the truth as a representation of nineteenth-century American culture. The short story thus powerfully portrays the depravity and inhumanity of the period.

## **6. Conclusion**

When analyzed from the perspective of the New Historicism, Kate Chopin's *Desiree's Baby* reveals the themes that are the realities of the nineteenth-century society, the age in which the author of the short story also lived. Desiree seems to be a female representative of her time. Because there is slavery at the time, and the slaves are of black descent, the nameless baby is rejected by wealthy father. Indeed, Desiree and her husband suffer from societal biases. The insecurity of the racist culture of nineteenth-century America can be seen through *Desiree's Baby*.

It is clear that *Desiree's Baby* portrays the historical fact of the time in which it was written. In this short story, the white ones have both wealth and power. Armand, a white and wealthy individual, despises the people of color who labor as slaves on their owner's plantation. He refuses to accept the baby whose skin color resembles that of people of color as his son. Chopin's intense exploration of the themes of the importance of race and inequality in nineteenth-century America is thus an undeniable reality.

As stated by advocates of the New Historicism, any literary work is a representation of its time period. In this context, it is obvious that *Desiree's Baby* accurately portrays the status of women and people of color during the writing period in this setting. This short story is a reflection of its time because the era in which it was written has an effect on it. The racial disparity, gender discrimination and also racial prejudice that are historical facts at the time, are visualized through the short story. When the opinions and beliefs of members of society are taken into account, *Desiree's Baby* demonstrates that racial concern can be greater than love. Men hold a greater position, and women are easily accused of anything, even if it is false. By divulging these issues, not only historical information on society but also the ideology of the people at the time, which can be seen as the true components of history, are demonstrated. As a result, it is considered that Kate Chopin's short story directly reflects themes that illustrate the true ideology and position of the individuals who lived in the American society of the nineteenth century.

## **Disclosures**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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