

Univerzita Karlova v Praze

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Christopher Koy, M.A.

Signifying in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt

Disertační práce

Vedoucí práce – PhDr. Hana Ulmanová, M.A., Ph.D.

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This work is dedicated to
Maureen Frances Hughes Koy,
my mother.

Prohlašuji, že jsem dizertační práci vypracoval samostatně, že jsem řádně citoval všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

25. března 2011

Abstract (English):

The dissertation is fundamentally a study of intertextuality. Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932) was an African American novelist, essayist and short story writer whose voracious reading habits of classical Western literature as well as the writing of his contemporaries had a substantial impact on his writing, an impact which is investigated for the first time applying the theory of African American rhetoric of Henry Louis Gates. The study applies the notion of “signifying” (as Gates describes it in *The Signifying Monkey*) to Chesnutt and his use of fiction by Ovid, Apuleius, Walter Scott, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Washington Cable and Albion Tourgée. The research explores how Chesnutt quotes from, revises and parodies, (among other mimetic strategies), the language, plots and characters of the aforementioned writers.

Abstrakt (česky):

Tato disertační práce se zabývá studiem intertextuality v díle afroamerického autora románů, esejí a povídek Charlese W. Chesnutta (1858-1932), který byl ve své tvorbě významně ovlivněn vlastní horlivou četbou klasické západní literatury i literární tvorbou svých současníků. Tato disertace je prvním pokusem o prozkoumání těchto vlivů, a to s využitím teorie afroamerické rétoriky, jejímž autorem je Henry Louis Gates. Práce aplikuje pojem „signifikace“ (jak jej Gates popisuje v knize *The Signifying Monkey*) na Chesnuttovu tvorbu a jeho odkazy na díla autorů jako Ovidius, Apuleius, Walter Scott, William Makepeace Thackeray, George Washington Cable a Albion Tourgée. Předmětem zkoumání je, jakým způsobem Chesnutt cituje, upravuje a paroduje (kromě dalších mimetických postupů) jazyk, zápletky a postavy výše zmíněných autorů.

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1.0 Introduction

Charles Chesnutt has been acknowledged, today if not in his own lifetime, as one of the most important American authors of his generation. The scholarly interest in Charles W. Chesnutt has never been greater than today. Within the last decade and a half, three of Charles Chesnutt's novels have been published for the first time: *Mandy Oxendine* (University of Illinois Press, 1997), *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (University of Mississippi Press, 1999) and *The Quarry* (Princeton UP, 1999). With these novels, in addition to the three novels published in his lifetime,¹ Chesnutt's fiction may be interpreted with the aid of his published *Journals* (Duke UP, 1994) edited and published by the famous Melville scholar Richard Brodhead, the two collections *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905* (Princeton UP, 1996), the *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1906-1932* (Stanford UP, 2002) as well as his *Essays and Speeches* (Stanford UP, 1999). Quite a number of book-length studies on Chesnutt's fiction have also been published. The composition and intentions of Chesnutt's recently published fiction as well as the novels and stories published in his lifetime may be revealed in a new light with the aid of these journals, essays, speeches and letters.

In a scholarly study of literature, the standard for accomplishment necessitates an important and novel contribution to the understanding of the fiction under examination. While a few book-length studies of the fiction of Chesnutt have been published offering differing perspectives and evaluations on his literary artistry (and they will be addressed below in the introduction), none of them have pursued as their main focus an examination of Chesnutt's literary predecessors, nor have they considered Chesnutt's fiction in light of a well-grounded literary theory of intertextual

¹ These three novels are *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), the historical novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905).

relations. The goal of this dissertation is then to produce a new and meaningful interpretation of the fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt by both recognizing and analyzing the intertextual context in which he composed his writings.

I was first encouraged to consider Chesnutt's fiction in this light when consulting with Professor Martin Procházka in December 2003; specifically, Professor Procházka suggested that I undertake this sort of research in light of the theory of African American rhetoric called "signifying" as articulated by Henry Louis Gates. I am very grateful for his suggestion because I believe that much of it was both original with regard to its application to Chesnutt's works and that it has subsequently born fruit. In interpreting Chesnutt's fiction in this way, I hope to have contributed to some new insights and thus to a greater comprehension of his fiction.

* * *

Intertextual analysis can be very challenging because much knowledge about writers of the past is necessary in order to recognize and appreciate an intertextual relationship.² Sometimes an author "assists" or authorizes fictional influence for the reader by identifying writers (or schools of thought) in the actual work of fiction, while other authors in contrast play down any impact exerted by various sources and models, implying that their creative imagination was at play and intentionally obscuring literary influence. "Historical events" may be obviously portrayed or the events may become partially fictionalized as in Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Often, writers reveal their sources of influence through letters or essays, or they may acknowledge greatly admired influences to acquaintances who, for

² This problem may be compounded with writers from the past because the literary canon has changed, i.e., Chesnutt and his contemporaries read some authors who are hardly known today.

instance, write their biographies or otherwise assist biographers. Other resources such as a record of the books held in an author's library are revealing.³

Chesnutt kept a journal from the 1870s to the 1880s (that is in his teenage years through to his twenties) describing not only many of the books he had read, but his thoughtful opinion of them as well. Like other writers, Chesnutt also refers to authors in his short stories and in novels. Like many writers, Chesnutt had acquaintances with authors and exchanged views about fiction-writing as well as other authors in his correspondence.⁴

Many source texts unnamed by Chesnutt are recognizable because of the eminence of the works or of their author. The intertextual exploitation of Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address in Chesnutt's "The Sherriff's Children" may serve as a brief introductory example. The source of Chesnutt's redressing, a speech by Lincoln, intertextually employs the language and hence the authority of the Bible to empower his message in one of the president's last public appearances:

Lincoln: Both [North and South] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any man should dare ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes (Lincoln 1957: 282-283)

Chesnutt: The struggle between his love of life and his sense of duty was a terrific one. It may seem strange that a man who could sell his own child into slavery should hesitate at such a moment, when his life was trembling in the balance. But the baleful influence of human slavery poisoned the very foundations of life, and created new standards of light. The sheriff was conscientious; his conscience had merely been warped by his environment. Let no one ask what his

³ See McElrath, Joseph R. (1994): "Charles W. Chesnutt's library" In: *Analytical and Enumerative Bibliography* (8:2): 102-119.

⁴ The authors he corresponded with were mostly prominent white novelists such as W.D. Howells, Albion Tourgée and George Washington Cable, and among the blacks he corresponded with were prominent Civil Rights leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.

answer would have been; he was spared the necessity of a decision.
(Chesnutt 2000: 146-147)

Although this affinity to Lincoln appears obvious, it has not been commented upon up to now in secondary literature on Chesnutt. In both citations, an irony for Lincoln and a dilemma for Chesnutt's white protagonist precede the statement, "[i]t may seem strange that a/any man [...]" followed by a succinct clause graphically describing a crime of slavery. Lincoln follows his paradox with an admonishment not to moralize against slaveholders praying for God's help: "but let us judge not [...]" while Chesnutt likewise offers a generous excuse for his protagonist, using the same sentence structure: "But the baleful influence of human slavery poisoned the very foundations [...] his conscience had merely been warped by his environment." Chesnutt then concludes, "Let no one ask [...]" emulating the martyred President's aura of generous empathy steeped in moral Christian authority. The end effect is that this echoing of the Second Inaugural Address lends to Chesnutt's short story Lincoln's magnanimous force of divinity and history. It serves as an example of cooperative or unmotivated signifying, encoding both admiration and respect.

This form of intertextuality may be recognizable to literate Americans who know Lincoln's famous speeches.⁵ Still, it may be overlooked because, while Lincoln's sentence patterns are obviously echoed when placed side-by-side, they do not entirely conform in structure or in context in Chesnutt's story. Certainly the dilemma for Chesnutt's white protagonist, a small-town white North Carolina sheriff in danger of being shot by his unacknowledged black son, is poles apart from Lincoln's weighty question about divinity and war.⁶ As Michael Riffaterre asseverates in his

⁵ One may suspect that it would not be so easily recognizable to many English or continental European readers because Lincoln speeches are not in their "canon."

⁶ In a novel published one year after the short story collection including "The Sheriff's Children" was published, the protagonist's brother, John Warwick in *The House behind the Cedars* replies to

study of poetry, “The other text enlightens the reader through comparison: a structural similarity is perceived between the poem and its textual referent despite their possible differences at the descriptive and narrative levels” (Riffaterre 1978: 99–100). In this case, Chesnut’s unmotivated signifying is meant to bestow moral weight and then generously acknowledge extenuating circumstances to the honorable perpetrator of racism, the father of a black man threatened unjustly with being lynched or executed.

There have been some studies of influence cursorily presented in secondary literature. A recent article shows an uncanny resemblance between a child character named “Rose Amelia” in Chesnut’s *Mandy Oxendine* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Topsy” in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, arguing that Chesnut’s little girl does not condescend to “comic relief or subversive reappropriation of the minstrel clown” (Cooper 2009: 125). As such, Chesnut’s reuse of this stereotyped black girl is an example of what Gates would term “motivated signifyin(g)” (Gates 1988: 124) since it is oppositional, and thus seeks to revise Beecher Stowe’s characterization of her small black girl. The influence of Sir Walter Scott and Albion Tourgée on Chesnut has been cursorily argued in previously published articles as well, as will be shown in chapters below. Still, no focused study has been attempted before which exploits all the publications now available to the Chesnut scholar.

* * *

Lincoln’s argument about divine punishment exerted in the Civil War while arguing against his sister view of divine foreordination: “[Warwick] had seen God’s heel planted for four years upon the land which had nourished slavery. Had God ordained the crime that the punishment might follow? It would have been easier for Omnipotence to prevent the crime.” (Chesnut 1993: 121).

Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932) today stands as the historically first critically-acclaimed African American fiction writer whose short stories and novels have withstood the test of time by literary critics as works of significance in the history of American realism generally and African American literature specifically. His creative conjure stories as well as his predilection for writing about multiracial African Americans appeared imaginative and exotic in his time and were highly esteemed by many of the publishers and critics.⁷ However, the plots, themes and narrative form of his fiction were hardly whole cloth. A blend of the influence of his reading, his own personal experiences as well as his own authorial imagination seems to have been combined to generate ideas in the fiction-writing process. Chesnutt sedulously read the classics of Western thought and many works he read in the original Latin, German and French. Interested consistently in his contemporaries as well as the reading audience, he avidly kept up with the “respected” writing of his own era. Like many writers, he made extensive and explicit use of a wide range of classic and contemporary literature. I believe the nature of the influence of other writers constitutes an important and neglected part of Chesnutt criticism.

A synoptic view of Chesnutt’s writing career shows an influence of quite a few other writers. Already as a young man of twenty-two years Chesnutt was particularly ambitious to gain public acceptance, fame and wealth through fiction writing, and much of his ambition was motivated by his reading of fiction, as his journal attests. Houston Baker points out that Chesnutt had set artistic standards which “were not far from those of the American mainstream” and he made many “adulatory references to popular white American writers” (Baker 1988: 48), while Duncan points out that similarities with the majority of the writers of his time is deceptive and that Chesnutt

⁷ Chesnutt’s fiction appeared, for example, in *The Atlantic Monthly* in the company of the most famous authors such as Henry James (“Po’ Sandy” appeared together with James’s “The Aspern Papers” and “Dave’s Neckless” came out in the same issue as James’s *The Tragic Muse*).

“skillfully disguises those trenchant interrogations” which has played a roll in his uneasy position in American letters (Duncan 1998: 5). At the same time, Chesnutt pursued through fiction what critics today acknowledge are cleverly masked didactic aims of “elevating” his (white) readership of the immorality of the injustice blacks experienced in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods.⁸ Cognizant of the hostile Southern reception of works critical of slavery like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Chesnutt pursued his didactic endeavor in a furtive way, or, as twenty-one-year-old Chesnutt himself put it in his *Journal*, “[...] while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling” (Chesnutt 1993: 140). To be sure, violent racial injustice raged – for the most part unchecked – in the two decades that Chesnutt did most of his publishing, 1885-1905. In the 1890s “[...] on average one lynching was being perpetrated every three days in the United States [...]” (Kantrowitz 1998: 226), and lynching reached historically high numbers right after World War I when Black G.I.s returned to the United States while Chesnutt was writing *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* Yet, Chesnutt’s fiction does not exclusively address his own time. His fiction puts forward transhistorical resonance.

The title of this dissertation “Signifying in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt” references a term made current by means of the poststructuralist criticism of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. His study, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988), describes the complex motivated and unmotivated intertextual revision by African American writers. While Gates dedicated little space in his renowned work on Chesnutt (neither in *The Signifying Monkey* nor in his other

⁸ Not all critics agree to the pervasiveness of all Chesnutt’s fiction being directed to didactic aims. In one article William Andrews cites a letter dated April 31, 1900 from Chesnutt to Howells which “presages Chesnutt’s move toward more explicitly didactic fiction” – namely *The Marrow of Tradition* (Andrews 1976: 331) Ferguson on the other hand, maintains that “[t]hroughout his lifetime, Chesnutt never strayed far from these basic literary and personal principles (Ferguson 2001: 2). In other words, debate still ensues about how “didactic” *The Conjure Woman* and *The House behind the Cedars* are while there is little debate about his later novels.

criticism), in Houghton Mifflin's edition of Chesnutt's *Selected Writings*, SallyAnn H. Ferguson entitles her introduction "Charles W. Chesnutt: An American Signifier" (Ferguson 2001: 1). In this preamble however, Ferguson only emphasizes signifying on Biblical motifs through Christ-like black trickster characters juxtaposed, in the main, to most of Chesnutt's white characters who suppress them. No revision by Chesnutt of other English, American or African American texts is referred to by Ferguson except, like Gates, cursorily referencing a slave narrative.⁹ While slave narratives constitute the majority of literary writing preceding Chesnutt's publications, Chesnutt also read many other works which figure within the Gatesian understanding of "signifyin(g)." In *Figures in Black* (1987), Gates puts the matter clearly:

We are able to trace such complex intertextual Signifyin(g) relations by explicating what I like to think of as Discourse of the Black Other in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By "Discourse of the Black" I mean to say the literature that persons of African descent created as well as the nonblack literature that depicted black characters. The phrase, then, suggests both how blacks figured language and how blacks and their blackness were figured in Western languages [...] (Gates 1987: 49).

