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“The Role of Implicatures in Kate Chopin’s Louisiana Short Stories”

Teresa Gibert

It is tempting, in interpreting a literary text from an author one respects, to look further and further for hidden implications. Having found an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance—an interpretation (which may itself be very rich and vague) which the writer might have thought of as adequate repayment for the reader’s effort—why not go on and look for ever richer implications and reverberations? (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 278)

- 1 The popular renown and the critical praise that Kate Chopin received during her lifetime resulted essentially from her Louisiana short stories, published first in various magazines and subsequently collected in the volumes *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). After her death in 1904, a few of these stories were included in various anthologies and thus became virtually the only pieces of Chopin’s literary production available to the general public, whereas her later works went out of print or remained unpublished. For several decades her name was almost invisible in the field of literary criticism, except as a “local colorist,” a term that nowadays some scholars are reluctant to apply to her (Forkner and Samway xxii), partly because it has so often been used derogatorily, although there have been recent attempts to reappraise it, emphasizing its positive value (Ewell and Menke xvi). Others have taken into account her own ambivalence towards the local-color movement, from which she unsuccessfully tried to detach herself (Papke 24, Staunton 203, Steiling 197, Taylor 156). Indeed, for many years the status of Kate Chopin was that of a marginalized local colorist because she was associated exclusively with her early narratives set in Louisiana, which were taken to exemplify local-color fiction, a genre that captivated American readers in the 1880s and 1890s but which experienced a decrease in popularity during the twentieth century.
- 2 When modern scholarship rediscovered Chopin’s writings in the 1970s—following Per Seyersted’s publication of *Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography* and his edition of her *Complete Works*, both in 1969—they were mainly analyzed from feminist perspectives. Consequently, attention was focused on her most mature works, with a particular

emphasis on *The Awakening* (1899) and those short stories which were labeled "proto-feminist." When *A Vocation and a Voice*—Chopin's third collection of short stories, which she had begun writing in 1893—was finally published in 1991, it was also warmly welcomed by feminists. Meanwhile, her early Louisiana short stories became comparatively neglected. Not until recently have they been subjected to close scrutiny in the light of various theoretical frameworks, some of which are unrelated to feminism.

- 3 Kate Chopin's contemporary audience was attracted to her Louisiana stories because it was felt that they accurately depicted the everyday life of ordinary people in an area that seemed particularly exotic to the rest of America. Recent critics have pointed out that she did not simply record the lives of Creoles and Cajuns in order to satisfy her readers' curiosity, nor did she restrict herself to capturing an alien atmosphere and rendering it vividly to her readers through a skillful handling of picturesque details. Some modern scholars have remarked that Chopin was concerned with psychological realism and tried to show how people in Louisiana dealt with universal issues in agreement with the specific values prevalent in their environment. According to these new critical trends, Chopin would have adopted many of the typical features of the regionalist writing that was so popular among her contemporaries, but then she went beyond the surface representations of folkways and speech patterns in order to examine the values of southern society and explore fundamental issues in regard to humanity at large. It has also been argued that, unlike most regionalists, Kate Chopin expressed no nostalgia for the past, for she did not present an idealized picture of the Old South, in particular concerning its apparently harmonious gender, class and race relations. Her Louisiana short stories have been reinterpreted as subversive pieces that use the conventions of the genre in order to undermine and dismantle the conservative ideology that local-color fiction generally helped to support (Arner, Bauer, Elfenbein, Papke). But not all critics agree on these points. In fact, Chopin's treatment of gender, class and racial issues in her Louisiana short fiction has become a highly controversial matter. In spite of her present reputation as a socially progressive writer, she has been accused of having "taken advantage of the racist post-bellum cultural climate to further her writing career" (Lamothe 2). As a result of such discrepancies, she is being alternatively labeled as "deeply racist" (Taylor xiii) and as unequivocally anti-racist (Koloski 26) by scholars who are putting forward exactly the same texts as evidence for their opposing assertions, either to attack or to defend her.¹
- 4 Perhaps the main reason for the coexistence of multiple conflicting views on Chopin's early fiction lies in the complex use of implicatures which she made in these deceptively simple writings. Her way of conveying implied or covert meanings would explain the proliferation of contrasting interpretations over the years, because readers have understood her indirect statements in various manners. But there is something that the many different, often mutually exclusive, readings that are being propounded today have in common: all of them share the perception of the Louisiana short stories as extremely powerful weapons, either in favor of or against the prevailing ideology and values held and fostered by the establishment. In other words, we can no longer overlook the political import of such stories and conceive them as innocuous pieces of fiction merely designed for entertainment. In order to discern meanings beyond what is clearly stated, we feel prompted to read between the lines. We are encouraged to consider the levels beneath the mere surface so as to find the subversive or contradictory subtext hidden behind or encoded in the text, taking into account both its explicit and implicit meanings.

