APPLYING RHETORICAL TOOLS TO «DÉSIRÉE'S BABY» BY KATE CHOPIN

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Abstract: *The author of every short story seeks calculated effects, deals with rhetorical issues and adjusts solutions to a clear purpose. Therefore, an analysis and interpretation of Kate Chopin's story can greatly benefit from a rhetorical approach revealing the artistic method and design and accounting for the correct way in which readers should understand and react to the events and characters depicted. Despite its brevity and slightness, «Désirée's Baby» has been given fairly different interpretations as readers have reached divergent conclusions regarding the character of Armand Aubigny and the authorial intention. My main contention is that this particular text contains very clearly legible evidence of its author's design and intention that can be appealed to in order to adjudicate between the different interpretive hypotheses.*

Keywords: *the rhetorical approach to fiction, progression, discourse vs story, plot twists*

This short-story by Kate Chopin was written in November 1892 and published in *Vogue* in January 1893, i.e. twenty-seven years after slavery was abolished. It is one of the few stories Chopin chooses to set in Louisiana before the Civil War, which means that her intention was to touch upon a subject that strikes a nerve in connection with slavery in the US, that among characters there are both slave owners and slaves, and that race, prejudice and heritage are key points in the mimetic and thematic analysis.

It is a non-character narration employing an omniscient or, according the rhetorical approach to narrative (an analysis method[1] I am going to use in my demonstration throughout), a non-character narrator, relating the

[1] A strategy I learnt from James Phelan (a narratologist and scholar at Ohio State University), which follows the readers and their reactions, offering "a blow-by-blow description of what happens when we read" (*Narrative As Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology*. Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1996, 10) and enabling its practitioner to achieve a certain kind of knowledge about the text, as a communicative transaction between author and reader.

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events without emotional commentary. The story refers to events that unfolded in the past (the 19th century) over the course of several months, the narrator also disclosing background information about even more remote past years. The narrative in the first part of the story progresses largely by the introduction and (partial) resolution of a cognitive tension (a tension of unequal knowledge between an author and the authorial audience: she and her narrator surrogate know all about this world, while the authorial audience is completely unfamiliar with it). According to Phelan, this "cognitive tension functions to propel us forward in the narrative, orienting us toward the acquisition of information that will influence our judgments, expectations, desires, and attitudes about the characters and the instabilities they face."[2] Thus, the audience learn that Madame Valmondé is going on a visit to L'Abri to see Désirée and her new baby, and that on the way the woman remembers that Désirée was found by her husband asleep at the gateway of Valmondé, when she was of the toddling age; that the Valmondés adopted her as they lacked children of their own; that Armand Aubigny, seeing Désirée standing next to the stone pillar of the gateway where she had been found eighteen years earlier, fell in love with her immediately, despite having known her for years since first arriving from Paris after his mother's death; that Monsieur Valmondé wanted to ensure that Désirée's unknown origin was carefully considered, but Armand being so in love did not care and they were married soon afterwards.

While continuing to reduce tension by giving information about the reasons and circumstances of Madame Valmondé's visit (she has not seen the baby for a month, and she shudders when she visits L'Abri because the place looks so sad without a woman's touch - Armand's mother having lived and died in France – and because of Armand's strict rule with his slaves), the narrator introduces the first instability: when Madame Valmondé sees Désirée lying beside her baby, she is startled to see the baby's appearance, while Désirée laughs and chatters happily about her son and her husband's softer treatment of the slaves since the baby's birth. This puzzlement defines the central issues of the whole narrative: there is something wrong about the child.

[2] James Phelan, *Narrative As Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1996), 10.

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Without any warning or typographical clue (such as a blank space between lines), the narrator switches from the visit episode to a day when the baby is already three months old. The feeling that there is something wrong in connection with the child is enhanced and eventually the instability is complicated even further. When the baby is three months old, Désirée is suddenly disturbed by a subtle feeling of menace: a general air of mystery among the slaves, unannounced visits from neighbors, plus a negative change in her husband's behaviour (he avoids her and maltreats the slaves again). As she sits in her room, she looks at her son and at one quadroon boy, fanning the baby. The similarity between them finally dawns upon her. When she asks Armand about their child and what it means, he responds coldly that the child is not white and that is because she is not white. Desperately, she responds that she could not be but white, with her brown hair, gray eyes, and white skin, but he cruelly retorts that she is as white as their mixed-race slave La Blanche. This apparently gives resolution to the story's instability so far: at a time when America was plagued by serious slavery issues, the baby of the Aubignys is mixed-raced because his mother (with her obscure origin) must be mixed race. The progression leads us to read the biracial child thematically: he comes to represent the category of miscegenation with serious legal, religious and moral consequences in the slave states of America. "Race mixing" between black and white people was not only a taboo and forbidden by the church, but interracial marriage was illegal, as it violated the state's anti-miscegenation laws. Moreover, it was a shame for a proud family of white plantation owners to mix their blood with the black race. In those times, any person with any known African ancestry, however remote (even 'one drop'), was regarded as 'black.'

A conflict mentioned will always represent a new instability in a story, therefore the paragraph that (apparently) solves the first instability introduces a second instability: how will the couple's friction be settled? How will they cope with this new development of miscegenation in their lives? This movement also establishes the overarching thematic background (marriage and relationship within the context of racial prejudice) and consequently gives thematic prominence to certain of Armand's attributes, even as the implied author's handling of the narration technique designs the trajectory of the main action around the mimetic interest in Désirée and Armand's family and their struggle.

