



An Insight into the Notion of Otherness in "Désirée's Baby" and "That Evening Sun"

Hanife Salbaş¹

¹Institute of Graduate Studies, ELT Programme, Ondokuz Mayıs University, Samsun, Turkey
Email: hanifesalbas2@gmail.com

DOI: 10.53103/cjlls.v2i6.69

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the notion of otherness, which is prevalent throughout the 19th century in America through the individual and environmental analysis of the main characters in two American short stories- "That Evening Sun" (1931) by William Faulkner and Kate Chopin's "Désirée's Baby" (1893). The current study presents the common theme in the short stories of both Faulkner and Chopin, which demonstrates how racism, injustice, sexism, and prejudice were imposed on persons in the South during the antebellum era (about the middle of the 19th century to the early 20th century). The diminishing values that African American and female characters have to face are analyzed in the article comparing their situation in relation to gender and racial discrimination, and the way they are segregated from the society. Themes such as victimization, segregation, the isolating nature of inequality, alienation from society and civilization at large, and the position of African American women in the mid-19th century Southern United States are analyzed in this article through the symbolic elements present in both short stories. By opposing and contrasting the protagonists of the two stories and providing an in-depth analysis of the characteristics and motivations of each character, this article brings awareness to the issue of otherness in its broadest sense.

Keywords: Racism, Gender, Otherness, Discrimination, Literature

Introduction

America is often portrayed as a place where individuals of various socioeconomic and racial origins may realize their full potential and accomplish their goals. This perception has encouraged millions of people all around the world to move to America with high expectations for their future. As with other aspects of American culture, the literary scene has also been affected by this transformation. While presenting America as a desirable place to live, American literature which has undoubtedly grown to be a significant medium for expressing major issues in the society often alludes to more complex and veiled themes such as identity conflicts, phobias, and existential dread. The concept of "otherness" is one of the most important issues to address in this context.

The term "otherness," which is frequently associated with ethnocentrism and

stereotyping, refers to the predominance of an in-group that sees itself as superior to the out-group and rejects the other's subjectivity and individuality (Golkowska, 2014). Despite its predominance in regular daily existences, the othering phenomenon may also be found in fictional works. The difficulty of otherness, which may be defined as the challenge of coming to terms with ways of life that are thought to be foreign to one's own, has been a preoccupation of American authors and philosophers throughout the whole of the country's literary and philosophical history. Despite the fact that it has been understood in a variety of ways, there is a consistent theme throughout the many theoretical approaches to otherness: the realization that our ideas of who and what we are, are inextricably bound up with our preconceptions about people in our immediate surroundings. The concept of otherness may manifest itself in a number of different ways. In this article, it occurs in the form of discrimination.

“Otherness” in *Désirée’s Baby*

The theme "otherness" is a vital element in Chopin's *Désirée's Baby*, the story which starts with a nameless woman whose origins are not known. Chopin's heroine, Desiree, gets caught up in the morally charged issues of racial discrimination and adultery throughout the story, which makes one woman the target of society's severe judgment while also giving her agency over her own fate (Crowell, 2017). She has been ostracized even at the beginning, from a perspective of the era that story is involved; the lineage is very much valued for wealth and for revealing the racial background, a distinguished pedigree of white people. Ostracized character is presented to be naive and kind-hearted, with the emotional side of a human; these qualities are more than a convenience to attach to a woman in the patriarchal ideology. The character Armand is the wealthy, plantation owner, capitalist, rational patriarchy stereotype; *Désirée* is presented as if to be an object to purchase rather than an individual with her relation to Armand in the first place. "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" (Chopin, 2000, pp. 193–198). The name and hence the identity of *Désirée* are diminished; in addition to that, her unknown origin also gives the character a social role, her stance represents all the women in all the classes of the era. Armand presented her with gifts and gave her a name by means of the marriage, the image of the marital union is diminished to a purchase deal making the woman an object of desire.

Gender and Racial Discrimination

Gender discrimination against women is a prominent means to describe the ostracizing nature of the patriarchal ideology of the time, which can be seen through the male figures and their attitude towards women in general and through unwitting complicity

created by women in order to adapt to the extreme living conditions. Désirée's extreme willingness to her husband and equally discriminating attitude towards African American people shows her unwitting complicity for the patriarchal order which also puts her into a victimized position. Nevertheless, there is also another theme indirectly prevailing in the story, the racial discrimination. The patriarchal authority figures are important characters in revealing the idea so. Armand is a husband who appears to be unconditionally loving Désirée, due to his indifference to her unknown origins (Baysal, 2015, p.4); yet the question of race was the milestone in reversing this situation. The changing attitude presented in the authority figure towards his wife and his slaves is caused by the race discrimination. He completely ignored his wife, the baby, and turned into his violent nature considering the workers. A black baby was in no tolerance for a white exploiting plantation owner, the baby and the wife were the other in the eyes of this figure of authority. He does not see his wife as a person to be respected, or to have empathy for, he immediately cast her out. There are some parts hinting that Armand also has had sexual intercourse with his free laborer La Blanche, he sees her as mere commodity rather than a human being just like he did for Désirée, which puts the discussion of women as objects into forth.