I wish to explore selections of Chesnutt's literary production by applying the Gatesian theory of signifying at length, including black characters as represented by white authors. To a great extent I will rely on *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1993) which, along with his *Essays and Speeches* (1999) and two volumes of his letters (1997 and 2002), serve as excellent tools indicating not only which Western writers¹⁰ Chesnutt recorded having read but in a number of cases how he actually came to view them.

⁹ These scholars are not alone. In one article, Ronald Walcott (1973) sees "The Sheriff's Children" as a parable of Cain and Abel in Genesis while in a book dedicated to Chesnutt's narrative technique Charles Duncan shows Chesnutt's parody of the Bible in "The Fall of Adam" (Duncan 1998: 109).

¹⁰ The overwhelming majority of them recorded in his *Journal* were white writers.

1.1 Critical Reception of Chesnutt's Fiction

More than anyone else, Howells played the most significant role in Chesnutt's critical and popular reception in his lifetime. In the midst of his short professional book-publishing career, Chesnutt had received the praise of the powerful and influential novelist and critic William Dean Howells (1837-1920) for his two short story collections in a review in 1900. Yet, in the very next year Howells penned a critical review for his second published novel, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Howells stated that this novel "[...] is too clearly of a judgment that is made up" and "would be better if it was not so bitter" (Howells 1901: 882). In declaring it "bitter" for the public yearning for reconciliation, Howells essentially closed the door to public approval of Chesnutt's novel – to great obloquy. Critics as early as H.L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis¹¹ have contrasted the kind of realism evident in this historical novel with the often criticized Howellsian position that "our novelists [...] concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of American life which are the more American [...]" (quoted in Cunliffe 1970: 206). Recent critics have cited especially the focused praise Howells directed towards Dunbar's dialect poetry and Chesnutt's dialect fiction and his unambiguous approval of the accommodating views of Booker T. Washington, views Chesnutt clearly did not valorize in his fiction but unambiguously criticized (see Andrews 1976 and McElrath 1997).¹² The diminution of Chesnutt's popularity subsequently continued only until a modest revival in sales occurred in the 1960s followed by a substantial increase in critical attention from the mid-1980s onward.

In the years before his revival, Chesnutt had few critics take note of his contribution to American letters. One exception is a very early analysis of African

¹¹ See Mencken's "The Dean" (1962) and Lewis's "The American Fear of Literature" (Nobel Prize Address) (1953)

¹² In other words, Chesnutt's rather militant novel *The Marrow of Tradition* did not accommodate Southern segregationists as Booker T. Washington approvingly did.

American criticism, J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939, republished 1988). His study particularly lauded the oral tradition in African American literature which obviously includes Chesnutt's use of the vernacular in storytelling. Redding points out that African American fiction which began with William Wells Brown in the 1850s up until Chesnutt were "doctrinal, definitely conditioned to the ends of propaganda. A willful (and perhaps necessary) monopticism had blinded them to other treatment [...]" and that African American fiction and nonfiction "were still infected by the deadly virus when Charles Chesnutt began his literary career [...]" (Redding 1988: 39).

In this chronological overview of African American letters which includes every literary genre, Chesnutt follows a section on three poets, the last of which is his contemporary Paul Laurence Dunbar. In Redding's study, more attentive writing is dedicated to Chesnutt's short stories than to his novels. Chesnutt's stories in *The Conjure Woman* "bespeaks the writer's artistic sincerity" (Redding 1988: 68). Interestingly, he particularly singles out "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" as "the most worthy prose fiction that the Negro had produced." Redding highly praises this story: "It is not the weak pseudo-tragedy of propaganda, it is not pathos and tears in which Chesnutt deals - it is the fundamental stuff of life translated into the folk terms of a people who knew true tragedy" (Redding 1988: 69).

Redding is puzzled by the second collection of short stories, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* because he cannot discern any one concrete political standpoint and that aggravates him: "what is the author's point of view?" In some moments he thinks Chesnutt is ridiculing his characters "based on the tragic absurdity of colorphobia" (Redding 1988: 71), rather than being wise to Chesnutt's satire. Chesnutt had many yarns to unroll: the experiences he knows or

has observed obviously do not always echo the author's (political) point of view.¹³ In addition to conflating narrator and author, an additional mistake to be noted on Redding's part, the stories in *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* are not all localized in Ohio as Redding asserts: "The Sheriff's Children", "The Bouquet" and "The Web of Circumstance" are set in the South. About the collection generally, Redding states that the theme of miscegenation in every story are "situation stories," which "represent a new approach to the Negro character in fiction." Without exaggerating, Chesnutt showed "artistically and not too obviously of the way of life to which the Negro might attain were it not for the bugaboo of color" (Redding 1988: 72).¹⁴

Professor Redding is ambivalent about Chesnutt's novels and writes much less about them. He compares the moral dilemma of Chesnutt's Rena Walden (Warwick) in *The House behind the Cedars* with Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Both characters have a secret they feel morally obliged to disclose before marriage. Unlike Tess however, Redding argues that Rena has committed no sin. Redding does not consider the 19th century southern white view that a person of mixed racial heritage secretly passing as white would be regarded as a sinner for concealing her ancestry. Redding contends that in *The House behind the Cedars* the struggle between happiness and the desire to keep the highest standards of fidelity which - due to the situation a light-skinned African American finds herself - reflects "a Hardian flavor" Redding finds so impressive: "The stark, bare tragedy and the resolution in death [...] for downright power, no novel of the Negro race quite equals *The House behind the Cedars*" (Redding 1988: 73).

¹³ One should note an essential contradiction between Redding deploring propaganda on the one hand and his demand for consistency in a "political point of view" on the other.

¹⁴ Later, Malcolm Bradbury elaborated further on Chesnutt's novelty in asserting that Chesnutt's works "show the beginnings of a tradition that would come to real fruition in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s" (Bradbury 1992: 22).

As to Chesnutt's second published novel, Redding sharply condemns *The Marrow of Tradition* as a demonstration of Chesnutt's artistic ineptitude and as sheer propaganda: "All the reasonable sympathy, so marked in his previous books, and so necessary to fine artistic accomplishment, is gone [...] nothing of artistic sanity saves the novel from its melodramatic madness" (Redding 1988: 74-75). Redding impulsively places Chesnutt's treatment of the mood and character in *The Marrow of Tradition* side by side with William Wells Brown's first novel *Clotel*, i.e., characters which are "not real to us as an individual or a type" because "of the necessity of yielding to the demands of propaganda" (Redding 1988: 27-28), which is in stark contrast with Howells's otherwise negative review of the same novel in which Howells admits that Chesnutt "deals his blows so absolutely without flourish that" he had "nothing but admiration for him" (Howells 1901: 882). Certainly Chesnutt wrote in his historical novel of the 1898 massacre in Wilmington, North Carolina, and in this sense the novel serves as propaganda. Yet in Chesnutt's generation of African American writers, this attribute was not always regarded negatively. Du Bois unyieldingly attests to this view in "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926):

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists [...] I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda (Du Bois 2000: 22).¹⁵

The final novel by Chesnutt published in Redding's lifetime, *The Colonel's Dream*, is "more delicately wrought" even though it is "a novel of purpose" (Redding 1939: 75). Redding tells little more than a summary of the tragic plot and he regards, among the three novels, most highly the artistic value of Chesnutt's first novel *The House behind the Cedars*, and most praiseworthy of all his literary output *The*

¹⁵ For a comparison of Du Bois's doctrine with Percy Bysshe Shelley's dictum that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" see Baker (1988): *Afro-American Poetics*, 51.

Conjure Woman tales, where Chesnutt "brought Negro creative literature much further along [...] he worked dangerous, habit-ridden material with calm and fearlessness" (Redding 1988: 76). While Redding was a professor at universities such as Louisiana State University, George Washington and Cornell, his impact was moderate at best and his acknowledgment and praise of *The House behind the Cedars* and of *The Conjure Woman* exerted little influence. Chesnutt rarely appeared in anthologies in the U.S. or abroad except in volumes dedicated exclusively to African American fiction.¹⁶

While a number of short studies appeared in the U.S., just a few books were dedicated to his work. The first biography, a valuable contribution to Chesnutt studies given both the personal access to the author and his work, was written by Chesnutt's daughter in 1952 employing her personal knowledge of her father and friends, her access to his letters and her own memory.¹⁷ A linguistic analysis of Chesnutt's use of dialect by Charles Foster (1971) concludes that his orthographic rendering of African American Vernacular, especially that of "Uncle Julius" in *The Conjure Woman* and other dialect stories, corresponds empirically to the pronunciation studies collected by Guy S. Lowman in Fayetteville, North Carolina.¹⁸ The first (uncritical) study of his literary output enthusiastically extolled the merits of the neglected writer and was published in 1974.¹⁹ Until 1980, no critical monograph was written about his fiction. The first work was the critical biography by the African American literary historian

¹⁶ For the publication history of Chesnutt's fiction, see Sylvie Lyons Render's "Introduction" in *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1981). Up to now none of Chesnutt's fiction has appeared in Czech translation, not even in the groundbreaking anthology *Masky a tváře černé Ameriky* (1985), though in Chesnutt's lifetime some of his stories were published in French and all of the *The Conjure Woman* tales have been published in Germany as *Sklavenmärchen aus Nordamerika* (1991)

¹⁷ Chesnutt, Helen (1952): *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press

¹⁸ Foster, Charles W. (1971): *The Phonology of The Conjure Tales by Charles W. Chesnutt*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

¹⁹ J. Noel Heermance (1974): *Charles W. Chesnutt: America's First Great Black Novelist*. Hamden (Connecticut), Anchon.

William L. Andrews entitled *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*. In the same year a “Twayne US Authors Series” volume on Chesnutt appeared as well by Sylvia Lyons Render.²⁰ From the mid-1980s, a steady increase of critical scholarship had been forthcoming until the mid-1990s when a flood of articles has been coming out.

After Chesnutt’s three hitherto unpublished novels, collected letters, journals, essays and speeches were edited and published, there subsequently followed quite a number of book-length studies of Chesnutt’s fiction which are either still in print or easily obtainable. Henry Wonham’s *Charles W. Chesnutt: a Study of the Short Fiction* (1998) interprets the most famous tales and stories and includes some of his essays and finally famous works of short criticism (ranging from Chesnutt’s contemporary Howells to current scholars of today); a full-length narratological study – Charles Duncan’s *The Absent Man: The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1998) which argues that the difficulty in reading Chesnutt makes him an “enigmatic figure” or an absent man, and seeks out to “reveal” him through this narratological elucidation; Dean McWilliams’s *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (2002) which maintains that Chesnutt depicts race through his fiction and essays as a social construct; Matthew Wilson’s *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (2004) is an application of the relatively new critical approach of whiteness to Chesnutt’s fiction; and finally Ryan Simmons’s *Chesnutt and Realism: A Study of the Novels* (2006) undertakes a study of Chesnutt through the lens of “realism,” a term which Simmons calls for a needed redefinition and reconsideration in view of Chesnutt’s “job of articulating the realities of race” (Simmons 2006: 7). These studies have taken neither an in-depth consideration of the literary sources of Chesnutt’s fiction

²⁰ Frances Richardson Keller, a historian, published her historical (rather than literary-oriented) biography *An American Crusade: the Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt*, focusing especially on his political activities and essays, in 1978.

nor attempted a comprehensive examination of the complex revisions he undertook via parody, irony or satire.

1.2 Theoretical Approach to the Intertextual Analysis

For the last three decades criticism has reformulated the notion of literary history as a dynamic interplay of texts, as texts which “talk” to each other. J. Hillis Miller characterizes literary works as “inhibited [...] by a long chain of parasitical presences, echoes, allusions, guests, ghosts of previous texts” (Miller 1977:446). Moreover, the parody employed by Chesnutt can be regarded as “signifyin(g)” as Henry Louis Gates conveys the term in *The Signifying Monkey* where he refers mostly to the intertextual, formal revision and implication by black authors on previous text(s) by black authors. A few critics such as William E. Cane have misunderstood Gates’ theory of “Signifyin(g)” to exclude white texts as a target of parody. While Gates employs the term “signifyin(g)” as a metaphor for this formal revision of black texts, his study nevertheless leaves the door open for black authorial revision of white texts as well. Gates refers to sundry parodies of white authors in, for example, Wole Soyinka’s short play *The Lion and the Jewel* which “[s]ignifies [...] in our sense of the term [...] upon Shakespeare” as well as numerous occasions of Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s revision of James Whitcomb Riley. Likewise he refers to Sterling Brown’s “riff” on one of Robert Penn Warren’s poems and LeRoi Jones’s revision of W.B. Yeats (Gates 1988: 107, 122-123).

The key point in citing Chesnutt’s parody, specifically his revision of motifs and motivations of the characters in Ovid’s stories and the novels of Apuleius, Thackeray, Scott, Cable and Tourgée (as well as the prevailing tropes in African American fiction generally) is best pointed out by Gates who describes theorizing the black tradition:

Our task is not to reinvent our traditions as if they bore no relation to that tradition created and borne, in the main, by white men. Our writers used that impressive tradition to define themselves, both with and against their concept of received order... black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms (Gates 1988: xxiii, xxiv).