- 5 Throughout the years, all of the stories contained in *Bayou Folk* and *A Night in Acadie* have been interpreted at various levels. For instance, the brief tale entitled "Ripe Figs," generally taken as an extremely straightforward sketch about youth and age, has also been elucidated in the light of its symbolic overtones, linking the figs in the story with sexuality and its chrysanthemums with death (Branscomb). Chopin's use of contrasts and natural imagery in "Ripe Figs," together with the cyclical plotting pattern of the piece, have been subjected to close analysis (Gardiner). Relying on many other examples of this kind, it has recently been contended that Chopin's contemporary audience missed much of what the author discreetly encoded into her early writings. Nevertheless, attention should be drawn to the fact that some modern critics may be underestimating the ability of both their predecessors and the late nineteenth-century general public to grasp the tacit meanings of Chopin's Louisiana stories. For centuries, readers have been capable of understanding indirect statements, since implicit modes of expression have been traditionally preferred to plain blunt speech in most kinds of literary discourse. But audiences are not equally prone to unabashedly discuss the inferences they have drawn, and some readers may prefer simply to praise subtlety rather than go into detailed explanations of views that have been expressed with a certain degree of reserve. Thus, Chopin's former critics emphasized how in the story "At Chênrière Caminada" the author had worked through "subtle implication" (Rankin 161) and had dealt "subtly with the ambiguities of affection" (Reilly 1937: 73; 1942: 134), whereas later scholars have openly referred to "the primal force of erotic desire" (Davis 65) and have pointed out how the tale is a fine instance of local-color fiction while also transcending the confines of that genre (Beer 52).
- 6 When accounting for different perceptions of implicitness, it should also be noted that modern theoretical approaches lead critics to emphasize certain aspects that may have gone unnoticed until new categories of literary analysis were introduced. Current responses to most of Chopin's Louisiana short fiction are informed or instigated by a growing awareness of issues hitherto disregarded. This is the case of "At the 'Cadian Ball," the story to which "The Storm" was to be a sequel. While one of its first critics derided its conventionality (Arner 1970: 2), a more recent commentator has praised it as "Chopin's most skillful blending of the topics of gender, power, and class" (Ewell 1986: 76).
- 7 If we examine the development of Chopin's literary career in search of any changing patterns regarding her use of implicatures, in the sense of pragmatically inferred propositions, we will observe how she gradually adopted more explicit forms of expression. As a result, her audience felt increasingly threatened and ended up rejecting her provocative later writings. *The Awakening* is a case in point, and the short story entitled "The Storm" represents an extreme case. Chopin wrote "The Storm" in 1898, shortly after *The Awakening*, and never submitted it for publication, since she probably realized that this explicitly erotic story went far beyond the limit of what her editors and readers were willing to accept. In "The Storm" Chopin offered an unusually frank depiction of a joyful and pleasurable extra-marital sexual encounter with positive effects on both partners and their families. Furthermore, at a time when literary conventions required that no adultery should go unpunished, Chopin's unambiguously happy ending left no doubts about her attitude towards love affairs. Indirection is not completely absent from the story, for the dialogues are full of conventional and conversational implicatures, but the predominant mode of expression here is optimistically uninhibited,

and the open conclusion leaves readers definitely expecting further passionate meetings that Chopin's contemporary audience would have deemed utterly improper.

- 8 Due to its explicitness, "The Storm" has not generated any contrasting interpretations, in spite of the close critical attention to which it has been submitted. Likewise, another of Chopin's mature short narratives, "The Story of an Hour" (composed and first published in 1894) does not allow for much conjecture. Little effort of elucidation is needed to understand that it is about the sense of freedom enjoyed by a woman during the hour she mistakenly thinks that she is a widow, until she discovers that her husband is still alive. Both "The Storm" and "The Story of an Hour" exemplify maximum explicitness, and consequently, maximum consensus on the author's intentions and readers' interpretations. In order to illustrate the opposite end of the spectrum, that is, maximum implicitness, and therefore, a wide range of diverging opinions, I would like to focus on Chopin's most famous Louisiana short story: "Désirée's Baby."

