

Name:

Date:

True or False

Directions: Circle true or false to each of the following statements based on what you already know. Try your best.

1. The 19th century represents the years 1901-2000. True or False

2. The American Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865. True or False

3. The Civil War was a result of the controversy of the enslavement of Black people in the America. True or False

4. "Antebellum" is a term that means "after the war." True or False

5. A plantation refers to an estate on which crops are grown, such as cotton, rice, coffee, sugar, or tobacco. True or False

6. In the 1800s, both northern and southern states of America enslaved millions of Black people. True or False

7. By 1860, there were 4 million slaves living in America, with more than half living in the cotton-producing states of the South. True or False

8. All slaves worked outside in the fields on plantations. True or False

9. Slaves throughout the South had to live under a set of laws called the Slave Codes that emphasized the idea that slaves are property not people. True or False

10. Family name and status were very important in Southern plantation culture before the Civil War. True or False

11. Women were unable to vote in the United States until 1865. True or False

12. In the early nineteenth century, married women in the U.S. were legally subordinate to their husbands. True or False

Vocabulary “*Désirée’s Baby*” by Kate Chopin

Define the following terms from the story “*Désirée’s Baby*.”

Word	Part of Speech	Definition
speculation	noun	
obscure	adjective	
corbeille	noun	
cowl	noun	
imperious	adjective	
conviction	noun	
menacing	verb	
sumptuous	adjective	
unwonted	adjective	
bayou	noun	

“Désirée’s Baby”

Short Story by Kate Chopin

As the day was pleasant, Madame Valmondé drove over to L’Abri to see Désirée and the baby.

It made her laugh to think of Désirée with a baby. Why, it seemed but yesterday that Désirée was little more than a baby herself; when Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmondé had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar.

The little one awoke in his arms and began to cry for “Dada.” That was as much as she could do or say. Some people thought she might have strayed there of her own accord, for she was of the toddling age. The prevailing belief was that she had been purposely left by a party of Texans, whose canvas-covered wagon, late in the day, had crossed the ferry that Coton Maïs kept, just below the plantation. In time Madame Valmondé abandoned every speculation but the one that Désirée had been sent to her by a beneficent Providence to be the child of her affection, seeing that she was without child of the flesh. For the girl grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere,—the idol of Valmondé.

It was no wonder, when she stood one day against the stone pillar in whose shadow she had lain asleep, eighteen years before, that Armand Aubigny riding by and seeing her there, had fallen in love with her. That was the way all the Aubignys fell in love, as if struck by a pistol shot. The wonder was that he had not loved her before; for he had known her since his father brought him home from Paris, a boy of eight, after his mother died there. The passion that awoke in him that day, when he saw her at the gate, swept along like an avalanche, or like a prairie fire, or like anything that drives headlong over all obstacles.

Monsieur Valmondé grew practical and wanted things well considered: that is, the girl’s obscure origin. Armand looked into her eyes and did not care. 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? He ordered the corbeille from Paris, and contained himself with what patience he could until it arrived; then they were married.

Madame Valmondé had not seen Désirée and the baby for four weeks. When she reached L’Abri she shuddered at the first sight of it, as she always did. It was a sad looking place, which for many years had not known the gentle presence of a mistress, old Monsieur Aubigny having married and buried his wife in France, and she having loved her own land too well ever to leave it. The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall. Young Aubigny’s rule was a strict one, too, and under it his negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master’s easygoing and indulgent lifetime.

The young mother was recovering slowly, and lay full length, in her soft white muslins and laces, upon a couch. The baby was beside her, upon her arm, where he had fallen asleep, at her breast. The yellow nurse woman sat beside a window fanning herself.

Madame Valmondé bent her portly figure over Désirée and kissed her, holding her an instant tenderly in her arms. Then she turned to the child. “This is not the baby!” she exclaimed, in startled tones. French was the language spoken at Valmondé in those days.

“I knew you would be astonished,” laughed Désirée, “at the way he has grown. The little cochon de lait! Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and finger-nails,—real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Is n’t it true, Zandrine?”