Applying his theory, Gates wrote comprehensive analyses in *The Signifying Monkey* of novels by Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker. In clarifying his theory, he also cited extensively from slave narratives, folklore, jazz lyrics, nursery rhymes, and from fiction by Harper, Wright, Ellison and some others. While Gates mentions Chesnutt as an influential part of early African American fiction (Gates 1988: 122), he does not reference Chesnutt's African American predecessors, but the lack of publications by black fiction writers, which, Gates argues, constitutes Chesnutt's greatest motivation: "To become the first black person to do so [i.e., publish a volume of stories or a novel] was Chesnutt's great preoccupation" (Gates 1988: 115). Gates then notes one exception, that of William Wells Brown:

[...] he felt the pull of another influence [besides Tourgée], one he was determined to undermine. And this influence was that of William Wells Brown, a prolific author and a leading figure in the black abolitionist movement [...] Chesnutt uses the occasion of "skimming" Brown's book [*The Negro in the American Rebellion, His Heroism and His Fidelity*] on March 17, 1881, to reassert the significance of his mission, which was no less than to inscribe the black's name on the tabula rasa of Western literature (Gates 1988: 116-7).

Gates cites Chesnutt denigrating the writings of William Wells Brown: "[...] if they were not written by a colored man, they would not sell enough to pay for the printing" (Gates 1988: 117)²¹ and interprets Chesnutt's negative criticism to Brown's lack of "images of middle-class respectability and gentility" (Gates 1988: 117). Chesnutt

²¹ This Chesnutt quote may be located in his *Journal* published after Gates's *Signifying Monkey* came out (Chesnutt 1993c: 164).

finds the (historical) information interesting enough, but not in the way it was rendered. Clearly, Chesnutt is denying any validity to artistic quality in the publications of black writers of the past in his *Journal*. Gates's argument runs along the line that even though Chesnutt in fact wishes to be the first and denies Brown's position as the first African American author, Chesnutt "structured the central plot of "The Passing of Grandison" (1899) after the plot of chapter XIII ("The Slave's Escape") of Brown's last novel, *My Southern Home, or, The South and Its People* (1880), arguing that Chesnutt's story was "an instance of a motivated Signifyin(g) revision" (Gates 1988: 117). My view is that while Chesnutt may have viewed Brown a poor word-smith, he did not mean to denigrate his life and experiences as a runaway-slave-turned-abolitionist, and merely thought his writings poorly rendered.²² Moreover, Chesnutt's "redressing of Brown's chapter," according to Richard O. Lewis, was limited to Brown's plot structure, not the plot itself.

Gates curiously designates the genre of this book as a novel, though this work is called a "autobiographical memoir" by its author in his "Preface." *My Southern Home, or, The South and Its People* includes commentaries from his travels, transcriptions of folk songs he encountered while traveling, and rewritten material from his previous publications. As Ernest states concerning the escape chapter which Gates describes, "The early part of the book is based on Brown's life [...] He tells of escapes and describes life under slavery, but largely presents himself as an observer and commentator" (Ernest 2008: 89-90). He subsequently writes about antebellum laws directed only to free blacks, the efforts to reopen the African slave trade in 1860 and other aspects of Southern political history. In the most recently

²² Chesnutt's criticism of Brown's lack of artistic writing skills anticipates W.E.B. Du Bois's criticism of Booker T. Washington's writing: white Chesnutt and Du Bois were never enslaved, Brown and Washington wrote from personal experiences their respective slave narratives, addressing the ensuing disadvantages.

published paperback (Mentor, 1993), *My Southern Home, or, The South and Its People* is referred to by its editor, William L. Andrews, as “autobiography.” It seems then that only by restructuring the escape plot of a work of nonfiction, Chesnutt does not at first deny validity to Brown’s writing to only quietly validate him later in a short story as “an instance of a motivated Signifyin(g) revision.” Moreover, the tactics employed in the escape in Brown’s narration of the slave Jerome from Natchez, Mississippi (i.e., faking being a steamboat hand and later receiving help from Quakers) and the fantastic mask on the part of Chesnutt’s “loyal” slave Grandison who tricks his owner into thinking he has “escaped” from abolitionists makes the redressing of the chapter structure either coincidence or an unconscious effort, and therefore unmotivated rather than “motivated Signifyin(g) revision.” Since this instance in “The Passing of Grandison” is the sole example that Henry Louis Gates cites of Chesnutt signifying on an African American work of fiction, I in contrast argue that Chesnutt redresses no African American work of fiction preceding his own publications. At best, Gates may be referring to an instance of unmotivated, unconscious revision of nonfiction, and specifically a chapter taken largely from his own slave narrative.

Gates argues that Chesnutt is hardly the only African American to deny influence from the literary tradition of African Americans: “[...] in general, black authors do not admit to a line of literary descent within their own literary tradition” (Gates 1988: 120). He cites Richard Wright as a similar example: “Richard Wright revoices Charles Chesnutt’s opinion that he had no black literary antecedents worthy of revising; rather Wright turned to the novels of the Western tradition for influence” (Gates 1988: 118). While it is accurate to describe Chesnutt’s ambition to be a great author, he does not write of his ambition of being the first African American or black

author. While noting that whites writing about blacks in novels have enjoyed great literary success, he believes a “Negro” could depict black characters more accurately. Chesnutt also never pursued fame as a “Negro writer.” For more than a decade after his first major breakthrough (when in 1887 *The Atlantic Monthly* published “The Goophered Grapevine”), very few knew that Chesnutt had any black ancestry until Howells revealed the fact publicly in his 1900 review of his two volumes of short stories (Howells 1999: 52-54).

* * *

After his decline in reception, Chesnutt did not stand high in the canon for many years; indeed he and his writing had been repeatedly assessed as “accommodationist” (as the beloved African American Vernacular poet Paul Laurence Dunbar was likewise labeled). Chesnutt’s fiction was sorely neglected for most of the 20th century. Much of this neglect may be linked with Chesnutt’s most famous book, *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and its often comic moments, as well as his use of African American Vernacular (which many critics linked with the hated minstrels and the plantation literature). Moreover, *The Conjure Woman* deployed of a similar narrative framing of rustic stories of an ex-slave talking to white people as Joel Chandler Harris’s popular *Tales of Uncle Remus*, which for readers too closely resembled the same plantation literature written by southern white apologists of the former Confederacy narrated by a former slave longing for the “good old days” before the war. Certainly, linking Chesnutt’s stories with acquiescence of racist minstrels or plantation literature is a terrific misreading, and reflects the difficulties some readers may have in overcoming an understandable contempt for shows or vernacular

literature representing black characters as child-like and stupid for the entertainment of white audiences, as Richard Wright wrote in an essay in 1937.²³

Perhaps the lowest point in the history of Chesnutt's reception came in 1962 with the publication of "Myth of Negro Literature" by the African American poet LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), published in *The Saturday Review* in 1962 and later reprinted in his collection, *Home. Social Essays*. After dismissing the major African American novelists in the canon, LeRoi Jones specifies Chesnutt by name as the example of the "spectacular vapidty" in trying "to prove to America...that they were not who they were, *i.e.*, Negroes" (Jones 1968: 106). In this essay, he views black writers of literature originating from the middle class, and claims that when blacks enter or are members of the middle class, membership to that class pushes black identity out.²⁴ Moreover, middle class blacks are demeaning to black culture because they imitate "white models." This is not true, Jones asserts, with jazz music.

As Josef Jařab penetratingly puts it, Jones "created two myths of his own, namely the myth of *white black literature* and the myth of *black black music*" (Jařab 1985: 591). As Jones would have it, Charles Chesnutt's middle class identity evidently resulted in his portraits of characters which I can only identify in some of his stories in the second collection of stories, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* and possibly a very poor reading of *The Conjure Woman*. As Jones disparagingly puts it,

[...] the embarrassing and inverted paternalism of Charles Chesnutt and his 'refined Afro-American' heroes are far cries from the richness

²³ Without pointing to Chesnutt by name, Richard Wright argued in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" that instead of social consciousness, black writing "went a-begging to white America [...] dressed in knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human [...]" (Wright 2000: 45).

²⁴ This interpretation may be contrasted with the argument put forth by Nowatzki thirty years later in which Chesnutt "passed" into the white subgenre of plantation literature as a means of subverting its ideology (Nowatzki 1995: 20-36). Since the mid-1990s, most scholars have subscribed to Nowatzki's theory.

and profundity of the blues. And it is impossible to mention the achievements of the Negro in any area of artistic endeavor with as much significance as in spirituals, blues and jazz (Jones 1968: 106-107).

In contrast, Henry Louis Gates cites the African American authors' reading of other black literature and, by means of mimetic patterns of African American rhetoric, Gates observes the magnitude in this African American artistic tendency to "signify." Jones, conversely, dismisses black writers generally as "middle class" and urges black writers (both of the 1960s and those of the future) to attempt exactly the opposite of signifying on previous texts:

If there is ever a Negro literature, it must disengage itself from the weak heinous elements of the culture that spawned it [i.e., of the middle class], and use its (African American) existence as evidence of a more profound America." (Jones 1966:115).

I suggest that Jones's prescription, written during a period in which, as Josef Jařab points out, the "Black Aestheticians" emphasized "a dehistoricized interpretation of black American literature" which was "not frequently enough based on a reasoned analysis of the past" (Jařab 1985: 590) may be contrasted with Gates's semiotic observations of the African and African American rhetoric. Jones insists on African American existence as the source of creative literary production rather than any signifying on previous texts since his overall view of black literature as bourgeois divorces the writer from black experience and identity.²⁵

²⁵ The dichotomy between the two positions above presages the famous debate between Henry Louis Gates and Joyce Ann Joyce in *New Literary History* in 1987 concerning the black literary tradition in which Joyce attacked the black poststructural critics as distant from the realities of black social and historical experience; Gates responded by asserting the need to create a distance between reader and text in order to better distinguish the formal workings of the texts. See Gates (1987b) and Joyce (1987).

Ignoring the fact that a mere cursory examination of Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) can hardly allow it to be regarded as "accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege" or *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), which by most critical accounts is an indictment against passing, concluding that assimilation into the white majority brings tragic conclusions, this paper will attempt to address both Gates's theory of signifyin(g) and Jones's critique of Chesnutt's "fancied accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege" in what must have been Jones's principal target: Chesnutt's passing novels and his Blue Vein stories.²⁶ Jones seems to ignore the possibility of what Eric Sundquist describes as literary tricksterism after Reconstruction in which "the racist appropriation of black life in offensive mannerisms gave way to an African American reversal of the stereotype" (Sundquist 1993: 277). It is the very nature of signifying that Jones appears not to recognize because, as Roger Abrahams explains,

To the outside world, such signifying is sometimes regarded as a mark of irresponsible irreverence; it may make serious matters seem playful, or the subject of banter. But this is exactly what is intended [...] it tests the limits of meaning by exploring the edges of believability (quoted in Sundquist 1993: 279-280).

Chesnutt indicates his fascination in his *Journal* that white writers had been enjoying great success in writing about blacks in the South, and it is clear that the financial success of these authors appealed to him greatly. However, also the plight of young blacks, the next generation that he was teaching in Fayetteville, North Carolina fascinated him as well. Chesnutt married a darker-skinned teacher named Susan Perry in 1878 and two daughters were born in the following two years. Having traveled to Washington, D.C. in 1879, Chesnutt carefully considered leaving the

²⁶ Jařab shows how, within a few years of Jones's "Myth of Negro Literature," he changed his attitude and conditionally praised some black writers, though not the fiction of Chesnutt (Jařab 1985: 588).

South to escape the stunting isolation in Fayetteville, and, as he repeatedly wrote in his journal, not to expose his children to the limitations he had been forced to overcome in the South.

With his light complexion²⁷ Chesnutt could pass as white though within his own community in Fayetteville, North Carolina, he was known to originate from the population of free colored people to whom he refers to repeatedly in his conjure tales and other fiction. Chesnutt was denied highly desired educational opportunities in town because of his race. He twice tried to obtain foreign language instruction but the teachers were told that accepting such a pupil would result in the other pupils leaving his lessons (Chesnutt 1993c: 93, 142).²⁸ His daughter Helen Chesnutt wrote in her biography that her father had been accepted to West Point Academy until it was ascertained that he was African American (Chesnutt: 1952: 57). As a self-made man educationally, he taught himself Greek, Latin, French, mathematics and read the classics as well as German and French literature, often in the original.²⁹ Burns, Dickens, Byron and German romantic poetry are extensively quoted in his teenage years in his journal.

In addition to his journal, letters and essays, Chesnutt makes direct and indirect references to a variety of authors in most of his novels. In his first published novel, *The House behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt lists the literary and historical works left by John Walden's white father which this hero read literally as a means to pass as a white gentleman. Although John Walden was not born into slavery, the slave narrative trope of literacy yielding freedom is redressed by Chesnutt for free blacks.

²⁷ From Chesnutt's *Journal*, he writes as a 17 year-old: "At the pond this morning one fellow said "he'd be damned" if there was any nigger blood in me [...] I believe I'll leave here and pass anyhow, for I am as white as any of them" (Chesnutt 1997c: 78).

²⁸ He describes his frustrations in his *Journal*: "As to procuring instruction in Latin, French, German or Music, that is entirely out of the question. First class teachers would not teach a "nigger" and I would have no other sort" (Chesnutt 1997c: 93).

²⁹ Chesnutt also learned to play the organ on his own and played at church services in Fayetteville.

From Chesnutt's *Journals* becomes obvious that John Walden's self-education is an autobiographical feature of this novel. He slips in powerful critique of the social injustices blacks suffered in the post-bellum period. Addressing these social injustices is Chesnutt's didactic aim. As Chesnutt wrote in his journal on May 29, 1879:

If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort. The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites [...] This work is of a twofold character. The negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and quality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it – to accustom the public mind to the idea: and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling (Chesnutt 1993c: 139-140).

As Chesnutt indicates as a twenty-year old, the aim of his didactic texts would be to lift up white people's prejudiced behavior³⁰ by utilizing a popular romantic style that would entertain the white addressees while "imperceptibly" working in the idea of social justice into his fiction. Hence, Chesnutt does not vehemently expound the case of social injustice in *The Conjure Woman* and *The House behind the Cedars* to his overwhelmingly white readership at the turn of the century. Instead, Chesnutt employs in these works the African American trope of the "trickster" or "passer" to mask his didactic aims, a vaguely subversive means of getting into and changing the minds of his predominantly prejudiced white readership, somewhat akin to "change the joke and slip the yoke" phrase made renowned through Ralph Ellison's famous essay from 1958 so entitled about white misconceptions about black folklore (Ellison 1964: 61-73).