- 9 Désirée, a foundling raised by Monsieur and Madame Valmondé in their Louisiana plantation as if she were their own daughter, "grew to be beautiful and gentle, affectionate and sincere." At eighteen she married Armand Aubigny, the heir to another plantation, and was cruelly rejected by him after giving birth to a mixed-race baby whose black ancestry derived in fact from the child's paternal grandmother. We learn this at the very end of the story, once we have been told that Désirée and the baby have disappeared forever into the bayou. This is an extremely brief outline of the plot, which is almost impossible to summarize in a satisfactory manner because Chopin's text resists further reduction. The richness of the story is based on the accumulation of significant details, and thanks to its concise prose, the author managed to compress into 2,152 words the contents of what she could have expanded into a whole novel. Chopin's verbal economy partially accounts for her need to implicate, rather than explicate, but apart from the requirements of condensation inherent in the short fiction genre, there were also other reasons for her preference to communicate through veiled suggestions and resort to understatement. At the time of composing "Désirée's Baby," Kate Chopin was striving to be accepted by northern editors as a serious professional writer in the carefully regulated market of magazine and book publishing, controlled by censoring eyes, and consequently she could not work as spontaneously as she claimed (*Complete Works* 722), but under constraints that inhibited her treatment of socially sensitive topics.

- 10 This story was composed in 1892, and when it was published by *Vogue* in January of the following year under the title of "The Father of Désirée's Baby," it was an immediate success. It was included in *Bayou Folk* (1894), Chopin's first collection of twenty-three short stories and sketches which received over two hundred reviews and press notices. "Désirée's Baby" was frequently singled out for praise, and as it was often anthologized, it remained continuously in print while most of Kate Chopin's work was virtually unavailable. Among the reasons that may account for such acclaim, we should mention the fact that Kate Chopin's main themes—marriage and motherhood—are explored here through a submissive and vulnerable female protagonist who is far from being like the emancipated heroines that people her later fiction. A third theme, that of miscegenation, which is rather unusual in Chopin's fiction, was particularly controversial when the story was first published, but thanks to the author's "masterful phrasing and subtle word-choice" (Reilly 1942: 135), her audience, far from feeling offended, was delighted. It was indeed a period of "latent and massive social antagonism against miscegenation [...] among both blacks and whites" (Williamson 90).

- 11 Unlike most of Chopin's Louisiana short stories, which are set in the post-bellum period, "Désirée's Baby" is set before the American Civil War, when slavery was still legal. The story was published after emancipation, once abolitionist debates were over, but the social context in which the text was first received was to a great extent under the immediate effects of the recent past. Although "the criminalization of interracial relations, especially marriage, had begun in the colonial period" (Saks 64), it was after the abolition of slavery that such relations actually "had the potential to threaten the distribution of property" (Saks 69). In order to preserve the power structures and racial hierarchy of the slave era, it was deemed necessary to devise new mechanisms of control and, as a result, harsher laws regarding racial purity were introduced, and interracial sex and marriage were banned (Higginbotham and Kopytoff 82). Therefore, the main theme of "Désirée's Baby" directly addressed the concerns of its first readers, who must have been captivated by Chopin's artistic handling of such burning issues. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of this short story is the dexterity displayed by its author's intertwining of the typical features of a fairy tale with the crudest details of an awesome reality that her contemporary readers knew firsthand.²
- 12 In "Désirée's Baby" Chopin plays with her readers' anticipatory feelings and sense of intuition, because some of their expectations are met, whereas others are completely reversed or else remain unfulfilled. She deliberately misleads her readers so that, again and again, they hastily make wrong assumptions and jump to conclusions that prove to be false.³ Her deft use of foreshadowing techniques, especially the interspersed ominous details that presage a violent and tragic ending, can hardly be overemphasized. This prefiguring method becomes as relevant to the interpretation of the story as the use of various deluding devices. The contextual and background information which is generally desirable to infer meaning may in this particular case either be helpful or hinder comprehension. In other words, readers may at times derive both correct and inaccurate implications, which are not strictly implicatures because they receive no authorial support.⁴ Even the characters of the story are presented as being subjected to serious misunderstandings or unable to perceive covert meanings. These instances of comprehension impairment on the part of fictional characters enhance the readers' sense of superiority, the deceptive feeling that they are able to foresee the denouement of a story whose outcome is in fact unpredictable.
- 13 If we examine the scene where Madame Valmondé and Désirée speak about the baby, we will find hints which no perceptive reader of any time (even with minimal knowledge of the historical context) could fail to notice, whereas other allusions in the dialogue may be easily overlooked by inadvertent browsers. Not having seen Désirée and her son for four weeks, Madame Valmondé expresses her surprise at the sight of the baby by using a very ambiguous statement, which cannot be interpreted literally. She exclaims "in startled tones:" "This is not the baby!" Her utterance violates two Gricean maxims of manner, "Avoid obscurity of expression" and "Avoid ambiguity,"⁵ and this flouting of maxims causes the hearer to misunderstand the speaker's implicature. Indeed, Désirée misunderstands her foster mother's surprise and concludes that she is astonished at how much the baby has grown, not "at the way he has grown" in the sense that Madame Valmondé would interpret this sentence. Accordingly, Désirée replies naively: "Look at his legs, mamma, and his hands and fingernails,—real finger-nails. Zandrine had to cut them this morning. Isn't it true, Zandrine?" At this stage, Désirée is still completely unaware of any physical features that may disclose the child's racial heritage, but she is

