

Desiree's Baby: Prejudiced Criticism of the One-Drop Rule

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"Desiree's Baby" provides insight into the application of the hypodescent rule in plantation-era Louisiana, depicting individuals of mixed race who are marked and assigned to the subordinate social group. In her short story, "Desiree's Baby," Kate Chopin addresses the practice as it was applied to the "one-drop rule," the notion that an individual with white complexion may be deemed black by society given the presence of any African ancestry. Desiree, the story's protagonist, is eloquently placed at the intersection of the two races, victimized in order to highlight the flaws and inadequacies of the rule. Desiree's ultimate removal from white society and possible death may indicate a text working to criticize racial prejudice; however, underhanded comments and character portraits on behalf of Chopin indicate that this is not the case. Chopin's text contains racial descriptions of the characters allows for a critique of the method of racial assignment within the divided system it is meant to uphold, adding weight to its inadequacies. "Desiree's Baby" carefully outlines a situation in which the prepositions of the one-drop rule are manipulated and followed logically to an absurd consequence, rendering the system of categorization ineffective. Constructing an environment in which the one-drop rule should theoretically thrive, Chopin places Desiree in a southern plantation where she

can be made black easily, but more significantly, where blackness carries significant consequences. Despite Desiree's ability to effortlessly assimilate into southern society, taking on the role of the "beautiful, gentle, affectionate and sincere" southern belle, the story never loses sight of her "obscure origin" (Chopin 440). As a result, Desiree is not..... middle of papergressive, the system's failure stems from its inability to preserve the racial divide of the time. At the story's end, the cruel black slave owner remains in power while the white southern belle is exiled, her status having been revoked. With this in mind, the one-drop rule is not only criticized through Desiree's tragic end as its premise is disproven using reductio ad absurdum. Chopin tests the one-drop rule in the racist setting in which it should theoretically thrive, but manipulating two of the subjects with the concept of an "unknown origin," the system of racial categorization ceases to function effectively. As the hierarchy meant to be preserved falls apart, the one-drop rule exhibits apparent and irreparable flaws. Questioning the stability of the one-drop rule, the text displays a clear desire for a more dependable system of racial categorization.

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