

“Désirée’s Baby” is a story of love, prejudice and rejection, a story with noble beginnings that slowly turns to reveal an uglier side of human



relations. Armand, a wealthy landowner of the plantation L’Abri in the ante-bellum south of Louisiana, is confronted by a family secret that has been hidden from him, even into adulthood. The secret is scandalous for its day, and its consequences run deep into the fabric of society. No one told Armand of this secret. He discovers it by chance at the end of the story, when he finds the remnants of an old letter written by his mother to his father, the significance of which, and its revelations, makes us focus on the many tragic and ironic decisions made by him during this story. In the old south, bloodlines are very important to the status of a family and their social placement, so the “purity” of the family must be kept. This “purity” does not accommodate marriages of mixed race. Knowing this, Armand marries an old friend who he had known since he was eight when he moved to Louisiana from France with his father after his mother had died. She was a girl of no distinction, who had no history or reputation of family name like that of Armand, but despite this he fell in love “as if struck by a pistol shot”.(317). Others had warned Armand against marrying her, but he did not care for he was so swept away by her beauty. “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.” (316). Tragedy comes early in the marriage with the birth of their first child. Although no one seemed to notice at first, by the time the child was three months old, neighbors and Armand himself noticed a change in the child. “When the baby was about three months old, Désirée awoke one day to the conviction that there was something in the air menacing her

peace.”(317). It turns out the baby is of mixed blood and because of this, Armand shuns his wife and the child he was so proud of only days before. “He absented himself from home and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse.”(317). Armand was “the proudest father in the parish...it is a boy to bear his name.”(317). Additionally, he accuses Désirée of not being white (a crime against his family’s “purity”) which she adamantly denies. “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,” “Look at my hand whiter than yours, Armand,”(318). She writes to her adopted mother and tells her of what is happening. Her mother tells her to return home with the child where they will both be loved, but Désirée is so shocked and disheartened she sets off towards a local bayou with the child never to be seen again. Armand has made the decision to lose his family in order to save his name and it’s too late to bring Désirée back.

The irony is that the letter read by Armand from his mother reveals to him that it is he who is of mixed blood and not Désirée. Placing blame on outside forces can also be a tragic and misguided reaction to events that people encounter. Armand makes this mistake when he can see no other cause for his anguish and blames God for what he sees as a cruel injustice placed upon him. “He thought Almighty God had dealt cruelly and unjustly with him and felt, somehow that he was paying him back in kind when he stabbed thus into his wife’s soul (319). Ironically, in the letter Armand finds from his mother, she is praising God for having “arranged” their lives so as to be married in a racist world and to have a beautiful child such as Armand. “But above all, night and day, I thank the good lord 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”(319). Paradoxically, it is also this arrangement that is the root of his present day problems. Had he known of his “heritage” before hand, chances are! he would have approached life differently, but we have to assume this was hidden from him to protect him from the society in which he lived. Armand’s shunning of Désirée was not only an attempt to pay back God, but by somehow payback the others he felt were responsible for his personal tragedy.

He thought it necessary to cleanse himself and his family name of this regretful misfortune. At the end of the story Armand has ordered his slaves to build a large bonfire on the grounds of the estate where he is to throw all of Désirée’s and the baby’s affects. It is during this highly emotionally and rash moment that Armand learns his family secret, when he finds the letter from his mother. Here the story ends, and its tragic irony comes to light. Lying before him was proof that it was not Désirée who had colored blood but him. The wife and child he loved and so easily discarded to protect his family name, were innocent of his animosity and accusations. We can only imagine the heart wrenching turmoil he must have felt at that moment. Too, was the undeniable fact that his father had overcome similar odds and accepted the love of his mother even though she was black. Armand’s father had escaped from tradition and its shackles to stay with the woman he loved and yet still kept the family’s good name, where Armand had failed to do so. The finding of this letter reveals

to the reader the deeper consequences of decisions made based on prejudice and what others may think. All that Armand had done, giving up his marriage and condemning their child, burning all that reminded him of her and the baby, cursing God for his misfortune, had all come crashing in upon him!