The woman bowed her turbaned head majestically, “Mais si, Madame.” “And the way he cries,” went on Désirée, “is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche’s cabin.” Madame Valmondé had never removed her eyes from the child. She lifted it and walked with it over to

the window that was lightest. She scanned the baby narrowly, then looked as searchingly at Zandrine, whose face was turned to gaze across the fields.

"Yes, the child has grown, has changed," said Madame Valmondé, slowly, as she replaced it beside its mother. "What does Armand say?" Désirée's face became suffused with a glow that was happiness itself.

"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 is n't true I know he says that to please me. And mamma," she added, drawing Madame Valmondé's head down to her, and speaking in a whisper, "he has n't punished one of them—not one of them—since baby is born. Even Négrillon, who pretended to have burnt his leg that he might rest from work—he only laughed, and said Négrillon was a great scamp.

Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me." What Désirée said was true. Marriage, and later the birth of his son had softened Armand Aubigny's imperious and exacting nature greatly. This was what made the gentle Désirée so happy, for she loved him desperately. When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God. But Armand's dark, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her.

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. It was at first too subtle to grasp. It had only been a disquieting suggestion; an air of mystery among the blacks; unexpected visits from far-off neighbors who could hardly account for their coming. Then a strange, an awful change in her husband's manner, which she dared not ask him to explain. When he spoke to her, it was with averted eyes, from which the old love-light seemed to have gone out. He absented himself from home; and when there, avoided her presence and that of her child, without excuse. And the very spirit of Satan seemed suddenly to take hold of him in his dealings with the slaves. Désirée was miserable enough to die.

She sat in her room, one hot afternoon, in her peignoir, listlessly drawing through her fingers the strands of her long, silky brown hair that hung about her shoulders. The baby, half naked, lay asleep upon her own great mahogany bed, that was like a sumptuous throne, with its satin-lined half-canopy. One of La Blanche's little quadroon* boys—half naked too—stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers. Désirée's eyes had been fixed absently and sadly upon the baby, while she was striving to penetrate the threatening mist that she felt closing about her.

She looked from her child to the boy who stood beside him, and back again; over and over. "Ah!" It was a cry that she could not help; which she was not conscious of having uttered. The blood turned like ice in her veins, and a clammy moisture gathered upon her face. She tried to speak to the little quadroon boy; but no sound would come, at first. When he heard his name uttered, he looked up, and his mistress was pointing to the door. He laid aside the great, soft fan, and obediently stole away, over the polished floor, on his bare tiptoes.

She stayed motionless, with gaze riveted upon her child, and her face the picture of fright. Presently her husband entered the room, and without noticing her, went to a table and began to search among some papers which covered it.

"Armand," she called to him, in a voice which must have stabbed him, if he was human. But he did not notice. "Armand," she said again. Then she rose and tottered towards him. "Armand," she panted once more, clutching his arm, "look at our child. What does it mean? tell me."

He coldly but gently loosened her fingers from about his arm and thrust the hand away from him. "Tell me what it means!" she cried despairingly.

"It means," he answered lightly, "that the child is not white; it means that you are not white." A quick conception of all that this accusation meant for her nerved her with unwonted courage to deny it.

*quadroon- an offensive term for a person who is one-quarter Black by descent

"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," seizing his wrist. "Look at my hand; whiter than yours, Armand," she laughed hysterically.

"As white as La Blanche's," he returned cruelly; and went away leaving her alone with their child. When she could hold a pen in her hand, she sent a despairing letter to Madame Valmondé.

"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." The answer that came was as brief: "My own Désirée: Come home to Valmondé; back to your mother who loves you. Come with your child."

When the letter reached Désirée she went with it to her husband's study, and laid it open upon the desk before which he sat. She was like a stone image: silent, white, motionless after she placed it there. In silence he ran his cold eyes over the written words. He said nothing.

"Shall I go, Armand?" she asked in tones sharp with agonized suspense. "Yes, go."

"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.

She turned away like one stunned by a blow, and walked slowly towards the door, hoping he would call her back. "Good-by, Armand," she moaned.

He did not answer her. That was his last blow at fate. Désirée went in search of her child. Zandrine was pacing the sombre gallery with it. She took the little one from the nurse's arms with no word of explanation, and descending the steps, walked away, under the live-oak branches. It was an October afternoon; the sun was just sinking. Out in the still fields the negroes were picking cotton.