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Further, progression is characterized by a fast movement in the direction of resolving the second instability and eliminating remaining cognitive tension. Désirée writes to her mother, who advises her to come back to Valmondé with the child. Désirée presents Madame Valmondé's response to Armand, and he tells her to leave. Without changing her clothes or shoes, Désirée takes her son from the nurse's arms and walks to Valmondé, not down the long beaten road but through a deserted bayou, where she disappears forever. This is the resolution of the second instability: the interracial marriage ends with the death of one of the spouses, while the existence of the mixed blood child stops being a threat and a shame to the peace of L'Abri through the child's simultaneous demise. Weeks later, at L'Abri, Armand is having his slaves feed a bonfire with his child's and his wife's personal objects: a willow cradle, the *layette* and the *corbeille*. The last object to burn is a bundle of letters. In the same drawer where these letters came from, there is an unrelated letter that was sent by Armand's mother to his father. In the letter, the woman was thanking God that Armand would never learn that his mother "belongs to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery".[3] Only now (the audience realizes) the first instability (falsely resolved halfway through the story) is given its true resolution and the major attributes of Armand are brought to light.

Because the narrator never fully articulates Armand's reaction to the final major detail of the story (Armand's mother's letter), the fairly generalized view (held by numerous generations of university students I discussed this story with, as well as by different analysts associated with internet sites[4] of literary essays for and by students) is that it is at the end of the story and by accident that Armand finds out the truth about his genetic inheritance, and thus realizes that he has mistakenly blamed Désirée for their child's mixed ancestry. According to this view, the twist at the end of the text happens at the story level affecting the cognition of the character and it is a final and belated introduction of a new text instability. The truth of the matter is that the twist at the end is not part of the story's progress by instability introduction. There is no reference in the last paragraphs of the text to Armand's reading that piece of letter

[3] Chopin, Kate, and Edith Wharton. *Three Women, Six Stories* (Milan, Italia: La Spiga Languages, 1999), 9.

[4] Such as www.enotes.com, www.teenink.com and www.gradesaver.com

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by his mother at the moment of the bonfire. He might have read it or not. It does not have any importance. Moreover, there is no implicature of Armand's discovery of truth at that point which would trigger dramatic consciousness processes on his part. The reference to the letter is, in fact, part of the discourse and of the process of cognitive tension relief, by means of which the narrator informs the authorial audience of what she knows, while the audience do not know, and in this way influences their judgments and attitudes about the characters and the events. The entire final section of the short-story, which is separated from the rest of the text by a blank space, propels us forward till the end of the narrative by the technique of cognitive tension relief; the technique is similar to the one at the beginning of the story: progression based on tension of unequal knowledge between the narrator and the authorial audience.

The plot twist at the end of the story and the scares amount of information about it are a bit puzzling and some readers might misunderstand its deep significance. The delay in revealing that final detail of Armand's biracial ancestry was not meant to mislead but to add to the sophistication and the quality of the story. The narrator/implied author had no intention of creating confusion or misguiding her audience with regard to the story's first instability. On the contrary, there are numerous clues planted in the course of cognitive tension relief telling us that Armand has known all along about his mixed blood. Once readers understand that, a second and closer reading of the text will be performed with great delight. They will discover such details as: Armand was cruel to his slaves because he wanted to dissimulate his connection to the black race and to pay God back for his own 'shameful' origin; the old master, his father, on the other hand, had an easygoing and indulgent attitude to his slaves because he was secretly in love and married to a black female slave; Armand has a handsome and *dark face*; Armand's wrist is *darker* than his wife's; Armand returned from Paris following his mother's death when he was eight years old (what child of eight is not able to tell that his father is white, while his mother was black?); the remnant of his mother's letter is in the drawer where he kept Désirée's letters in a nice orderly bundle - that is his own personal drawer and the bonfire night is not the first time he opens it, therefore he must have known about that piece of old letter before.

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One time though it seems that the narrator's comment is meant to support the theory that Armand found out that *he* (not Désirée) was mixed-raced when reading his mother's letter at the end of the story. This comment follows the moment when Armand's wife shows him her mother's message to go back to Valmondé and confronts him about their future:

"Do you want me to go?"

"Yes, I want you to go."

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. *Moreover he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name.*[5] (Emphasis mine)

It seems here that the narrator's comment about Armand's hurt feelings and his revenge refer to his being angry with God because He allowed him to marry a biracial woman and have a mixed-race child. The truth is that this paragraph has to be interpreted as Armand's being angry with God for not arranging things in such a way as his child not to display the physical features of black people, just like it happened in his case: Armand is lucky to resemble his white parent and can easily "pass," i.e. claim that he is not racially mixed, adopt a new identity and create a life for himself never looking back at his origins.

In conclusion, by applying the rhetorical approach to this narrative, a method which pays special attention to the progressions in the narrative (the progression of the story, marked by *instabilities* that are introduced, complicated, resolved, and the progression of the discourse, marked by *tensions* regarding knowledge gaps between the teller and her audience), and by adding up all evidence about Armand's behavior, one can confidently infer that the twist in the last paragraph of the short-story was meant to cause the audience to reevaluate the narrative and character of Armand, not the story protagonist to re-evaluate his own life decisions.

[5] Chopin, Kate, and Edith Wharton. *Three Women, Six Stories* (Milan, Italia: La Spiga Languages, 1999), 8.

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