The character of Désirée, a lady who has been persecuted and discriminated against, is embarrassed that she is placed in the same category as black people. It is quite evident that she is equally victimizing the individuals who are subjected to racial discrimination, as seen by the statements "...whiter than his own Armand reacts angrily, as white as La Blanche's" (Chopin, 2000, pp. 193–198). The comical and abnormal nature of ostracizing African American people and the whole institute of free labor are mocked here; La Blanche is forced to lead a life of slavery just because her racial lineage is known or discovered hence the discrimination made towards black people is just presented as nonrational through this dialogue and the story at large. The quadroon boy fanning the baby and his mother, the mulatto La Blanche are two important characters in showing the redundantly violent nature of the slavery institution. The analogy between them and Désirée and her baby is given indirectly for the reader to deduce. Chopin also left a possibility of the quadroon boy being the child of Armand due to his relation to La Blanche which reinforces the analogy between the mothers and the children; they lead different lives, yet both end up being the ostracized and the victimized side caused by the authority figure. This analogy is where the racial and gender discrimination indirectly merges to show the severity of the victimization caused by the white authority and frivolousness for racial purity resulting in the woman and African American people being the other.

Madame Valmondé's attitude upon seeing the baby is an example of a victimized turning into a victimizer within this vicious system; people who ostracized create identification with them. She knew her daughter will be the victim, yet she was already complicit for the system and saw the black color as unacceptable; the patriarchal system that victimizes African American people is the same system that enabled men to see women

as an object, as the other.

The bonfire lit by Armand's workers symbolize the extreme power Armand holds through his wealth. He orders his workers to throw the possessions of his wife and his baby to the fire, including the gifts he gave to Désirée before marriage. The reason for this behavior is to remove Désirée and the baby out of his life, the understanding of setting their possessions on fire will remove them from his life shows that Armand is seeing them as mere commodity, a patriarchal figure looking down on women, even on his child due to a possible racial mix involving black people indicates the severe degree of discrimination and ostracizing imposed on women and African American people in mid-nineteenth century society.

Désirée goes across the bayou and disappears from civilization, completely casting herself and her biracial baby out from the society. The symbolic ostracizing turns out to be a physical one at the end of the story, resulting in the death of the character that is victimized. Departing from the civilization is a very important symbol for showing the severity of the discrimination imposed on women and people of African American descent.

The title *Désirée's Baby* is also an important implication in hinting that the baby is the other in the eyes of the father. Miscegenation was condemned to an extent of refusing one's own blood. They are not in the social roles they meant to be, they are "*Désirée and Désirée's baby*" compared to "*wife and child*" to Armand; hence the refusal is made on his side. Title of the story reinforces the racist and sexist discrimination heavily imposed on Désirée and the baby.

“Otherness” in That Evening Sun

That Evening Sun by Faulkner is another short story that reveals the clear distinction between the rich and the poor, the inequality and the prejudice on African American people especially African American women through the character Nancy (Dermot & McManus, 2014; Mambrol, 2022; McFarland & Tuck, 1964). The differences between the past and the present time show the reader the unvaried situation of the system and difficulties experienced by the ostracized group in the society.

Various characters stand for various values in the society, there are clear parallelism and juxtaposition between "*Désirée's Baby*" and "*That Evening Sun*" due to different perspectives of Chopin and Faulkner; the attitude of the patriarchal figures of authority, the attitude of the diminished women who have certain social roles such as mother and wife and the victim's attitude of identifying with the vicious system thus helping it thrive more and more. Hence the analysis would be much clearer and more explanatory if we take a closer look to the characters and what they stand for in the society.

Mr. Compson is a figure of authority, the white patriarchy, father and husband in the house, hence his actions are symbolic in relation to his social role as for all the

characters. He escorts Nancy to her cabin every evening and lets her sleep in his house; he has empathy towards this woman and understands her fear given the circumstances. In the one and only occasion in which Mr. Compson defends Nancy, he admonishes his wife with a sarcastic tone, pointing out that she is well aware that he is not laying outside with a razor. He identifies with the fear of a woman against the domestic violence, her possible death and he stands against his "bigoted" wife. Even though Nancy is a "fallen woman" in the eyes of the patriarchal system and supposedly under the eyes of the men, he does not cast her out with sexist discrimination. There is a major juxtaposition between Mr. Compson and Armand; Mr. Compson is an opposite character compared to Armand who does not even hesitate to claim his wife and his own daughter as the other. Even though Mr. Compson is represented the compassionate and the understanding side of the authority, his attitude on his discourse of "let white men alone" shows that he rejects white people are voluntarily having relation with Nancy, he sees the situation as immoral. The racial mix is of no tolerance in both stories, it is seen as immoral just in the case of Désirée and Armand; similarly, Mr. Compson reinforces that idea through his discourse, by implying that Nancy is forcing white men, hence blaming her blinding himself to the reality of her situation.

