

# The Predetermination of Class

By Ignacia Chu-Jacoby

Nakedness has no color: this can come as news only to those who have never covered, or been covered by, another naked human being.

— James Baldwin

According to American novelist James Baldwin we are all human beings and all carry the same characteristics. He explains this beautifully by describing the idea of blurring the lines of separation in regards to race. Throughout history it has been documented that we have the binary opposition of race that has separated people into groups of likeness. It has always been the case that skin color dictates our self worth in regards to economic standing. This idea has been reflected in both World and American literature. Race has always played a big role in politics, and just the world at large. Race and class are two things that play a big part in distinguishing individual identity and it does play a role of micromanaging rights of the people because of those two things. In our history texts books we learn that there is this fight for equality of both African American and the White Anglo Saxon population. Because of cultural differences we see this fear of being around a different ethnic group. With the White Anglo Saxon population, we see them being the dominant group that fears the African American population. This fear not only separates the ethnic groups, it also allows the White Anglo Saxon population to question the ethics of the African American's that live amongst them. With this fear and question of ethics, it pushes the black community away from the upper and middle class. Most of them end up being part of the lower class and serving the White Anglo Saxon group. The term "racial other" can be used to describe this divide in race and class. It desensitizes the minority group and it makes

them look less as a human. Because we are use to this idea of the “racial other” being part of the lower class, it is hard to imagine someone from that group having assets that make them part of a higher social standing. In our minds it is a rare that we find someone from the “racial other” group to have the assets of the upper class. Because it is rare, we tend to show less respect towards those who hold that social standing and not take them seriously as we would with someone from the White Angelo Saxon group. With keeping all of these historical to present cogitation of the placement of race, I like to argue that literature does a good job preserving these views through history and fictional and personal stories. These forms of literature bring forth the subject of the definition of race and how it places everyone into their so-called proper place in society. A perfect example of literature that deals with these issues is Kate Chopin’s, *Désirée’s Baby*, that emphasizes the ideology of how race already predetermines within society what class you belong to and the rights and treatment you deserve being in that group. Clearly Chopin’s piece does leave many forms of interpretation and brings forth the politics of that time and the burning question who is to really blame for the baby being racially mixed. These and many more questions will be looked upon to dissect the text as a whole and see how race and class are being portrayed.

When we look at other ethnic groups outside of our own there is always some form of prejudgment that comes along with that individual. Through the media, they have put a division of race and associating them with characteristics and traits that the viewers take along with them and apply it to the outside world. In having that prejudgment, it does place some form of exclusion and discrimination of other ethnic groups because of the fear that they may harm or do something that could be life threatening. According to author Dagmar Pegues, she believes that the fear of blackness is one of the unknown that could deal with sexuality and exoticness of being non-white with non-similar mannerisms. This means that with the fear of the racial other,

comes the curiosity of what it means to be different. In relation to Chopin's short story, Pegues argues that the author was exploring perception of race and how it led to emotions of fear and curiosity of the racial other. In looking at the story from that perspective, I would have to agree with the sexual desirability as Armand is the product of what was considered forbidden love due to the fact that the love was between two individuals from different ethnic backgrounds.

One thing that we find shocking in Chopin's short story is that Armand is a mullata. In being a mullata he would have been considered black and would not have been able to inherit his father's plantation. Because he passes for being part of the white community he is also able to claim such wealth and be able to be part of society and marry his wife Désirée'. Pegues, responded to the character of Armand to being part of a practiced literary device called the mullata stereotype which she claims has been used in other works such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Lydia Maria Child's *The Quadroons*. The mullata stereotype was used to support the cause of abolition (Pegues 3). In the case of Armand he is a mullata and he represents one of the fears that the white community which is the break of the southern hierarchy. This fear of this take over is part of what drives the southern white folk to be more oppressive of those who are non-white or simply mixed. Despite the fact that Chopin was writing during the time where there was fear of the racial other, she cleverly uses the baby as a way to open the conversation what does it mean to be of the mixed race. The baby will bring forth many questions of what it means to be mixed race and play a big role in the story.

The fear that the baby does not look full on white is a central role in the story. The iconic scene that brings this troublesome to light is when Madame Valmondé pays a visit and sees her grandson for the very first time. Her reaction is very startling and puts all of her attention to the skin tone of the baby. Knowing that the baby is mixed race, it concerns Madame Valmondé as it can affect the future of the baby when it grows up. This fear stems from the political issues of

race during that time period. Anyone who was mixed race was outcasted because they were not identifiable as to what group they belong in. With this general knowledge, it leads to the questioning of the paternity and ethnic origins of both the parents. Having the baby look different is what stirs up the plot and opens the subject of class and racial origins. We have to look at the parents and the servant. They are the key to opening up the conversation of the definition of race and class.