unconsciously giving a clue to readers who are familiar with the stereotypical assumption that fingernails provide an unmistakable indication of people's nonwhite racial ancestry, no matter how white they may look (Sollors 146). This detail reinforces our certainty that the slave nurse knows much more than she is willing to say and it makes her silence even more meaningful. Later on, Zandrine's reserved attitude can be linked to the "air of mystery among the blacks" that makes Désirée suspect that something is amiss when the baby is about three months old.

- 14 The reference to the baby's fingernails in the first dialogue is the only allusion, tenuous as it is, to a sign that is thought to reveal the child's race, for the story does not include a single explicit mention of any specific trait that may lead to the conclusion that he is not white. Even when Désirée finally puts an end to her self-deception, we are told about the shock she feels while she is looking alternatively at her baby and at the quadroon boy, but we are not informed about what it is exactly that she has seen. It is up to readers to decide if it is a racial resemblance, a family resemblance, or both (Koloski 120). The quadroon boy is simply introduced as one of the sons of La Blanche, without any reference to his other parent, but there are several hints that may lead to the conclusion that Armand Aubigny may be his father. Désirée's casual remark to Madame Valmondé that Armand can hear the baby cry from La Blanche's cabin makes us wonder what he was doing there. The question could be easily answered by readers acquainted with the socially accepted custom that allowed masters to take as concubines or to have sporadic sexual relations with the slaves they owned, and these men generally exercised their legal right to keep their offspring in bondage. There is no explicit mention of interracial concubinage in the story, but attentive scholars have made the assumption that La Blanche, who looks white but is legally labeled black according to the "one-drop rule," is Armand's mistress (Wolff 38, Peel 226, Toth 1981: 107). This circumstance would add more cruelty to Armand's sarcastic retort "As white as La Blanche's," when Désirée insisted on the whiteness of her hands.
- 15 Though there is no absolute certainty, it can be safely presumed that La Blanche's boy and Désirée's baby are half-brothers. On the other hand, in the story there is no room for speculation about any adultery on the part of Désirée, who remains desperately in love with her husband and whose innocence is reiterated (Sollors 68). She is recurrently associated with God's Providence and even her disappearance "among the reeds and willows that grew thick along the banks of the deep, sluggish bayou," with the visual effect of a halo around her head, is described as that of a saint's vanishing. Some readers have interpreted it as a sort of martyrdom, whereas others have presumed that it is suicide, taking into account how the young woman expressed her death wish in a note to her foster mother. In fact, Chopin does not clearly state that Désirée kills herself, or even that she dies, but the latter is the most common interpretation.⁶ There seems to be little hope of a better future for Désirée and her baby. But these two lovable characters elicit such a strong empathetic response from readers that some of them may be tempted to reject the bleak fate that appears to be almost inevitable and they may wish that both mother and child were able to start a new life. This remote possibility is neither explicitly negated nor implicitly suggested by Chopin, unless we were to search for a hint at the beginning of the tale and, assuming a cyclical structure, we could imagine Désirée's appearing somewhere else for a second time as mysteriously as she did at the entrance of Valmondé when she was a toddler.