³⁰ It is necessary to be clear that most slave narratives were almost exclusively didactic in nature. An exception is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) in the first chapter of which the adventures are also to be regarded as interesting reading, in addition to promoting "interests of humanity" or, more concretely, abolitionism.

Yet, in spite of Chesnutt's subtlety in his attempts to change views of whites, Chesnutt still found himself trapped within a tradition of relating African American attempts at publishing literary writing to white intervention. This problem will be noted, particularly in the chapters relating Chesnutt's novels and the respective influence of George Washington Cable and Albion W. Tourgée, the notion of "mentor" – a white writer advising an African American author how to write successfully to a white (and often racist) audience – is part of a major step forward in the evolution of the white-black literary relationship. The early step in this relationship preceding Chesnutt was based, according to Robert Burns Stepto³¹ on the authentication process by respected white personalities who prefaced literary works. These prefaces were written to authenticate to the (white) reading audience that the black man or woman really wrote the work of poetry, for example the published poetry of Phillis Wheatley, or the slave narrative, including the most famous American abolitionist narratives by William Wells Brown or Frederick Douglass. Stepto shows how authorial control was gained by black authors over the centuries. While he does not cite Chesnutt's many white mentors, he covers the mentors of Harlem Renaissance authors such as Zora Neale Hurston all the way through to Ralph Ellison whose authorial control was obtained in its most patent form. Yet as Gates perceptively reveals in *Figures in Black* (1987), this understanding of the literary relationship between blacks and whites "concerns itself with the signified, and not especially with the signifier" (Gates 1987: 48). With regard to Chesnutt, this dissertation aims to rectify that absence.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. also shows how signifying also alters previous texts by way of various word tricks or "verbal horseplay" as Gates cites jazz musician Mezz

³¹ See Robert Stepto (1979): *From Behind the Veil: A Study of the Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press.

Mezzrow, which are "designed to train the subject 'to think faster and be more nimble-witted'" (Gates 1988: 69). In chapters 2 and 4 it will be show how Chesnutt employs in selected short stories the slippage between signifier and signified, a particular African American rhetorical play of language, linked not only with a relation to racial identity but as an indirect means of representing suppressed anxieties and desires, as Gates shows in his examination of Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in chapter 5 of *The Signifying Monkey*.

Gates also points to free indirect discourse as another mode of signifying. That Chesnutt employs free indirect discourse will be made evident in chapter 3 whereby two light-skinned male protagonists in two early novels are compelled to make unambiguous their racial identity (or in the other case, pass as white) within their respective communities. This strategy of narration (*style indirect libre*) allows Chesnutt to signify upon the tension of two separate racial communities (Gates 1988: 194).

* * *

By way of clarification, some major sections of chapters were published previously in Czech journals or proceedings. A small part of the second chapter on Apulieus and Ovid was published as "The Mule as Metaphor in the Fiction of Charles Waddell Chesnutt" in a conference proceedings in Brno.³² The majority of chapter 3 on Sir Walter Scott was published in "Signifying on Scots: Charles W. Chesnutt's

³² Koy, Christopher (2005): "The Mule as Metaphor in the Fiction of Charles Waddell Chesnutt." In: *Theory and Practice in English Studies, vol. 4. Proceedings of the Eighth Conference of British, American and Canadian Studies*, Brno: 93-100.

Parodies of Walter Scott” and came out in České Budějovice in 2007.³³ Most recently, a shorter version of the sixth chapter focusing on Albion W. Tourgée was published in “You is got a monst’us heap ter l’arn yit’: Charles Chesnutt’s Revisions of Albion Tourgée’s ‘Carpetbagger’ and ‘White Negro’ Characters” in an *Annual* published by the English Department at the University of Pardubice.³⁴

³³ Koy, Christopher (2007): “Signifying on Scots: Charles W. Chesnutt’s Parodies of Walter Scott” In: *Dream, Imagination and Reality in Literature. South Bohemian Anglo-American Studies No. 1.* České Budějovice: 93-101.

³⁴ Koy, Christopher (2010): “You is got a monst’us heap ter l’arn yit’: Charles Chesnutt’s Revisions of Albion Tourgée’s ‘Carpetbagger’ and ‘White Negro’ Characters” In: *American and British Studies Annual 3*, Šárka Bubíková [ed.]. Pardubice: 87-95.

2.0 Ovid, Apuleius and Animal Symbolism

Charles Chesnutt was fluent in Latin although he had been educated in segregated schools without a Latin teacher and therefore was self-taught.³⁵ As a 21-year-old teacher at a North Carolina public school for “colored” children, Chesnutt describes having dedicated an hour a day outside of his teaching duties to the systematic study of Latin (Chesnutt 1993c: 119). In his journal, Chesnutt recorded his study of Latin:

I do not think that I will ever forget my Latin. The labor I spend in trying to understand it thoroughly, and the patience which I am compelled to exercise in clearing up the doubtful or difficult points, furnishes[,] it seems to me, as severe a course of mental discipline as a college course would afford. (Chesnutt 1993c: 92)

Chesnutt quoted extensively from *The Aeneid*³⁶ and from Cicero’s Catiline Oration in his *Journal*, and he additionally cited what the critics of his day had remarked about the citations he quotes in Latin. He writes of the embarrassing ignorance of the supposed educated class of whites in Fayetteville for their poor knowledge of Latin. Chesnutt records studying Ovid, Horace and Seneca in his *Journal*, and in his conjure stories, as well as his non-dialect short fiction, he puts on display his narrator’s knowledge of many Latin writers as well.³⁷ He successfully

³⁵ In Chesnutt’s *Journal* he describes making the acquaintance of a white teacher-trainer, John J. Ladd who had studied Latin at Brown University in Rhode Island. Ladd was visiting Chesnutt’s hometown in Fayetteville where a school was set up for prospective white teachers in North Carolina (from which Chesnutt was excluded): “I told him of my acquirements and my aims, and he was astonished. I read a selection from Virgil, in order that he might criticise my Latin pronunciation. To my surprise and delight it was perfect, and my labor had not been in vain. He declared that he had never met a youth who, at my age and with my limited opportunities for instruction, had made such marked and rapid progress in learning. He encouraged me to continue my studies [...]” (Chesnutt 1993c: 105).

³⁶ Approximately thirty pages of Latin is copied into his *Journal*.

³⁷ In Chesnutt’s conjure stories alone, Latin writers are referenced via John, the white Northern narrator who frames the actual conjure stories told by Uncle Julius. “The Marked Tree” serves as a typical example, introducing a relative (who wished John’s help in finding a new home in the South) in a peculiar way in his description of the greatest Latin poet: “My relative belonged to the fortunate class of those who need take no thought today for tomorrow’s needs. The dignity of labor is a beautiful modern theory, in which no doubt many of the sterner virtues find their root, but the dignity of ease

passed his love of Latin on to his second daughter, Helen Chesnutt (1880-1969) whom he taught at home additionally German and French.³⁸ Indeed, he taught all of his children at home whatever subjects he viewed the local educational institutions to have lacked.

In Chesnutt's final novel entitled *The Quarry*, he depicts the education of an intellectual light-skinned African American, the protagonist Donald Glover which adheres much to Chesnutt's own education (except that Glover was not self-educated). With regard to his classical philology studies he writes that:

[N]one of his teachers in the high school, not even the principal, had studied Latin or Greek. Donald in his thirst for knowledge must learn them both. The Greek, perhaps because of the unfamiliar letters, did not at first especially appeal to him [...] Latin, on the other hand, he simply ate up, so to speak [...] During a summer vacation, he read the whole twelve books of Virgil's masterpiece – twice as much as demanded in most college courses in a year. (Chesnutt 1999b: 68)

The summer vacation in which Chesnutt himself accomplished nearly this same feat took place, according to his *Journal*, in the summer of 1879 (though in October 1878 he had read from Book 1 to Book 4) of *The Aeneid* in Latin. In the following subchapters, Latin texts which Chesnutt read in the original were revised and placed in a setting and followed a structure quite similar to those of the tales of Uncle Remus. While texts written in Latin at first sight would not seem to fit in with the signifying theory of Henry Louis Gates, Gates himself writes that “[a]nyone who analyzes black literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our

was celebrated at least as long as the days of Horace, a gentleman and philosopher, with some reputation as a poet.” (Chesnutt 1993a: 194)

³⁸ Helen Chesnutt held an undergraduate degree in Latin from Smith College and a Master of Arts in Latin from Columbia University and made her career teaching Latin in Cleveland. She published a Latin textbook, *The Road to Latin* (1932). Among her many pupils was a poet named Langston Hughes. As mentioned earlier, she also wrote the first biography of her father, Charles W. Chesnutt.

canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the Black” (Gates 1988: xxiv).

2.1 Latin in “A Deep Sleeper”

In *The Conjure Woman* Charles Chesnutt’s white narrator, an enterprising businessman from the North, seeks specific information about the land and development possibilities in North Carolina. In the process, he “learns” about antebellum history of racial and social tensions of the region through stories narrated in African American Vernacular English from an elderly ex-slave named Uncle Julius McAdoo. Thus, the tales are made up of a series of black-white dialogues about black-white conflicts (as well as conflicts among blacks). Julius’s tales may be considered in light of the Gatesian theory of Signifyin(g), the trickster tradition of African literature. Uncle Julius McAdoo’s power struggles with the narrator and the narrator’s wife (as well as the masters of his past) fall under the Signifyin(g) Monkey strategy.

Henry Louis Gates has generated a great deal of interest for his theory of African-American rhetoric which may be applied not only to *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, but also to the other tales and stories by Chesnutt first collected and edited by Sylvia Lyons Render. Richard Brodhead has subsequently published all conjure tales together in one volume (including those tales rejected by the white publishers for publication in *The Conjure Woman*). Both collections contain some of the best short stories and tales by Chesnutt and had, until the last thirty years, remained essentially neglected by the critics.

Rather than emphasizing black literature as an investiture of black history, sociology and politics, Gates has placed exacting attention on the nature of black figurative language. Gates argues that what makes black texts different is exactly their trans-historical modes of “signifyin(g)” against the grain of dominance – whether that be of a dominant white ethnocentrism or the lion of the jungle. “Signifyin(g)” functions primarily through the “ambiguities of language” in its capacity for repetition and reversal or revision.

“A Deep Sleeper,” one of six tales meant for but eventually rejected from Chesnut’s first book, *The Conjure Woman*, includes the same narrative set-up of all of the other *Conjure Woman* stories: the unnamed northern white narrator assumes a powerful role and hears the history of local (race) relations from an ex-slave, Uncle Julius. The wrestling of the black man with the white man (and in this case also his sister-in-law) over power via language is evident early in the story within the story narrated by the loquacious Uncle Julius:

“Tom’s gran’daddy wuz name’ Skundus,” he began. “He had a brudder name’ Tushus en’ ernudder name’ Cottus en’ ernudder name’ Squinchus.” The old man paused a moment and gave his leg another hitch.

My sister-in-law was shaking with laughter. “What remarkable names!” she exclaimed. “Where in the world did they get them?”

“Dem names wuz gun ter ‘em by ole Marse Dugal’ McAdoo, w’at I use’ ter b’long ter, en’ dey use’ ter b’long ter. Marse Dugal’ named all de babies w’at wuz bawn on de plantation. Dese young un’s mammy wanted ter call ‘em sump’n plain en’ simple, like *Rastus* er *Caesar* er *George Wash’n’ton*, but ole Marse say no, he want all de niggers on his place ter hab diffe’nt names, so he kin tell ‘em apart. He done use’ up all de common names, so he had ter take sump’n else. Dem names he gun Skundus en’ his brudders is Hebrew names en’ wuz tuk out’n de Bible.” (Chesnutt 1993a: 193-4)

Naturally the reader (like John’s sister-in-law Mabel) knows that these names do not originate from the Bible of the Hebrews. She is puzzled because she does not

recognize the African American vernacular pronunciation of Latin ordinal numbers: *prīmus, secundus, tertius, quārtus, quīntus* etc.³⁹ In naming his slaves in Latin by order of birth, the owner usurps the privilege of family, one of many means of executing his power over the slaves, and in this case, through naming their babies. The joke lies in the masking nature of the Latin language: while Latin is opaque to the unlettered blacks, when rendered into African American Vernacular this “white” language of education⁴⁰ has become inimitable and therefore opaque to whites. While the black slaves have no idea that their names are mere ordinal numbers in the learned language of educated whites, by giving the names innovative phonemes (and eventually developing different meanings) of their own, African American Vernacular English in point of fact subverts white authority to name slave babies in order of birth, resulting in an unknown identification to the white interlocutor. “Skundus” (*secundus*), “Cottus” (*quārtus*) and “Squinchus” (*quīntus*) thus gain new identities to both the signified and signifier. The well-read Mabel neither recognizes nor appreciates the names and, wishing an explanation, she “draws out” the ex-slave, Uncle Julius.

The white woman’s ignorance inveterately delights in the ignorance of the African American narrator, yet she frivolously seeks an ignorant explanation, and receives one: the unusual names, as Julius “translates” them,⁴¹ originate from the Old Testament. When Mabel, the narrator’s sister-in-law, further inquires, “Can you give me chapter and verse?” - Uncle Julius responds, “No, Miss Mabel, I doan know

³⁹ One of the most prominent slave characters in the *Conjure Woman* collection unnamed in the citation above is named “Primus” which would be recognizable in African American vernacular. This character will be discussed later in this chapter.

⁴⁰ Latin has been regarded as the language which was traditionally the educational means of separating white people into their respective social classes.

⁴¹ In this case, Julius unknowingly “translates” African American Vernacular Latin into standard English. His decoding between the two languages is an example of what Gates calls “Black double-voicedness” or a palimpsest in which a commentary is made on a word which the reader can decipher only by reading through the commentary that actually obscures in the very process of evaluating (Gates 1988: 105).