Desiree had not changed the thin white garment nor the slippers which she wore. Her hair was uncovered and the sun's rays brought a golden gleam from its brown meshes. She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds. She disappeared among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou; and she did not come back again. . . .

Some weeks later there was a curious scene enacted at L'Abri. In the centre of the smoothly swept back yard was a great bonfire. Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway that commanded a view of the spectacle; and it was he who dealt out to a half dozen negroes the material which kept this fire ablaze. A graceful cradle of willow, with all its dainty furbishings, was laid upon the pyre, which had already been fed with the richness of a priceless layette .

Then there were silk gowns, and velvet and satin ones added to these; laces, too, and embroideries; bonnets and gloves; for the corbeille had been of rare quality. The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters; innocent little scribblings that Désirée had sent to him during the days of their espousal.

There was the remnant of one back in the drawer from which he took them. But it was not Désirée's; it was part of an old letter from his mother to his father. He read it. She was thanking God for the blessing of her husband's love:—

"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."

Name:

Date:

Désirée's Baby

"Désirée's Baby" is a short story by Kate Chopin published in 1893. The story is set in Louisiana during the mid-nineteenth century, or the Antebellum South period. Also known as the plantation era, this was a period in history where enslaved Africans made up most of southern America's population. At the time, rich, white slaveowners were at the top of the social hierarchy. Prior to the Civil War, America heavily relied on the labor of slaves for economic growth, yet slaves were commonly mistreated and severely abused. They were considered property of white slaveowners and could be sold or traded at any moment.

Literary Analysis Questions

1. How did Monsieur Valmondé meet Désirée?

2. Why did Madame Valmondé keep Désirée?

3. What kind of ruler/slaveowner was Armand Aubigny? What evidence supports your claim?

4. Why does Monsieur Valmondé remind Armand that Désirée is "nameless"? What does it reveal about both Monsieur Valmondé and Armand's characters?

5. Describe the L'Abri plantation under Armand's ownership.

6. Consider how Armand's character develops over the course of the text. Specifically, how does his behavior change after his son is born? Would the situation be different if his child was a girl?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

7. What signs are readers given that Armand is a contentious man?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

8. Why doesn't Desiree take the easy road home? What is her fate?

PREVIEW

9. What items does Armand order to be burned at the end of the story? What motivates him to do this?

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

10. Looking back, how does Chopin foreshadow the surprise ending of Armand's ancestry?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

11. Why does Chopin choose to have Armand find his mother's letter weeks after Désirée has already left the plantation? What is the irony?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

12. Do you think that Armand admits to anyone what he has discovered about his own heritage? Explain.

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

13. Refer back to the story and conclude what readers know about the character La Blanche. What inferences can you make about her relationship with Armand?

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

Constructed Response

Consider the themes of racism and sexism in *Désirée's Baby*. What message does author, Kate Chopin, send to readers about these themes? How do these two themes build on another to produce a complex story? Use textual evidence and write your answer in at least one fully developed paragraph.

PREVIEW

NOT FOR EDUCATIONAL USE

Activate Prior Knowledge and Provide Historical Context Before Reading Activity

True or False Answer Key

1. The 19th century represents the years 1901-2000.

True or **False**

The 19th century is between 1801-1900.

2. The American Civil War was fought between 1861 and 1865.

True or False

3. The Civil War was a result of the controversy of the enslavement of Black people in America.

True or False

4. "Antebellum" is a term that means "after the war."

True or **False**

Antebellum translates to before the war. The Antebellum era is known commonly today as the time before the American Civil War.

5. A plantation refers to an estate on which crops are grown, such as cotton, rice, coffee, sugar, or tobacco.

True or False

6. In the 1800s, both northern and southern states of America enslaved millions of Black people.

True or **False**

Between 1774 and 1804, all of the northern states abolished slavery.

7. By 1860, there were 4 million slaves living in America, with more than half living in the cotton-producing states of the South.

True or False

8. All slaves worked outside in the fields on plantations.

True or **False**

Some slaves worked indoors as house servants and nursemaids.

9. Slaves throughout the South had to live under a set of laws called the Slave Codes that emphasized the idea that slaves are property not people.