- 16 Although *Désirée's* final disappearance would have been a suitable ending to the story, there are still four short paragraphs which provide a clever final twist, slightly artificial or "somewhat contrived" (Seyersted 94) for the taste of certain readers, a disappointing trick for some (Baker 859), but "no mere writer's trick" according to others (Wolff 37).⁷ The surprise ending centers on Armand, who had his slaves light a great bonfire and throw everything that once belonged to *Désirée* and the baby into the flames. "Back in the drawer from which he took" his young wife's letters, there was the remnant of one from his mother to his father in which she mentioned the fact that she belonged "to the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery." Although Chopin does not indicate that Armand "discovers" the fragment or that he reads the letter for the first time, most readers tend to infer that the piece of information which is new for them is also a genuine revelation for Armand at this point of the story.⁸ The possibility that Armand could have known about, or at least suspected, his racial origins is far from being a standard assumption, although some scholars have dwelled on the chance that the "dark-skinned aristocrat [...] may vaguely remember his racially mixed mother" (Elfenbein 126).⁹
- 17 It has been suggested that *Désirée*, and not only Armand, may have had black ancestors (Peel 233).¹⁰ Although this circumstance cannot be totally ruled out (Koloski 116), it seems most unlikely because Chopin links the young woman to images of whiteness and contrasts her fair skin with "Armand's dark, handsome face." The only observation that misleads readers into thinking that *Désirée* might be legally considered nonwhite is the reference to her "obscure origin," just as they are deluded into supposing that Armand is "pure white" because his name is "one of the oldest and proudest in Louisiana." By playing with what something seems to be and what it turns out to be, the author underscores how simplistic the distinctions between "black" and "white" are in fact (Arner 1972: 140; Toth 1981: 208). In this sense, by calling attention to paradox, the story confronts the myth of "white racial purity," which proves to be an extremely dangerous myth because it inexorably leads to the tragic ending that the fairytale beginning did not anticipate.
- 18 Among the many hypotheses that have been put forward about this short story, one of the most striking is the one propounded by Margaret D. Bauer, who argued that Armand Aubigny had been aware of his own black heritage all his life and that his marriage to *Désirée* was part of a plan to have legitimate children that would pass for white, as he himself was passing. If they had a dark complexion, he could always blame *Désirée's* "obscure origin" without endangering his own status as a master, which depended wholly on "racial purity" under the "one-drop rule." In the light of this theory "*Désirée's* Baby" could be regarded as one of the earliest examples of "passing" literature (162). According to Bauer, one of the most outstanding features of this particular story, if compared with other instances of the genre, would lie in Armand's ability "to pass for over a century" because readers "continue failing to see Chopin's hints about Armand's race and therefore continue to be surprised by her final disclosure" (170).
- 19 Such hints have provided an interesting basis for discussion in the past decade. The former uneasiness of those who commented on the contrast between *Désirée* (the emblem of whiteness and light) and Armand (always identified with blackness and darkness) has given way to an open rejection of such a dichotomy. What some recent critics find most objectionable in Chopin's story is the following binary opposition: the "pure white" character is invariably associated with God and set against the mixed-raced villain, explicitly allied with Satan. This kind of reading clearly contradicts those who

hailed "Désirée's Baby" as an indictment of racial prejudice (Arner, Elfenbein, Papke, Wolff). Far from going against the grain, Chopin's text would have reinforced the prevalent negative feelings towards miscegenation at the time of its publication, for this story would have presented once again the stereotypical treatment of the mulatto character in most of American fiction as "a victim of a divided inheritance" who combines "the vices of both races and none of the virtues" (Brown 278-79). The reversal of roles by which the "tragic octoroon" turns out to be Armand, rather than Désirée, would not make any difference in the message that can be read between the lines concerning the undesirability of miscegenation (Andrews 314, Arbery 393-94, Berzon 99-116).