'em. Hit ain' my fault dat I ain't able ter read de Bible. But ez I wuz a-sayin', dis yer Skundus growed up [...]" (Chesnutt 1993a: 194). In essence, Uncle Julius is not aware of the inaccuracy of his explanation because he cannot read the Bible since slaves were legally forbidden to be taught reading and writing. While Mabel enjoys his ignorance and mockingly laughs at him, he defends this situation by stating that it was not his fault.⁴² Chesnutt has Julius react defensively about his lack of literacy (indirectly stating that he is not stupid). It becomes obvious that he wants Mabel to stop laughing at him. In effect, Julius undermines the entertainment value of this minstrel-like appeal she demonstrates in laughing at his ignorance. He modestly attacks her white perception of his (ontological) ignorance as a black slave by stressing that his ignorance of the Bible is not due to stupidity on his part (or on the part of his race), leaving unspoken but understood that his ignorance of the Bible can be traced to white authority's legally-enforced ignorance. That his discourse includes a defensive strategy clearly marks Chesnutt's conjure stories as distinct from the minstrelsy of the humble black subjugated (ex-)slave notable in plantation fiction.

In much the way he operates in other conjure stories, Chesnutt signifies on the minstrel or plantation writing, depicting the "stupid black story teller" whose ignorance is a means of comic entertainment to the (white) audience. In this way, Chesnutt signifies and revises the black story tradition of Joel Chandler Harris and his *Tales of Uncle Remus* (1880) as well as the plantation fiction of Thomas Nelson Page, both of whom depict child-like blacks nostalgic for the return of the plantation "family," and his revision comes in the form of Julius pointing out that it was not his fault that he could not read, a response wholly nonexistent in plantation literature.

⁴² As usual in these conjure stories, Chesnutt does not have Uncle Julius state overtly that whites forbad him the ability to read and therefore kept him ignorant from knowing the word of God.

In his uniquely African American deployment of the Latin language in this conjure story, Chesnutt's metonyms make both a comic and tragic element of slavery oblivious to both his black and white characters, reminiscent of tragic/comic elements in the "Esu-Elegbara" and "Signifying Monkey" trickster figures which Gates appropriates for his theoretical approach to black literature. Moreover, in his second chapter of *The Signifying Monkey* Gates shows a mathematical model of signification depicting standard American English and African American vernacular on intersecting "x" and "y" axes of linguistic discourse as running perpendicular rather than parallel to each other (Gates 1988: 49). Chesnutt, however, adds Latin, a rarely spoken foreign language, into this story. This chart does not depict what Chesnutt has his characters in "A Deep Sleeper" employ, for in this case, one mask meets another mask, and language serves as the means of Chesnutt's joke. Recognizing this signified joke embedded in the tragedy of slavery requires a closer reading via the literary theory of Gates and an ability to recognize what Latin scholars may well argue is Latin's most vulgar form ever spoken (and published).

2.2 Ovid and the Conjure Stories

Born in 43 B.C. at Sulmona (approximately 150 kilometers east of Rome), Publicius Ovidius Naso's poem *The Metamorphoses* is regarded as one of the greatest works in Latin which continues to be a success with a popular reading public. Ovid moves his readers deeply despite his stories appearing at the surface level to be a simple set of stories concerning supernatural transformations. The motive of characters in the plots of the 250 stories by Ovid are multifarious and include greed, passionate, lustful nymphs and gods who succumb to violent fits of rage resulting in disfigurement, murder, cannibalism or rape. Transformations

include humans or nymphs changed into animals, trees and other vegetation. Ovid assumes an unbroken relationship between man and nature, and he shows through his stories to some extent a political interest. The transformations not only link man with nature but reinforce the “Ovidian theme of the very contingency of connectedness” (Feeney 2004: xxi).

Chesnutt’s conjure stories likewise include passionate love, jealousy, greed and death. His stories include trickster figures employing magical power which result in the transformation of characters on a slave plantation, both black and white. For most scholars, Chesnutt’s conjure stories have come from an oral tradition from the African American folktales, the same source that produced *The Tales of Uncle Remus* recorded by Joel Chandler Harris. However, Chesnutt himself wrote that only “The Goophered Grapevine” was directly told to him by a black gardener who worked for his father-in-law in Fayetteville, North Carolina. As Chesnutt states in his 1931 essay “Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem” about his conjure stories,

[...] while they employ much of the universal machinery of wonder stories, especially the metamorphosis, with one exception, that of the first story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” of which the norm was a folk tale, the stories are the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect they differ from the Uncle Remus stories which are avowedly folk tales (Chesnutt 1999a: 544).⁴³

Quite a number of Ovid stories from *The Metamorphoses* are astonishingly similar to the transformation stories described by Chesnutt’s voluble narrator of the framed conjure tales, Uncle Julius McAdoo in *The Conjure Woman*. “Python and Daphne”⁴⁴ Sandy McSwayne is transformed into a tree just like Daphne, and in both cases – as in so many of Ovid’s work – the metamorphosis in this story ultimately

⁴³ Interestingly, the only secondary literature linking Chesnutt’s conjure stories to Ovid is written rather unconvincingly, and, I believe erroneously, to “The Goophered Grapevine,” the single conjure story Chesnutt heard a black man in Fayetteville, North Carolina narrate. See Myers (1979).

⁴⁴ This story is usually entitled “Apollo and Daphne” in Book 1 of Ovid’s great poem.

concerns love. More precisely, forbidden or thwarted love causes these transformations to take place in both stories. In the plot by Ovid, the love is being denied by the beautiful Daphne who is relentlessly pursued by the love-smitten god Apollo.⁴⁵ In the case of the enslaved “Sandy” in Chesnutt’s story “Po’ Sandy,” his love is denied not by his wife but by his master who repeatedly sold or lent either his wives⁴⁶ or him to other neighboring plantations. The master separates Sandy from his second wife as well, abominably forbidding them from being together. His wife, a conjurer woman, suggests solving their separation problem with guile by transforming him, suggesting sundry animals (a rabbit, a dog, a wolf, a mockingbird), finally settling on a quiescent tree in order to avoid being sold away. In Uncle Julius McAdoo’s “gruesome narrative,” however, the tree Sandy’s wife transforms him into a tree which is cut down, brought to a saw mill and cut into lumber to build a schoolhouse, and his wife consequently becomes frenzied and eventually mad after personally witnessing her transformed husband cut into pieces by the circular saw of a nearby lumberyard.

The similarities of the metamorphoses in both the Latin classic and Chesnutt’s story concern injustice and thwarted love, and while the setting and mythmaking details in Ovid’s work naturally differ greatly, the transformation of a person into a tree seems to be unique to only Chesnutt and two of Ovid’s stories based on Greek mythology.⁴⁷ Like Ovid’s gods Cupid and Peneus, the conjure woman, as in most of Chesnutt’s conjure tales, serves as a conduit between the injured party and the

⁴⁵ Cupid has shot Apollo with an arrow to cause him to fall in love with Daphne. Cupid is a trickster figure insofar as he is much less of an authority or as powerful as the Roman gods he shoots.

⁴⁶ Sandy’s first wife was sold when “a spekilater come erlong wid a lot er niggers (Chesnutt 2000: 16) and traded. Sandy then gets a new wife named “Tenie,” a conjure woman, with whom he falls deeply in love.

⁴⁷ No tree transformation appears, for example, in any of *The Tales of Uncle Remus* by Joel Chandler Harris, or any African American folklore collected by Roger Abrahams, Zora Neale Hurston or Richard Dorson. A tree metamorphosis does appear with a positive conclusion in Ovid’s “Philemon and Baucis” (Book 8)

perpetrator of injustice, usually the slave master. In another story in Book 9 of *The Metamorphoses*, “Dryope,”⁴⁸ a picture is provided of the retribution that may happen to anyone harming trees since trees are potentially the abode of nymphs. Precisely the same kind of pernicious warning is enunciated by Uncle Julius McAdoo who urges the newcomer John from Ohio not to use the wood because it is still haunted by the metamorphosized slave Sandy, a warning echoed in another conjure story entitled “The Marked Tree.”⁴⁹

In Ovid’s story “Pan and Syrinx,” Pan is goat-footed, exactly like Primus in “The Conjuror’s Revenge.” Pan and Primus share nearly all personality traits related by these respective authors. A former slave of a nearby plantation who tends horses,⁵⁰ Primus is goat-footed because, near the end of Julius McAdoo’s conjure tale, he was not completely returned back into human form before the conjurer died. In Ovid’s “Pan and Syrinx,” Pan is a rustic God described as working as a musical, noisy and fun-loving shepherd, living in the country, and also physically exhibiting sexual prowess which celebrates masculinity as well as a reflection of the animal itself. In Chesnutt’s story, similar manifestations of Pan are exhibited in Primus, such as his concupiscent behavior toward women generally and toward Sally, a lighter-skinned mulatto, particularly. Primus is described as “de livelies’ han’ on de place, alluz a-dancin’, en drinkin’, en runnin’ roun’, en singin’, en pickin’ de banjo.” (Chesnutt 2000: 42). Like Pan, Primus had “stubborn spells” which caused him to engage in violent attacks. These spells were so dangerous that blacks and whites alike stayed out of his way. After Primus is transformed into a mule, among other actions, he

⁴⁸ In some translations this story is translated into English as “The Transformation of Dryopë”

⁴⁹ In “The Marked Tree” the tree in question looks like an oak tree but is referred to by the African American narrator Julius as a “upas” tree, a tree with poisonous effects that both Lord Byron in the forth canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* allude to.

⁵⁰ Primus appears in a few works of fiction by Chesnutt. In his novel *Mandy Oxendine*, Primus cares for the horses of a murdered white man who had attempted to rape the heroine of the novel.

viciously attacks a slave who made advances on Primus's beautiful mulatto lover, an act Chesnutt transposes into an act of comic violence. Like Pan, Primus is prone not only to violence but to madness (as a mule Primus declines through comic excess consumption of tobacco and alcohol).

The opening of Chesnutt's story depicts the free black man, Primus, violently whipping his horses before Julius McAdoo and a Northern couple for whom McAdoo serves as coachman. This violent behavior is ascribed by Uncle Julius McAdoo as the frustrations of a club-footed ex-slave (and an ex-mule).⁵¹ While the setting and plots differ greatly, the similarities of the characteristics of Ovid's Pan and Chesnutt's Primus are not coincidental.

In Chesnutt's conjure story "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," an innocuous slave woman is sold (or rather exchanged - - for a horse) without her knowledge by her duplicitous master. She has to leave her mother and her infant-baby behind. After some time this baby, called "little Mose," becomes sick, apparently out of longing for his benign mother. His transformation into a humming bird, later into a mockingbird, and finally a sparrow, recalls Ovid's story "Tereus, Procne and Philomela" from Book 6 of the *Metamorphoses* whereby four characters are magically transformed into birds. (A hornet nest is conjured and a hornet likewise flies to the exchanged horse, infecting it with an illness, thus echoing the four metamorphoses into birds that Ovid's story contains.) Becky, her son Mose and the exchanged horse all become deathly sick under the spell of the conjure woman. With brief visitations as metamorphosized birds, both mother and child recover temporarily their health. Unlike Ovid, the efficacy of these permutations results in a happy ending, for the exchange of sale is recalled by both of the white, slave-owning parties because of the illnesses of the

⁵¹ Both Julius and Primus shared the same master and accordingly the same family name, McAdoo.

exchanged “articles of property,” resulting in the jovial reunification of mother and son.

Gender-roles are reflected similarly: men intentionally cause the immeasurable suffering of women and women rectify the situation in both stories. Chesnutt expands upon the gender conflict when John, the narrator crosses swords with his wife in a form of literary criticism of Uncle Julius McAdoo's tale. John derides the “ingenious fairy tale [...] especially the humming-bird episode, and the mocking-bird digression, to say nothing of the doings of the hornet and the sparrow” (Chesnutt 2000: 61). His wife, however, recognizes the story as a woman might – how the child and mother may become physically ill when separated, and declares that

“[t]hose [birds] are mere ornamental details and not at all essential. The story is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war” (Chesnutt 2000: 61).

As in Ovid's classic story, the entire conflict in Chesnutt's story is instigated because of forced family separation and a terrible injustice to a female family member.

In “Narcissus and Echo” in Book 3, arguably Ovid's most famous story, Narcissus falls in love with his own beauty when seeing his image at a clear fountain. He pines away to become one with nature in the form of the flower named after this story. Chesnutt revises this plot in his short story “Lonesome Ben,”⁵² one of the rejected conjure stories Chesnutt penned but did not see published in his first published book *The Conjure Woman* (Brodhead 1993: 25). In this astonishing story of multiple unmotivated signifying, a slave named Ben runs away from his stern master because “he wa'n't gwineter take dat cowhidin” as punishment for drinking alcohol (Chesnutt 1993a: 150). He escapes with some provisions with the intent of

⁵² “Lonesome Ben” was written in 1897, but first published in 1900.

going North, gets lost and after a few days finds himself back where he started. Running out of food and consequently eating clay near a river to kill his hunger pains, Ben hides in the woods and sees his lover Desdy and one of his two children. Upon seeing her and his beloved son Pete walk down a trail, Ben reveals himself from his hiding place but is surprised to find that they completely fail to recognize him and walk on after some exchange of rather inhospitable words. Ben in turn weeps over their quick forgetfulness and goes to a nearby creek. Ben looks at himself in the water's reflection. Moreover, like Narcissus, Ben's vision of himself in the water becomes his own undoing, for he sees that his skin has been transformed from black to a light yellow.