True or False

Some Slave Code laws include: slaves could not leave the residence without permission, hit a white person (even in self-defense), buy or sell goods, own firearms, own property, gather in groups with other Black people without a white person present, learn to read or write, possess any anti-slavery literature, or visit the homes of whites or free Black people.

10. Family name and status were very important in Southern plantation culture before the Civil War.

True or False

11. Women were unable to vote in the United States until 1865.

True or **False**

The 19th amendment—which gave women the right to vote in the U.S.—was ratified on August 18, 1920.

12. In the early nineteenth century, married women in the U.S. were legally subordinate to their husbands.

True or False

Wives could not own their own property, keep their own wages, or enter into contracts until 1839. Their Godly purpose was to be obedient to their husbands. Women were expected to be domestic and stay home to care for the family.

Vocabulary “*Désirée’s Baby*” by Kate Chopin

Define the following terms from the story “*Désirée’s Baby*.”

Word	Part of Speech	Definition
speculation	noun	a theory without evidence
obscure	adjective	describes unknown or uncertain
corbeille	noun	an elegant basket of flowers or fruit
cowl	noun	a large, loose, hood
imperious	adjective	describes domineering and arrogant
conviction	noun	a firm belief
menacing	verb	to threaten in a hostile manner
sumptuous	adjective	describes expensive and luxurious looking
unwonted	adjective	describes unusual or uncommon
bayou	noun	a marshy outlet of a lake or river

Désirée's Baby

"Désirée's Baby" is a short story by Kate Chopin published in 1893. The story is set in Louisiana during the mid-nineteenth century, or the Antebellum South period. Also known as the plantation era, this was a period in history where enslaved Africans made up most of southern America's population. At the time, rich, white slaveowners were at the top of the social hierarchy. Prior to the Civil War, America heavily relied on the labor of slaves for economic growth, yet slaves were commonly mistreated and severely abused. They were considered property of white slaveowners and could be sold or traded at any moment.

Literary Analysis Questions **Answer Key**

1. How did Monsieur Valmondé meet Désirée?

"Monsieur in riding through the gateway of Valmondé had found her lying asleep in the shadow of the big stone pillar." He found her as a baby/young toddler abandoned.

2. Why did Madame Valmondé keep Désirée?

She couldn't have her own children, so she saw Désirée as a gift from God.

3. What kind of ruler/slaveowner was Armand Aubigny? What evidence supports your claim? He was abusive and cruel, unlike his father. After his father died and Armand took over, the slaves were miserable and afraid all of the time. "His negroes had forgotten how to be gay, as they had been during the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime."

4. Why does Monsieur Valmondé remind Armand that Désirée is "nameless"? What does it reveal about both Monsieur Valmondé and Armand's characters?

Monsieur Valmondé knows that Désirée's origin is a mystery, and during this time period, heritage and ancestry were regarded as extremely important. Family name contributed to one's social standing. Monsieur Valmondé is a caring, realistic man, while Armand is an arrogant one. Monsieur Valmondé doesn't want his adopted daughter to end up hurt, but Armand disregards the warning, believing his name is the proudest in Louisiana so it doesn't matter.

5. Describe the L'Abri plantation under Armand's ownership.

It was decrepit and falling apart. "The roof came down steep and black like a cowl, reaching out beyond the wide galleries that encircled the yellow stuccoed house. Big, solemn oaks grew close to it, and their thick-leaved, far-reaching branches shadowed it like a pall."

6. Consider how Armand's character develops over the course of the text. Specifically, how does his behavior change after his son is born? Would the situation be different if his child was a girl? Armand changes from ruthless and harsh to gentle and easygoing.

Désirée states, "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." There's evidence that Armand would not be as pleased if he had a girl because women were not treated as equals to men during this time, and even Désirée—who thinks highly of her husband—doesn't believe he would be as happy with a daughter. Armand doesn't have much respect for women.

7. What signs are readers given that Armand is a contentious man?

Désirée was afraid of him. "When he frowned she trembled, but loved him. When he smiled, she asked no greater blessing of God." Anytime Armand was upset with Désirée, she felt she so submissive, ashamed, and guilty (as if it were always her fault) that she "could die." He was also abusive to his slaves.