On the other hand, Mr. Aubigny is a man who chooses to love instead of discrimination and disregards the supposedly condemned heritage of his wife; he stands up for her, he is compassionate and claims his values in life. He is another figure of authority. we don't see him as violent, discriminative whatsoever so he is a parallel character to Mr. Compson in the relation that we can create towards women and African American women to be exact.

Obviously, there are patriarchal authoritative characters that we can parallel with Armand; for example, Mr. Stovall. The deacon has a certain place in the class-conscious society, he is a man of a religion. Nancy is a prostitute and the information given shows that she usually works for white men. Mr. Stovall used Nancy's services and yet refused to pay for it. "It has been three times now since he paid me a cent." He has responsibilities towards all people including all the classes and for both genders regardless of age and race. Nevertheless, Mr. Stovall is presented as a very violent character in a very violent scene. He does not hesitate punishing Nancy by striking her in the mouth in order to silence her discourse, he shuts her up to preserve his position, reputation in the society; there is no fear in him regarding the possible legal sanctions against his behavior, no fear of recrimination. He is stripped off of his social role in his violent acts towards Nancy. He was just a white man battering, looking down on an African American woman. Nancy is a highly paranoid and mentally ill woman, yet a person of religion like Mr. Stovall only judges her by her skin color, social position, her profession and that shows the severity of sexism and racial discrimination. There are no consequences of this very much violent act, because African American women are not protected under the law or any civil rights at the time.

Nancy's attempted suicide is also a very symbolic narrative in her alienated and

diminished situation. In addition to that narrative, it also shows the mental position she is in, she is ill to a point of letting go due to her living conditions, her extreme poverty, a deadly oppression she experiences everyday due to her black color. The degree of the oppression is seen in her desperation of taking her life. It was cocaine and not whisky, because no nigger would try to commit suicide unless he was full of cocaine, because a nigger full of cocaine was not a nigger any longer. Nevertheless, she was blamed to do drugs. This accusation shows the high scale of white authority ignoring the African American life, diminishing it blindly. Instead of addressing the problem and helping her, jailer ignores the situation and makes up an excuse for her suicidal behavior.

Mrs. Compson is the supposed angel in the house, she has children and a husband. She is in the peaceful domestic realm. She is supposed to be associated with care, love, light and nourishment in the patriarchal narrative of the society. However, she is a woman victimizing and ostracizing other woman, she has no empathy towards the dangerous situation of Nancy, she diminishes Nancy's fear of death to a mundane occasion and looks down on her, hence diminishing her value as a human being. Mrs. Compson gets irritated every time Mr. Compson tries to help Nancy, because she does not see her life valuable. "I can't have Negroes sleeping in the bedrooms. How much longer is this going on? I need to be left alone in this big house while you take home a frightened Negro?" (Faulkner, 1995, p. 299). These specific lines help reinforcing the idea that women need solidarity in a society that victimizes them. She is indifferent to the attempts of Nancy in her survival, she is blind to the cry of a victim, ostracized character and that contributes to Nancy's alienation from society at large just like Désirée.

Nancy is already seen as "fallen women" due to her illicit sexual relations with a "white man", she is an African American woman, she is born to a life of free labor serving for white supremacists, she is acknowledged only for her work not as a woman, a mother and a wife; meaning she does not have a place for herself in the society as an individual. She is cast out extremely due to her circumstances. We can compare her situation with Désirée who eventually ends up in the same position as Nancy; despite the fact that Désirée has companions like Madam Valmondé, Nancy has no caring companion by her side. She is the ultimate other in the society that she has to live in, maybe that discrimination explains the reason for her attempted suicide. Given her situation, we see that Nancy eventually recognizes and identifies with the corrupted system that diminishes her. Apart from acknowledging being a free laborer, we see that she is also identified with the idea of domestic violence; even though she is completely afraid of the idea of domestic violence and eventual death, in her discourse with Mr. Compson we see that she is capable of contributing to this vicious system in which people are immune to violence coming from their partners. She identifies with the possible deadly attack from Jesus and she directly exclaims to do the same, "decapitating" him if Jesus betrayed her in St. Louis. This acceptance ironically shows that Nancy justifies Jesus in his violent acts against her and

she does not blame Jesus in doing so, because in her mind she is taught that violence is the answer towards any betrayal. The ultimate other character is contributing to her diminished stance in the patriarchal society by accepting the violence, justifying Jesus.