Ben didn' knowed w'at ter make er it fer a minute er so. Fus' he 'lowed he must hab de yaller janders, ersump'n lak dat'! But he had knowed rale dark folks ter hab janders befo', and it hadn't nebber 'fected 'em dat-a-way. But bimeby he got up o'ff'n 'is han's an' knees an' wuz stan'in' lookin' ober de crick at de clay-bank, an' wond'rin' ef de clay he's b'en eat'n' hadn' turnt 'im yaller w'en he heard sump'n say jes' ez plain ez wo'ds. (Chesnutt 1993a: 155)

Ben does not look for a prolonged span of time at his new ugly pigmentation as Narcissus does at his own beautiful image. Rather, his new image audibly haunts him. At this point, Chesnutt combines his revision of Ovid with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

'Turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay!'

He looked all roun', but he couldn' see nobody but a big bullfrog settin' on a log on de yuther side er de crick. An' w'en he turnt roun' an' sta'ted back in de woods, he heard de same thing behin' 'im.

'Turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay!'

Dem wo'ds kep' ringin' in 'is years 'til he fin'ly 'lowed dey wuz boun' ter be so, er e'se dey wouldn' a b'en tol' ter 'im, an' dat he had libbed on

clay so long an' had eat so much, dat he must 'a' jes nach'ly turnt ter clay (Chesnutt 1993a: 155).

The African American narrator Uncle Julius McAdoo is suddenly interrupted by the new, white Ohio-born settler, John, who directly recites from Shakespeare the words of Hamlet:

“Imperious Caesar, turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away,”

I [John] murmured parenthetically.

“Yes, suh,” said the old man, “turnt ter clay. But you's mistook in de name, suh; hit wuz Ben, you 'member, not Caesar. Ole Mars Marrabo did hab a nigger name' Caesar, but dat wuz anudder one.” (Chesnutt: 1993a: 156)

After John is admonished impatiently by his wife for rudely interrupting the narration, Uncle Julius continues his narrative of Ben's fate. To recapitulate, Ben finds it so incredulous that his face turned from dark black to yellow that he himself momentarily thinks the image in the water might be that of another man. Thereafter Ben contemplates that he may be sick from jaundice, though he finally concludes that he must have turned yellow because of all the clay he has been relegated to eat as a runaway slave. Hearing noises in the swamp, Ben then interprets the croaking of the bullfrog as the repetition of the words “Turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay! turnt ter clay!” The repetition of this line haunts and estranges him, making Ben even more lonesome. Just as he looks around to find a man who could look like the image in the water, he turns around thinking a human being has said the words, but instead sees only the bullfrog. In the words of his friend Primus, Ben looks like “de mos' mis'able lookin' merlatter I eber seed” (Chesnutt 1993a: 153).⁵³

⁵³ As Jennifer Fleissner's recent article points out, some black slaves really ate clay, becoming sick and dying from this practice due in part to a lack of food given by slave owners. This phenomenon was

This narrative is then interrupted by the literate interlocutor, John, who references the line from the fifth act of *Hamlet*. The illiterate Julius naturally fails to recognize the literary source of John's Shakespearian utterance and corrects him with regard to the name of the slave in question. The poignant story ends rather grotesquely with the slave turning into clay after he is baked by the sun into brick. Eventually a tree falls from strong wind onto Ben (whose remains transformed into brick). He is thereby smashed into countless pieces. Like Ovid's Narcissus, Ben dies and returns as part of nature to the mother earth.

In the context of the quote from *Hamlet* (Shakespeare xxxx: v.i.205-6), Hamlet utters these lines to Horatio after pondering the physical change of the King's jester, Yorick, whose skull he held in his hand. In this famous part of *Hamlet* preceding the funeral of Ophelia, Hamlet reflects on death, and what becomes of all human beings after life ends. Hamlet asks Horatio if he "thinks Alexander looked o' this fashion l' the earth" (Shakespeare xxxx: v.i. 190-1) and after Horatio's affirmation, Hamlet feels the state of the skull is not useful, but rather "of earth we make loam; and why of that loam – whereto he was converted – might they not stop a beer barrel?" (Shakespeare xxxx: v.i.202-4).

Chesnutt's motivated signifying underscores a Shakespearian meditation on death, thereby foreshadowing Ben's inevitable destiny. Allegorically, Chesnutt uses the sallow pigmentation of clay-skin as more than physical sickness: Ben's madness seems to be less a result of his diet than his irrevocable loss of loved ones who no longer recognize him.⁵⁴ Just as Hamlet lost his father and his respect of his own mother – all said his love of life itself – Ben has lost his beloved family and ultimately

reported and published in nineteenth century medical journals. The results of this diet, called "geophagy," often included a lightened color in skin pigmentation, mental disease and death (Fleissner 2010: 321-331).

⁵⁴ The realistic tragedy of runaway slaves Chesnutt presents in this allegory was the runaway's loss of family and friends, a recurrent theme in slave narratives and early African American novels.

his purpose for living. Like Ophelia,⁵⁵ Ben suffers hallucinations rather than mere physical illness. John perceptively acknowledges his malady by quoting from *Hamlet*. Both Ophelia and Ben die horrifically in a swamp setting. Likewise, Narcissus, Hamlet and Ben express in ways signifying mental neurosis at various moments a keen desire to escape from their respective fates.

While John quotes *Hamlet*, demonstrating his literary edification, Julius misconstrues his naming Caesar for Ben. At a surface reading, Chesnutt seems only to indicate the dichotomy of the literate white name John's knowledge of Shakespeare with a humorous correction by the illiterate Uncle Julius. However, with a recognition of Chesnutt's echo of a scene in *Hamlet*, Ben, the lowly slave, may be understood as a human being ranked as worthy of the same intensity of sympathy as Prince Hamlet shows for Alexander or Caesar. Hence Chesnutt illuminates another horror of slavery – specifically the tragic plight of fugitive slaves – to the reader's attention through his revision of this famous Shakespearian scene. The literary audience advances sympathy by linking the fugitive slave's death with the great heroes of ancient history. Chesnutt thus sensitizes whites – his main literate audience in 1899 when his conjure stories come out – with his didactic aim of elevating the white people by conflating elements of *Hamlet* with a story by Ovid widely known by his white reading audience.⁵⁶

Charles Chesnutt deftly projects the characteristics of heroes as well as some plots from Ovid's stories of magical transformations into his conjured slaves in an antebellum North Carolina setting. In the conjure stories, Chesnutt does not overtly rely on the reader recognizing Ovid's (or for that matter, Shakespeare's) name to

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Ben's wife's name is the unusual name Desdy, short for Desdemona, another likely suggestion of Shakespearian influence.

⁵⁶ Like a novel greatly admired by Chesnutt, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, sympathy was regarded as a means to effect social change through the power of sentiment, producing a fellow feeling to transcend social differences, revealing a common humanity.

support his text's intertextual purpose, for neither name ever appears in a single conjure story. Moreover, with John framing the conjure story-teller's narration, the magic transformations through voodoo is never presented by Chesnutt as anything but heterodoxy to his readers, unlike some of the later African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, whose stories and novels were highly influenced by folklore.⁵⁷ As Eric Sundquist emphasizes, Chesnutt even regarded voodoo as superstitious and the belief system as "forms of primitivism among contemporary African Americans who did not aspire to a more assimilated American middle class" (Sundquist 1993: 135) in his nonfictional essays as well as in his *Journal* where he describes his encounters with superstitious blacks in North and South Carolina.

I believe that Chesnutt's conjure stories are an unambiguous indication of his syncretistic openness to different religious traditions. Clearly, the Ovidian influence featuring myths from the ancient civilization he closely studied is a, if not *the*, major source of stimulation for both plot and character in many of Chesnutt's imaginative conjure stories (rather than the folk tales passed orally by African Americans).⁵⁸

2.3 Apuleius and the Mules in Chesnutt's Fiction

Apuleius of Madauros has exerted some influence on the writing of Charles W. Chesnutt. His novel *Asinus aureus* (most frequently translated as *The Golden Ass*, but literally as 'The Prince of Ass-stories') wielded extensive influence on

⁵⁷ Supported by a Guggenheim fellowship, Hurston composed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) in Haiti while undertaking field work in a scholarly study of the practices of voodoo, and voodoo presented in her study *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) is clearly evident in many aspects of her most famous novel. Moreover, Hurston participated and was a practitioner of this proto-African religion (Koy 2000: 65-74).

⁵⁸ I would like to mention that I read through *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus* (2002), the folk tales collected by ethnologist Richard M. Dorson as well as the tales in Zora Neale Hurston's two collections. I was frustrated to be unable to ascertain Chesnutt's conjure stories having similar characters or plots in these works of African American folklore as one finds in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. I had originally intended to dedicate a chapter to Chesnutt's revision of African American folklore, but I failed to find any resembling his conjure stories.

Shakespeare⁵⁹ and the European adventure novel,⁶⁰ Apuleius created a picaresque novel that at times has qualities of both comic entertainment as well as nightmare-like experiences of its protagonist particularly paralleling Chesnutt's forth conjure story, "The Conjuror's Revenge."

Unlike any of Chesnutt's conjure stories, however, *The Golden Ass* has many lubricious episodes, especially in the second part of the novel. Keeping his fiction acceptable for publication, Chesnutt shared the view of many of his genteel contemporaries such as W. D. Howells and Mark Twain that literary art refrain from any direct description of sexuality. Likewise, graphic descriptions of violence are kept at a minimum with Chesnutt while Apuleius holds nothing back in describing the crimes of his murderers who enslave Lucius the ass.

Both Chesnutt and Apuleius were of mixed ancestry that formed the basis of discrimination in their respective societies. Apuleius publicly defended his biracial ancestry in court in 158 A.D. – "half-Numidian" and "half-Gaetolian")⁶¹ – when on trial for practicing magic thus: "I see no more reason to be ashamed of this than Cyrus the Great of Persia should be ashamed of being half-Mede and half-Persian by descent" (Apuleius 2001: 27). Chesnutt too shares not only the African ancestry but as an American of mixed racial background which he believed included Native American background, he regarded himself as an American first rather than a "Negro." The designation of his time "octoroon" used on occasion in Chesnutt's fiction, is confirmed to be the mixture of Chesnutt himself – "I am really seven-eighths white, but I have never denied the other [...]" (Chesnutt 1997b: 89)

⁵⁹ See for example J.J. M. Tobin (1984): *Shakespeare's Favorite Novel: A Study of 'The Golden Ass' as Prime Source*, Lanham, Md, University Press of America.

⁶⁰ See for example the second essay in M. Bakhtin (1981): *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin, University of Texas Press.

⁶¹ See the "Introduction" by Jack Lindsay to his translation of *The Golden Ass* (Lindsey 1962: 5).

Many attributes of mules in our time and asses in ancient times are similar. In the novel by Apuleius, Lucius “is revealed as one with the slave-worker; and Apuleius’ criticism penetrates to the heart of the social problems of antiquity” (Lindsay 1962: 22). Both animals express a pervasive symbolic metaphor as beast of burdens which, as transformed human beings, characterize slavery. The significant distinction between the two works is the animal into which the heroes are transformed: an ass and a mule. The ass in Apuleius’s day “was held to be a notoriously stupid brute typifying lust, cruelty and wickedness, that is to say, the very opposite of [...] nobility and chastity” so highly admired in Roman society (Grimm 2005: 12). The mule, the sterile offspring of a mare and a male donkey was a beast of burden first bred and used by Spaniards both in their home country and in Spanish colonies. The term mulatto, meaning the offspring of one black parent and one white parent, is a racist term etymologically derived from the Spanish “mulatto” meaning a young mule. It is racist because it associates offspring of animals of different species with a person of mixed ancestry.⁶² The term “mulatto” is a cognate – the Czech language also uses “mulat/mulatka” to denote a person of mixed African and Caucasian ancestry.⁶³

The mule is an important symbol in early African American literature and folklore. As Joel Williamson has pointed out, the “mule was the ubiquitous and important animal in the rural and premodern South” which had no mule ancestors or descendants, so that

as the mule dies, so too dies the mulatto. The association with mules also carried the implication that the hybrid could be continued only by an artificial contrivance, by an unnatural act of mating that ought not and does not have to be, which, in fact, if we but know the truth, must

⁶² The Spanish first termed the racially mixed offspring because they first enslaved Africans across the Atlantic and also introduced mules there.

⁶³ The old-fashioned Czech idiom “*dřít jako mezek*” (*to slave like a mule*) likewise links slave and mule.

be made to be straining against the winds and tides of nature (Williamson 1984: 96).

Much of these characteristics carry weight with the adventures in *The Golden Ass* which includes taboo sexual relations between the ass and a white woman. The overall plot of *Asinus aureus* concerns a young man named Lucius whose love affair with a maid servant brings him to encounter her lady who is also a witch. His curiosity gets the best of him when he watches this lady transform herself into an owl using her mysterious herbal potions. After she flies away, Lucius tries it, but applies to his skin an ointment from the wrong box and is turned into an ass. The subsequent chapters or “books” (except the last one, book eleven), consist of a series of adventures of either experienced or overheard stories which satirically describe much of Roman society – including murder, adultery, witchcraft, corrupt businesses and thievery. The novel shows precious little of a society based on law, honor or an orderly society.

In “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” first published in June 1889 in the *Overland Monthly*, Chesnutt distinctly revises the plot and character of *The Golden Ass*. Chesnutt gave careful attention to contrasting themes with Apuleius. Both works concern themselves with sin, suffering and redemption, and thus are allegorical fables of the human condition.

The fourth story of *The Conjure Woman*, “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” commences with Julius McAdoo, a former slave, resolutely proposing to the white northerner that he identifies black people with the mule. He suggests that instead of a mule, a horse be purchased to work the expanded operations. Julius McAdoo encodes the brutality of slavery as he narrates the history of a dark black slave named Primus – an unwieldy slave who repeatedly broke the overseer’s rules.