8. Why doesn't Desiree take the easy road home? What is her fate?

"She did not take the broad, beaten road which led to the far-off plantation of Valmondé. She walked across a deserted field, where the stubble bruised her tender feet, so delicately shod, and tore her thin gown to shreds." She took the route that led to the bayou instead of the route that led home to her parents. She did this because she was in such a deep state of depression and guilt that she wanted to end her own life. Armand made her feel so unwanted and so disregarded after accusing her of not being white, she walked herself and her child into the swampy waters, never to be seen again.

9. What items does Armand order to be burned at the end of the story? What motivates him to do this? Armand throws the baby cradle, the baby's belongings, Désirée's gowns, laces, bonnets and gloves all in the fire (he orders his slaves to do it for him). He believes his child is of mixed race and that it is because his wife must have Black ancestors. He is motivated by the shame he feels Désirée has brought upon his name. Désirée and the baby are now atrocious and corrupt to him, so he needs to get rid of all their things.

10. Looking back, how does Chopin foreshadow the surprise ending of Armand's ancestry?

Désirée's mother immediately recognizes that the baby is not white, she says, "This is not the baby!" in startled tones. She even holds the baby in the sunlight to double check. Désirée states, "Oh, mamma, I'm so happy; it frightens me." which indicates her life is going too well, and something bad is to come.

"But Armand's **dark**, handsome face had not often been disfigured by frowns since the day he fell in love with her." This line hints that Armand has a darker skin tone, and that his heritage is the reason the baby is not 100% white.

11. Why does Chopin choose to have Armand find his mother's letter weeks after Désirée has already left the plantation? What is the irony?

This decision in story structure makes for a more tragic resolution. When Armand discovers his mother's ancestry, it's too late, his child and wife are already dead. The irony is, Désirée killed herself out of shame for being of Black descent, when there was no proof of this. The fact is made clear that the opposite is true, and Armand is the one with the Black heritage.

12. Do you think that Armand admits to anyone what he has discovered about his own heritage? *Answers will vary. Most likely, Armand will never admit what he has discovered. He is an arrogant, proud man that has built his whole reputation on owning/despising the Black race.*

13. Refer back to the story and conclude what readers know about the character La Blanche. What inferences can we make about her relationship with Armand?

"And the way he cries," went on Désirée, 'is deafening. Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche's cabin.'" This line indicates Armand is at La Blanche's living quarters, which readers could speculate is because he is having a sexual relationship with her. This was a common abuse of power amongst slaveowners and female slaves during this time.

"One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys—half naked too— stood fanning the child slowly with a fan of peacock feathers." This line indicates that La Blanche's son is partially white, which means he may be Armand's son. In this moment, Désirée also recognizes the similarities between her baby and the boy, possibly because they have the same father. Désirée demands Armand look at her white skin, to defend herself, to which he replies, "As white as La Blanche's." This line allows readers to understand that La Blanche is a Black female servant and slave in the home, in case it was unclear about who her character was based on the little information given about her prior.

Constructed Response

Consider the themes of racism and sexism in *Désirée's Baby*. What message does author, Kate Chopin, send to readers about these themes? How do these two themes build on another to produce a complex story? Use textual evidence and write your answer in at least one fully developed paragraph.

Answers will vary.

Kate Chopin introduces racism into "Désirée's Baby" by establishing the setting: Louisiana during the plantation era. She reiterates the theme that slaves are mistreated and considered inferior property by developing Armand's character as an arrogant, cruel, slaveowner. She notes that Black people are considered the race "cursed with the brand of slavery" and most people during this time view anyone with Black descent a complete disgrace. Chopin also suggests that during the nineteenth century, women were not treated as equals. From this story, readers can infer that women were expected to be obedient to their husbands and always be submissive. The themes of sexism and racism intertwine when Armand is disgusted by Désirée after he believes her to have African heritage. Because Désirée was an orphan, and a woman with no authority, she was an easy scapegoat to blame for their child's mixed race. He encourages her departure without second thought as to what would come of her or their child. Désirée's decision to commit suicide further shows the belief that a woman without a husband or a respectable family name is unworthy of living. Chopin displays the patriarchal and racist society that existed in America during the Antebellum Era through the downfall of Armand and Désirée's marriage.