Nancy's fear is not associated with the possible razor attack from Jesus but associated directly with death, because she knows that would be the end of betrayal, she accepts it, justifies it, victimizing her situation more and more. Nancy is the central ostracized character contributing to her doom just like Désirée. There is an enormous parallelism between these two victimized figures, especially in their contribution to the vicious system. The seemingly never-ending stream of speech coming from Nancy, in which she says she is just a nigger and it's not her responsibility to solve is extremely important in her relation to this contribution. She accepts that she is a diminished figure in the society due to her skin color and accepts this fact thus identifies with it. She is the other, the victim that turns into a victimizer, harming herself more. She exclaims her color is not her fault, yet internalizing the blame for the color black as if it were a crime is the first mistake that she makes. Désirée had the same situation in her life and she chose to wander around the wilderness casting herself from the civilization to the end of her time. She chose to be dead, to kill her baby instead of embracing and standing up for herself. Both characters are the ultimate victims cast out by the society, social norms and figures of patriarchal authority. They both choose to accept their victimization, submitting to them, hence contributing to the system.

The internalization of the condemnation, the unwitting complicity to the idea of "black is less" is the most incorrect acceptance which causes both of their lives in the end. They both disclaimed their self-worth because they were conditioned by the cultural norms. "I hell-born, child. I will be nothing soon. I am going back where I come from soon" (Faulkner, 1995). These lines stated by Nancy contribute to the discussion held before, the extreme fear of death, and self-hatred are literally coming out in her words. Nancy's asking the children to stay at her cabin as an alternative idea for her protection shows the absurd nature of inequality. Nancy figures that children being white will serve as a protective element from Jesus. It shows the extent how Nancy thinks little of herself and how much she casts herself out from their world. She knew that other black people cannot help her and this is because racial violence; they cannot interfere because just as Nancy are not protected by the law they are not too that is why Nancy feels protection from Compson children who are white and privileged.

The town Jefferson is a very representative medium in reflecting the reality of the racial inequality. The ditch plays the role of a border between the white people and black people and contributes to the idea of segregation in the symbolic narrative. "Negro Hollow" is where Nancy lives, it is another world, another social sphere compared to the other part of the town where whites live. African American people are physically alienated to a certain area in the town; namely, the division of African American people becomes

something physical and does not remain in the minds of the bigoted. The narrative being constituted on the memories of Quentin also helps the reader to see the comparison between the past and the present regarding the lifestyle of African American people. The image of Negro women doing white people's laundry was a matter of free labor in his childhood and now just a labor in the modern times. They still have to work for the white people and still live under poorer living conditions. This shows the consequences of the slavery institution; even though it is abolished, African American people are still suffering from it, they are still the victim and barely anything is changed. Children throw rocks and still expect servitude from Nancy, children are aware of the diminishing nature of free labor institute; at their very young age they are taught and learnt how they are better than black people. The bigoted mind supporting the racial segregation claiming the African American as the other and the less in the society is nourished from the early childhood years.

Conclusion

The notions that were prevalent throughout the latter half of the 19th century against mingling racial groups, in particular with white women and black slaves, as well as women's developing willfulness in demanding that their own desires be satisfied, made these topics very controversial for the time period in which they were written. In the light of the analysis of two short stories "That Evening Sun" by William Faulkner and "Desiree's Baby" by Kate Chopin, the themes of racial and gender discrimination which are grounded in the notion of "otherness" are presented dramatically.

References

- Baysal, K. (2015). Surviving history: Kate Chopin. *Ars Aeterna*, 7(1), 1–9.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/aa-2015-0001>
- Chopin K. (2000). Desiree's baby. In Walker N. A. (Ed.), *The Awakening* (2nd ed., pp. 193–198). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (Original work published in 1893).
- Crowell, A. (2017, May 14) Literary Analysis, Kate Chopin–“Desiree’s Baby” and “The Storm”.
- Dermot, & McManus, D. (2014, August 21). *That evening sun by William Faulkner*. The Sitting Bee. Retrieved September 12, 2022, from <http://sittingbee.com/that-evening-sun-william-faulkner/>
- Faulkner, W. (1931). *That evening sun go down*. American Mercury, Incorporated.
- Faulkner, W. (1995). *That evening sun*. Collected Stories, 289-309.
- Golkowska, K. U. (2014). Empathy and Othering in Joseph Conrad's Amy Foster. *Arab World English Journal*, 2, 60–68.
- Mambrol, N. (2022, January 12). Analysis of William Faulkner's That Evening Sun. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. <https://literariness.org/2022/01/12/analysis-of-william-faulkners-that-evening-sun/>

Tuck, D., & McFarland, D. T. (1964). *Crowell's Handbook of Faulkner*. Crowell.