Primus ends up stealing a free conjure man's shote and consequently is magically transformed by the Guinea-born conjurer into "a monst'us fine mule." As a metamorphasized mule, Primus is resold to his slave master⁶⁴ who simultaneously and in vain hunts for the human version of Primus, whom he advertises as a runaway slave. The mule carries on with similar antics of Primus: he eats tobacco, drinks wine and viciously attacks a slave who attempted to make advances on Primus's beautiful mulatto wife. In due course the African conjurer summons the mule to his house after his conversion to Christianity. The conjurer, wishing to do well by reversing his black magic, dies before completing the reversal of his punishing charm. For the rest of his life, Primus's body is marred with the lower leg of a mule, illustrating the permanent physical disfigurement of his ordeal. Early in the story, Primus mercilessly whips a horse (the horse in the donkey–mule binary metaphor is evocative of the white man), thus revealing the implacable and tormented soul of a former slave.

"The Conjurer's Revenge" is unique among the book's stories because the conjurer is a man (rather than Aun' Peggy or Tenie, the conjure women), reflecting the male as the agent of enslavement of Africans. This is a redressing of Apuleius whose hero Lucius is transformed into an ass and later returned into human form by females with magical powers. The wife of Primus, "a monst'us good-lookin' yaller gal" (Chesnutt 2000: 45), sexually links a mulatto woman slave with a mule, whose jealousy results in violent attacks against her wooer. Likewise, Apuleius has the transformed Lucius be subjected to drastic sexual experiences, though they are of a different sort: an elegant Greek lady, who takes a lustful liking for his enormous

⁶⁴ The plantation master almost recognizes Primus in the countenance of the mule: "Mars Jim look' at de mule, en de mule 'appeared ter be soun' and strong. Mars Jim 'lowed dey 'peared ter be sump'n fermilyus 'bout de mule's face, 'spesh'ly his eyes; but he had n' los' near mule, en did n' hab no recommenb'ance er habin' seed de mule befo' [...]" (Chesnutt: 2000: 45).

phallus, becomes the lover of the ass. Famously used by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this comic moment is echoed and redressed by Chesnutt in the tragic fate of the mule Primus who has lost his lover Sally. His only course of action is to kick the new wooer of Sally, an action which Lucius the ass likewise undertakes in the novel when a rare chance arises.

The sexual slavery experienced by Lucius is vastly underplayed and toned down by Chesnutt. Additionally, there are no abductions of girls or murders in Chesnutt's story. The crime initiating the conflict in "The Conjuror's Revenge" is a comparatively modest stealing of a shote. The mistreatment of the ass appears considerably worse than what Primus suffers on the plantation.

Uncle Julius McAdoo, the narrator himself, identifies with all mules as fellow slave-workers when he says,

"I doan lack ter dribe a mule. I's alluz afeared I mought be imposin' on some human creetur; eve'y time I cuts a mule wid a hick'ry, 'pears ter me mos' lackly I's cuttin' some er my own relations, er somebody e'se w'at can't he'p deyse'ves" (Chesnutt 2000: 41).

That the mule, like a human being, could be assessed for its health and strength and bought in a manner replicating the trade of slaves substantiates the connection between the mule and the slave, both of whom are dealt with identically by the white slaveholder. The mule in Chesnutt's story is sold illegally while the ass in Apuleius' novel is sold or stolen by a near endless succession of owners and is always maltreated.

Despite Julius McAdoo's initial protest and threatened refusal to narrate the history of Primus, feigning a loss of dignity because of the white couple's initial ridicule, John regards the story of the transformation of the slave into a mule as a cleverly devised ruse by Uncle Julius. Here Chesnutt draws on the African-American

use of the term “lies” which as Henry Louis Gates explains, describes wild tales and figurative discourse (Gates 1988: 56). After telling his calculated “lies,” Julius arranges the sale of a sickly horse to the white listener of his narrative instead of the coveted sturdy mule and thereby gains financially, to the detriment of the white northerner.

Both Apuleius and Chesnutt share similar grotesqueries in their respective works. The devil is insinuated in both works because the metamorphoses end in religious conversion. Apuleius’s protagonist Lucius converts to the cult of the goddess Isis and corresponds to Chesnutt’s practitioner of voodoo becoming a Christian. Both Lucius and Primus are plainly desperate to escape their beast-of-burden status.

Among the fourteen conjure stories, Primus is one of only two slaves who suffers a metamorphosis that is punitive like Lucius.⁶⁵ Likewise, after returning to nearly complete human form, his punishment marks him physically for life, for inadvertently, it is a life sentence. “Chesnutt based his story loosely on the plot of Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*” (Redling 2006: 140) claims Erik Redling, the sole scholar up to now to discuss Chesnutt’s revision of Apuleius. He briefly argues how the respective transformations of Lucius and Primus back to human form are marked by notable shared similarities:

[...] the goddess Isis gives him precise instructions on what he has to do to get back his human shape. Primus follows the instructions of a conjure man, who, like Lucius, suddenly turns religious and deeply regrets his deeds, into his human form (Redling 2006: 113)

⁶⁵ The second character is “Dan” in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” the sixth story in *The Conjure Woman* who is also transformed by a conjure man (rather than a conjure woman). Dan is the same enslaved person who is kicked by Primus for making advances on his attractive lover Sally.

The transformation of Primus leaves a physical trace of his experience as a metamorphosized mule, for Lucius “[t]he experience deeply marks him (an invisible trace)” (Redling 2006: 113) while it remains permanently visible for Primus. Whereas Primus has a mule foot for the rest of his human life, in *The Golden Ass* Lucius, not yet transformed back to a human, is told to seek out the priest whose left foot is sprained so that he limps with his left leg, or, as Apuleius puts it, “he walked gingerly with hesitant step, for his left heel was slightly misshapen” (Apuleius 1999: 237).

The rewards for the conversion are described immediately after adapting the new faith similarly. Chesnutt clearly redresses this issue by reformulating the conversion into an (African-) American context. Lucius is addressed by a priest while the conjure man describes his own salvation himself:

Apuleius: In the green years of youth, you tumbled on the slippery slope into slavish pleasures, and gained the ill-omened reward of your unhappy curiosity [...] Let unbelievers see you, and as they see you let them recognize the error of their ways; for behold, Lucius is delivered from his earlier privations, and as he rejoices in the providence of the great Isis, he triumphs over his Fortune [...] Consecrate yourself from this moment to the obedience of our religion, and of your own accord submit to the yoke of service. Once you have begun to serve the goddess, you will then better appreciate the reward of your freedom (Apuleius 1999: 227-8).

Chesnutt: I's be'n a monst'us sinner man, en I's done a power er wickedness endyoin' er my days; but de good Lawd is wash' my sins erway, en I feels now dat I's boun' fer de kingdom [...] I knows de good Lawd done fergib me, en I hope ter meet you bofe in glory. I sees de good angels waitin' fer me up yander, wid a long w'ite robe en a starry crown, en I'm on my way ter jine 'em (Chesnutt 2000: 47-8).

There are other issues which are noted in the singular interpretation of Apuleius and Chesnutt. Lucius and Primus listen in to conversations of their respective masters. Unable to communicate, they understand spoken language and

are constantly eavesdropping. They respond in accordance to their best interests.⁶⁶ The mule and ass are also the basis of both humor, based on their ludicrous condition and perspective, and an “undercurrent of seriousness” (Redling 2008: 140) for both writers attack exploitation of slaves in their respective societies. As Sylvia Lyons Render points out in her “Introduction” to the collected short stories,

The stereotypic comic Afro-American, always ludicrous and sometimes unbelievable in his good-natured stupidity, was already given assiduous attention by James Lane Allen, Virginia Boyle, Harry Stillwell Edwards, Irwin Russell, Francis Hopkinson Smith, and Ruth McEnery Stuart. Chesnutt, however, is careful not to demean his black characters while he pokes fun at them (Render 1981: 23).

The ass in Apuleius and the mule in Chesnutt’s various works of fiction play such a significant role in so far as both link the animals with enslaved people. In Apuleius this beast of burden is exploited, laughed at, slighted as “stupid” and “lazy” and “stubborn,” and is nearly killed on a number of occasions. In Chesnutt’s fiction the mule is never killed because the hybrid breeding brought greater opportunities for profit. Like a lighter-skinned slave, the mule was a more valuable worker than a donkey or horse, so this hybrid animal was seized as the metaphor for the mulatto.

In addition to the conjure story, Chesnutt employs the mule as a trope for the enslaved mulatto in two novels. The two mules depicted in *The House behind the Cedars* more or less replicate the wealth or poverty of their owners. The former slaves and black neighbors of the Waldens, Peter and Frank Fowler, possess an old, one-eyed mule. The Fowlers reside “on the other side of the neglected by-street...in a low, rude building with a clapboarded roof” (Chesnutt 1993b: 9) and work as coopers in Patesville, North Carolina. When Frank Fowler offers his fair-skinned neighbor and heroine of the novel, Rowena Walden, a ride with his old mule and cart,

⁶⁶ Similarly, Sandy in “Po’ Sandy,” transformed into a tree by his wife Tenie (discussed earlier in this chapter) can see and hear but cannot move or talk.

Rowena's plan to pass and marry a rich white man precludes any association with the definitive image of the enslaved: a decrepit plantation mule. The offer is viewed "as the height of the ridiculous" (Chesnutt 1993b: 27). This ugly, worn-out mule stands between Rowena and Frank. For Rowena, it symbolizes their potential mixture: the dark black Frank and the fair-skinned Rowena. Chesnutt signifies not only color but cast with this old mule.

The mule the dark black man Frank Fowler uses, often to help out with errands for his fair-skinned neighbors, had been an army mule used to transport military equipment in the Civil War. Most of the mules in the town of Patesville, North Carolina, were superannuated army mules, easily recognizable with the initials of their source branded in their bodies: "C.S.A." or "U.S.A." the latter "signif[ying] a very concrete fact" while the former reminded onlookers of "the vanished dream" of the "Confederate States Army" (Chesnutt 1993b: 71), much like some slaves who were likewise branded.

Late in the volume Frank Fowler proves his abiding fidelity to the Walden family, helping for example their old ailing mother, Mary Walden, free of charge. Rowena Walden's wealthy brother John, who has since legally become a white man, decides to replace Frank's old mule. He purchases "a fat, sleek specimen of vigorous mulehood" (Chesnutt 1993b: 124), a tool for the work he does as a cooper as well as a sign of greater prosperity. Frank's father Peter Fowler regards this act as "somethin' like rale w'ite folks," (Chesnutt 1993b:125) complimenting in this "white" way John Warwick for his "white generosity" when in fact the white slaveholders who took his services as a slave never gave him any cart or mule. At the end of *The House behind the Cedars* it is this same mule (which is called "Caesar") who melodramatically brings the beautiful octoroon Rena home after she escapes two

men attempting to rape her. The strong good-looking mule is an alternate, a depiction of strength and power for the new freeman Frank Fowler and symbolically replaces the worn-out mule from slavery times as an unacceptable means of transport. When Rena reconnects with her African American people, it is no longer ridiculous for her to be transported by a mule. Clearly, the mule is unacceptably below as a means of transportation for whites but for a person reconnected to the black community, Chesnutt returns Rena home with a mule.

In contrast, Chesnutt's mule in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) is an altogether modernist rendition. North Carolina during Reconstruction is again depicted as degenerate and the white population as shiftless. For the entertainment of white children Ben Dudley, the son of a former slaver, builds a "mechanical mule." Made of scrape wood and other material, Chesnutt describes how, "by manipulating rubber bands...the mule could be made to kick furiously" (Chesnutt 2005: 133), and it is made for entertaining a white little boy, a son of a Confederate Colonel and slave owner.

In the following chapter, the amusement comes to an abrupt end: "that artificial animal suddenly refused to kick, and lapsed into a characteristic balkiness for which there was no remedy [...]" (Chesnutt 2005: 137). It is never repaired to its original purpose again. The mechanical mule is a metaphor of the continued attempts by white Southerners at manipulating the black man well after emancipation, a manipulation that fails in the end to bring the desired results of re-enslavement. Ben Dudley, who constructed the mechanical mule, eventually moves to New York with another machine with which he hopes to begin a new business venture.

Chesnutt describes the change in the national economy and the apathetic Southern population which was slow to participate in changing economic

opportunities. On the surface level, the mule was slowly moving from the beast of burden bred and exploited daily to an old legend. The interest in keeping its entertaining trait alive is reflected in the mechanical mule, and its mechanical nature and its use as slap-stick entertainment for whites prefigures the “electrified rug” episode in Ralph Ellison’s opening chapter in his seminal novel *Invisible Man* (1952).

In both Chesnut’s and Apuleius’ fiction, stories within the frame of the fiction narrative are told to relieve the ordinary boredom of an afternoon. More importantly, the linked the mule/ass of both writers, while an entertaining form of vulgar humor in both works offers a trickster subverting authority, constitutes a reliable figurative substitute for the slave. As the translator Jack Lindsey writes, “The lonely progress of Ass-Lucius thus becomes that of all men; it reflects and defines the processes by which they exist, and, existing, move forward” (Lindsay 1962: 22). Southern whites characterized both “mulattos” and mules with the alleged attributes such as laziness, yellow color and stupidity as the ass was attributed in the ancient era. Often in Chesnut’s tales, the black story-teller signifies on the white master–black slave relationship by taking the master’s role and substituting his own role as slave with his mule, reflected in Primus viciously whipping the stallion at the start of the conjure story. Chesnut’s fiction exhibit an occasional reversal of the commonly practiced principles of the master–slave relationship.

3.0 Sir Walter Scott and Signifying on Chivalry

3.1 Introduction

The American reception of Sir Walter Scott, and specifically his reception in the South, is famously characterized by Mark Twain, a contemporary of Chesnut and a dominating figure in the popular literary market throughout Chesnut's publishing career. In *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Mark Twain notoriously associated Sir Walter Scott with the American Civil War, directly linking his writing with the cause of the war itself: "Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war" (Twain 1981: 219). Conventionally, most readers familiar with Mark Twain would associate this remarkable accusation with his tall tales. Mark Twain's hyperbole, however, raises a more discrete question: Can imaginative literature generate a mindset which aids in bringing about a terrible ravaging reality such as the American Civil War – as he later claims in *Life on the Mississippi*? Mark Twain hedges somewhat from his indictment against Scott, underscoring instead an association between his fiction and the cultural values his literary reception engendered:

It seems a little harsh toward a dead man to say that we never should have had any war but for Sir Walter; and yet something of a plausible argument might, perhaps, be made in support of that wild proposition. The Southerner of the American revolution owned slaves; so did the Southerner of the Civil War: but the former resembles the latter as an Englishman resembles a Frenchman. The change of character can be traced rather more easily to Sir Walter's influence than to that of any other thing or person (Twain 1981: 219).