To see the division of race and class, the story opens with the description of a wealthy family living in France who takes in what appears to be a white baby girl whom they will raise to marry a wealthy white man. The opening description is a perfect opening as it gives the idea of a perfect life (Chopin 1). According to author Ellen Peel, the character Armand Aubigny, is not only the main male figure, but also he plays the role of the dominant man of the household who is living under white privilege. In response to focusing on that character, Peel is right to analyze this character as he plays a major role in the overall story. In the beginning of this tale it is perceived that both Désirée' and Armand are the perfect young white couple with a baby son as a blessing. This description paints the color of the perfect secular family, as everything seems to be perfectly painted white. This perfect family however will be divided once there is major suspicion that the baby is mixed race.

When trying to figure out who in the family is mixed race the first person that is considered a suspect is Désirée. The reason for this is because women at that time were considered to be wild by nature and needed a man to be pure bred and groomed to take care of the home. Because of this, Armand uses that to accuse his wife of lying about her heritage. It is the fear that he will not be able to produce an heir with his wife that will be allowed to carry on the family name and fortune. Part of that fear is the loss of reputation amongst his peers. If they found out his wife was not a "full" white woman he could lose all credibility. With all of this

attention being put on Désirée,' it seems that her unknown past places her more so beneath her husband and in the classification of possibly being with the black community. Author Ellen Peel sees this predicament to be something that Désirée' can gain power from because she was established into white privilege society by her adopted parents the Valmondé who took her in and raised her as their own. Knowing all of this it appears that her background and skin color indicate that she is part of the White Anglo Saxon group (Peel 225). Looking at these details, Peel is right that with Désirée'' should not have to worry and that if anything it reflects back to Armand which makes him a weak character as he was quick to point fingers and blame Désirée for their baby not being fully white.

One character that is not really focused a lot upon is La Blanche. She is the nursemaid that helps Désirée' take care of her baby. When the subject of race comes into play, La Blanche's name gets thrown around as she is noted to be mullata. An example of this is when Désirée' argues with Armand about who is to blame for the baby having a mixed appearance. In their argument both Désirée' and Armand use La Blanche to compare each others skin tone because she is mullata (Chopin 1). In using La Blanche as a comparison of who is at fault Peel examines this and argues that there is a possibility that La Blanche is Armand's mistress because of her quadroon sons. Peel sees this as a possibility and sees La Blanche as Désirée's double because there could be a tie to both women being with Armand. This insight of this character is one to consider because there are other crucial scenes with brief mention of La Blanche and her sons that are used to compare the baby to them and their skin tone.

With both women being tied to Armand, Désirée's baby represents the two paradoxes of race and social stand of class. This paradox can be seen through the skin tones of Armand, Désirée' and La Blanche. When comparing skin tone, both La blanche and Désirée' appear to be lighter skinned than Armand who seems to have a darker tone than both women. The hierarchy

that can be seen is that being male; has more power and gives you ownership of a plantation. Both La blanche and Désirée' are beneath him because they are women. As it can be seen there is a paradox within race because if going by the one drop rule, Désirée' would have more power over Armand because she is fairer and more likely to fit into the class of white privilege group. Scholars see this as something that forces Armand to confront this contradiction because it could drastically change his social standing and give the power of white privilege to people like Désirée. In looking at the contradiction of race, it can be agreed upon that this plays a role in that Armand will have to discover that he could be like La Blanche and biracial and not fully white. This could be the reason why Armand treats Désirée' as inferior and beneath him because of the shame of his affair with another racially mixed woman. The fear of having ones reputation being tarnished is something that is a sub theme within the story. It can be illustrated through the reactions of the baby skin tone. The fear of losing ones social standing is something that should be feared and in the case of Armand it is very plausible that he would of lost ownership of the plantation if his secret of his racial background were to get out. In the end of all of this, race is being used as a way to predetermine ones destiny and rights to live a certain life style.

When looking at race as being the way to predetermine class and social standing it can separate ones racial identity into a racial hierarchy there seems to be a attraction to the racial other. Armand is a complex character and with him and the baby they open the conversation of race it affects ones reputation in society and where they are placed on the ladder of social standing. It is an ironic thing that La Blanche is used to measure out racial blood and who is what race. Unlike the other characters she could provide the key to Armand and his character and other questions of the way he treats the situation with his son and his wife. At first the story paints out a perfect young white family with a baby son, but reflecting back to it, just a few characters open the questions of one's race. This conversation is not one that should be put away

but one that should be expanded on and something to look at closely through other works of literature and society today.

## References

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