- 20 Thanks to the close scrutiny to which "Désirée's Baby" has been subjected throughout the years, the story provides a long history of contrasting interpretations. Divergences stem not only from the various ways of perceiving how the author plays with weak implicatures, but also from the numerous implications that readers themselves have derived from a deceptively simple text, which is in fact an intricately layered narrative. Today "Désirée's Baby" stands out as one of the most complex of Kate Chopin's short stories, and there are reasons to believe that other pieces of her unjustly despised Louisiana fiction—"La Belle Zoraïde" among others—can yield equally fruitful results. The prospect of analyzing the use of the implicit in these writings is particularly attractive, because when we undertake this kind of research we are invited to transcend predictable interpretations, we are encouraged to read creatively, and we become as active in the construction of meaning as the writer herself.

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NOTES

1. Bernard Koloski considers that "Désirée's Baby" "is among the most powerful condemnations of racism in American literature" (26). On the contrary, Helen Taylor insists that "Chopin's racism is a central element in her writing, and cannot be ignored or simply excused" (156). Combining a semiotic and political approach, Ellen Peel questions the subversiveness of "Désirée's Baby" and concludes that systems of meaning are certainly upset, but hierarchical power structures are not attacked (237). Werner Sollors forcefully rejects former interpretations that praise this short story for its progressive treatment of racial issues (1997: 66-72). Emily Toth postulates that "ultimately we do not know where she [Chopin] stands on the connection between racial inheritance and character" (1981: 207). Chung-Eun Ryu argues that Chopin was

neither a reformer nor a reactionary, and that she presented a realistic portrait of Louisiana racial relations.

2. Jon Erikson has analyzed Chopin's use of fairytale features in "Désirée's Baby" (beginning with the combination of the well-known motifs of the wished-for child and the foundling) "as a basis for its exploration of the theme of appearance versus reality" (57).
3. Ellen Peel's semiotic approach provides an account of the "disruption of meaning" which takes place in "this drama of misinterpretations" (223).
4. Sperber and Wilson define implicatures as those contextual assumptions or implications which receive some degree of authorial support (1986: 194).
5. These are two of the maxims, enclosed in the supermaxim "Be perspicuous," which H.P. Grice included in the category of manner (308).
6. Most readers conclude that Désirée and her baby die in the bayou. On this subject see Arner 1972: 140; Sollors 145; Toth 1999: 145. Among the commentators who presume that Désirée has committed suicide are Benfey (228), Erikson (63), and Taylor (50 and 166). Ellen Peel is more cautious when she states that "Désirée walks away, apparently to her death" (230) and even considers the possibility of her survival (233).
7. According to Per Seyersted, "the ending undeniably has intense dramatic value, but its artifice mars what is otherwise an excellent piece of writing" (122). In his introduction to *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin* he also deplored the story's "trick ending" (31).
8. Seyersted (94) and Toth (1981: 205 and 1990: 215) state that Armand "finds" the letter. Using a different wording, Skaggs (25), Ewell (1986: 69) and Taylor (166) agree with this interpretation. Arner mentions "the two discoveries Armand makes at the end of the tale" (1972: 140). Peel remarks: "Only after Désirée and her baby have disappeared and her husband is burning their belongings, do he and the readers come across a letter from his mother to his father" (229). Seyersted states that "the revelation [...] comes as a complete shock to him [Armand], as it does to the reader" (122), whereas in fact Chopin does not describe Armand's reaction to the letter.
9. Roslyn Reso Foy has argued that at the age of eight "Armand was certainly old enough to remember his mother, but circumstances have caused him to suppress the past" and that Chopin "leaves it to the reader to decide whether Armand's cruelty springs from social forces and prejudice or whether it is in reality a distant memory of his mother—a repressed, unconscious remembrance of his own past" (223).
10. Ellen Peel speculates at length on two of the many unsolved enigmas of the story and concludes: "Like the impossibility of knowing Désirée's race, the impossibility of knowing her death offers a challenge to complacency about knowledge" (234).

AUTHORS

TERESA GIBERT

Teresa Gibert is Professor of English at the Spanish National University of Distance Education (UNED) in Madrid, Spain. She is the author of *American Literature to 1900* (Madrid: CERA, 2001), a survey course primarily addressed to university students enrolled in distance education programmes, and has also written extensively on twentieth-century British, American and Canadian literature. She has contributed essays to the collections *T. S. Eliot at the Turn of the Century* (Lund: Lund UP, 1994), *T. S. Eliot and Our Turning World* (London: MacMillan, 2001), and *DA:*

Datta: Teaching The Waste Land (Hyderabad: CIEFL, 2001). Her recent work on short fiction includes "Narrative Strategies in Thomas King's Short Stories," published in the volume *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).