Twain loathed Sir Walter Scott's fiction, most particularly its alleged pernicious influence on the South, and he parodied what he strongly condemned as Scott's "sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless, and worthless long-vanished society" (Twain 1981:220). To be sure, Mark Twain, has in common

with Walter Scott a number of general attributes. For example, both wrote literature that was especially appealing to both male and female readers in a time when the male novel-reading audience was shrinking alarmingly.⁶⁷ Beyond Scott's influence in constructing Southern white values regarding birth, rank and honor rather than merit, Twain argued that his influence ruined the reception of Southern literature as a whole.⁶⁸

Walter Scott was not distained only by Samuel Clemens in the United States. Charles Waddell Chesnutt also wrote parodies of Scott's fiction, pastiches of an altogether different ilk from Mark Twain particularly in *The House behind the Cedars* which can be read as a pastiche or as "parodic-travesty forms," to cite Mikhail Bakhtin's phrase (Bakhtin 1981: 61).

First under consideration will be the significance of Scottish influence generally in the construction of the South, for in addition to Sir Walter Scott and his literary influence, Chesnutt references both the heritage and ancestry he shared with many black and white Southerners alike: Scottish ancestry. The historical and cultural aspects of Scottish culture will be elucidated at the start before the examination of Scott's literary reception may be made.

3.2 Scottish Influence on the South

In Chesnutt's time as well as today, symbols of Scottish heritage express

⁶⁷ Mark Twain clearly did not see in Scott a rival for his audience as much as his *bête noire*. With the dead criminals aboard the sinking ship named after Scott in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Mark Twain aptly articulated in fiction his own critical view of Scott's dangerous literary value.

⁶⁸ Mark Twain suggested that Southern novelists study *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes rather than *Ivanhoe* if they happened to be fascinated with chivalry.

frustrations of white Southerners who lost the Civil War over slavery.⁶⁹ Most of these symbols associated with the Confederacy are rooted in 18th and 19th century Southern Scottish culture, which likewise had a thoroughgoing influence on black cultural values before and immediately after slavery. Little scholarly research has been undertaken about Scotland's lasting impact on early African American letters. The most notable symbol of the Confederacy is the so-called "rebel flag." Its enormous popularity is seen still today throughout the South of the United States. The Confederate States of America flag is basically a match of the flag of Scotland: the cross on the flag represents the saltire cross, which represents Scotland in the Union Jack. It also represents the cross of Saint Andrews, the patron saint of Scotland. Additionally, the flag of the Ku Klux Klan is remarkably similar to the Scottish flag. The many similarities are not coincidental.

The Confederacy is linked to Scotland because so many of the white people populating the South emigrated from there. The historians Kay and Cary demonstrate with statistics that the majority of white people living in North Carolina from the 18th Century onwards were Scots who had originally settled Virginia and other colonies further to the north, especially Maryland and Pennsylvania, and that from the 1760s, "Highland Scots came directly from Scotland to help populate" not only the specific area where Chesnut grew up in, but "the entire colony" which grew in the most significant rates among white immigrants (Kay and Cary 1995: 19). Historically, the North Carolina and Virginia colonies did not have as many slaves as many of the neighboring states, but often gained cheap labor through Scottish indentured servants. These Scottish immigrants eventually became planters, farmers and yeoman who came to play an early dominating role in the state of North Carolina,

⁶⁹ These symbols appear on state flags, license plates, memorials, and parks. State parks, schools and highways have been named after Confederate generals, Ku Klux Klan leaders and Southern segregationist politicians.

Chesnutt's home state, as well as Virginia. Scots eventually made a significant impact on other slave-holding states such as Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi etc as these territories opened up for settlement. As historian David Hackett Fischer wrote concerning Southern history:

A critical factor was the heavy settlement of the South by immigrants referred to today as Scotch Irish – people from the north of Britain, the lowlands of Scotland and the north of Ireland. These settlers, whom Benjamin Franklin described as 'white savages,' brought with them a culture based on centuries of fighting between the Kings of England and Scotland over the borderlands they inhabited. They had a penchant for family feuds, a love of whisky and a warrior ethic that demanded vengeance. (Fischer 1989: 81)

As the Scottish historian T.M. Devine notes in his study, *Scotland's Empire and the Shaping of the Americas* (2003), Scots were overwhelmingly concentrated in Southern slave states. They made up 15 percent of the population of Georgia, North and South Carolina.⁷⁰ Moreover, immigrants from Scotland played a considerable role in the Atlantic slave trade given the relative proportion of their population.

Songs and poetry from the South celebrated not merely romantic notions of Scottish ancestry, in point of fact many songs linked the Confederate cause to the Scottish struggle. In an anthology originally published in 1904, *War Songs and Poems of the Southern Confederacy 1861-1865* edited by H. M. Wharton and reissued in 2000, many poems allude to Scotland and Scottish heroic cult. One poem dedicated to the Scotch-Irish General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson compares his death with that of Douglas. Many of the poems celebrate the less famous Confederate war dead and allude to the Scottish past, as this excerpt of an admittedly execrable poem demonstrates:

⁷⁰ In these same slave states, Georgia and the Carolinas, Scots made up more than 25 percent of the non-slave population.

I sometimes fancy that were I king
Of the princely Knights of the Golden Ring,
With the song of the minstrel in mine ear,
And the tender legend that trembles here,
I'd give the best on his bended knee
The whitest soul of chivalry,
For little Giffin of Tennessee. (Ticknor 2000: 126)

Scottish cultural influence is paramount to this argument. Some critics may go further in their claims – such as Mark Twain (noted above) or, for a more recent example, African American novelist Ishmael Reed (1938–), who contends that the Civil War itself can be interpreted as a reenactment of Scottish-English conflicts on American soil (Reed 2003:99). These songs and poetry not only celebrated romantic notions of Scottish ancestry, masculinity and the virtues of chivalry but linked the Confederate cause to the Scottish struggle. The cult of Scottish militantism was expressed in a distinctive mold in Civil War poetry: the tradition of Scotland as a birthplace of rebellion and political radicalism, from Robert Burns to James Keir Hardie to the Red Clydeside. As Martin Procházka puts forth,

[t]he disappearance of Highland culture in the eighteenth century [...] has led not only to the nostalgic idealization of the land and the people, but also to the glorification of the poet's subjectivity as a heroic voice surviving even after the deeds of warriors have been forgotten (Procházka 1997: 69).

Their poems, songs and minstrels idealize images of heroic Highlanders who, despite following the ill-fated cause of Jacobitism, are depicted as loyal to the highest ideals of chivalry. Walter Scott's fiction especially made this cause not only acceptable, but romantic and seductive, especially to Southern writers.⁷¹ The projection of Scott's historical romances onto American soil and later to the pro-

⁷¹ For example, William Gilmore Simms (1806-1870), once a very popular novelist in the South, wrote historical novels in the same romantic vein as Walter Scott. At first depicting Southern colonial history and the Southern contributions to the Revolutionary War, Simms' mature novels focus on the borders between the settlers and the western frontier and the border between north and south.

slavery novels and the rebellious and ill-fated cause of slavery is the basis for Mark Twain's condemnation. The received cultural identification white Southerners assumed about Scotland and Scott's fiction is really what Mark Twain condemns in the passages intimated at the start of this chapter in *Life on the Mississsippi*.

The dynamics of the life on Southern plantation echoes the lifestyle of the Highlanders to some extent: uneven economic and social development of England and Scotland was replicated in the distinctions of the industrialized and highly commercialized North and the rural South.⁷² In Scotland and in the Southern part of the United States alike, greater stock was consigned to "virtue" and "tradition" whereas the industrialized capitalist England and the Northern states were revealed to place stock on commerce, progress and empire. Scots and Southerners alike viewed their traditions and sense of virtue under threat by the disagreeable transforming influence of commerce (Lincoln 2003: 45).

In Chesnutt's lifetime, both during Reconstruction (1865-1877) and well afterward, the defeated Southern whites by and large continued what they deemed as the inveterate Scottish tradition of resistance and specifically evoked Scotland in that resistance. In what might today be termed a "culture war," Southern apologists aimed, frequently through literary fiction, to persuade Northern whites that life for black slaves in the antebellum South had been wonderful, a way of life for which post-bellum free and miserable blacks were nostalgic.

A classic example is offered with the Scottish-American author Thomas Nelson Page's famous "Marse Chan" (1884), a short story he rendered in African

⁷² Most Southern planters were not capable of accumulating capital and regularly sought credit from Northern banks, particularly if the planters did not grow cotton, the most valuable industry in the U.S.A. (Callender 2004: 39-40). They came to regard their frequent difficulties with debt to the avarice of Yankee usurers and gaugers. (In his novel *Rob Roy* Scott includes an analogous business transaction when credit is offered and poorly gambled by Rob Roy while Osbaldistone senior succeeds in his own commercial speculations.)

American vernacular which casts chattel slavery in a very favorable light. The narrator, an old black ex-slave named Sam, recounts to a traveling by-passer (and a Northerner) about his nostalgic past:

Dem wuz good ole times, marster – de bes’ Sam ever see! Dey wuz in fac’! Niggers didn’ hed nothin’ ‘t all to do – jes’ to ‘ten’ to de feedin’ an’ clean’ de houses, an’ don’ what de marster tell ‘em to do; an’ when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont ‘em out de house, an’ de same doctor come to see ‘em whar ‘ten’ to de white folks when dey wuz po’ly. Dyer warn’ no trouble or nothin’. (Page 1991: 10)

This Southern white presentation of the black nostalgic feelings for slavery angered Chesnut and many like-minded writers.⁷³ Moreover, these artistic apologists maintained that the Civil War and especially the period of Reconstruction obliterated these “good times,” relegating the good and respectable freed blacks to miserable states of destitution. More to the point, with Reconstruction’s period of “chaos,” these apologists portrayed wicked blacks formerly kept in check under slavery, who, through emancipation, were “turned loose” to crime, particularly against white women under Reconstruction. Consequently, it was persistently asserted that the Klu Klux Klan was an appropriate response to black sex crimes on white women and that blacks and whites in the South should be kept physically separate or segregated.

The common genre expressing these political (and to their mind didactic) views in an entertaining medium of fiction fell under the category of “plantation literature.” Plantation literature historically developed from the antebellum “Anti-Tom” literature of the 1850s which countered well-known accusations leveled against slave-holders in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sensationally successful abolition novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851).

⁷³ As Chesnut said in a speech, “Thomas Nelson Page was disguising the harshness of slavery under the mask of sentiment.” Chesnut argued how difficult it was to win over an audience with his writing when white readers accepted the line of thought that blacks were happier as slaves. (Chesnut 1999a: 545)

William Gilmore Simms responded to Beecher Stowe's accusations of plantation cruelty with popular romances, short stories and tales drawing on the "family" metaphor which depicted white owners and black slaves expressing sentient bonds of loyalty toward one another.⁷⁴ In post-Civil War plantation fiction, Thomas Page, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Dixon, all Southerners of Scottish ancestry, were leading writers continuing in this vein.⁷⁵ For example, in "A Story of the War," Harris's black narrator, Uncle Remus, proudly recalls shooting a Union soldier who was about to ambush his master, "Marse Jeems," even though, as he is reminded, Union soldiers were fighting for his freedom.⁷⁶ Dixon's trilogy of Reconstruction, *The Leopard's Spots, a Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1902), *The Clansman, An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) and *The Traitor* (1907) includes brutal violence against virtuous, refined Southern white women by vicious, horrific black males (some of whom are mulattos while others are Northern blacks). These crimes of rape are depicted as justifiably avenged through the course of the novels by the Ku Klux Klan. As Chesnut referred to the situation years later, "Thomas Dixon was writing the Negro down industriously and with marked success [...] The trend of public sentiment was distinctly away from the Negro" (Chesnut 1999a: 545).

The first commercially successful artistic film in the United States, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), was based on Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman*. The film likewise justifies the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan and includes a scene with white-hooded clansmen surrounding a banner with "Scotland" written on it. This scene is not based on the novel proper, but rather on a statement

⁷⁴ See William Gilmore Simms' anti-Tom novel, *The Sword and the Distaff*. Philadelphia, Lippincott, Grambo, 1852 <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/simms/menu.html>>

⁷⁵ Other Plantation novelists who sentimentalized the "devoted Negro" included Harry S. Edwards and Maurice Thompson.

⁷⁶ As Gates puts it, "[...] even sympathetic characterizations of the black, such as Uncle Remus by Joel Chandler Harris, were far more related to a racist textual tradition that stemmed from minstrelsy, the plantation novel and vaudeville [...]" (Gates 1988: 176).

in the “Preface” to Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* in which he demands the restoration of Scottish traditions that he saw under threat by the enfranchising of blacks and the politics of Reconstruction. The last sentence of Dixon’s preface, linking “old Scotland” with the “young South,” reads in full:

How the young South, led by the reincarnated souls of the Clansmen of Old Scotland, went forth under this cover [i.e., under the white gowns of the KKK] and against overwhelming odds, daring exile, imprisonment, and a felon’s death, and saved the life of a people, forms one of the most dramatic chapters in the history of the Aryan race (Dixon 1997: iii).

It is noteworthy that in linking the KKK to clansmen of Scotland, Dixon inaccurately links Celtic Scots with the “Aryan race.” In colonial America, immigrating Scots were originally not regarded as white, or “Aryan” as Dixon puts it. In his recent study, *Working toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Become White* (2005), David Roediger demonstrates how Europeans such as Celts, Slavs, Jews as well as Latin immigrant “racial” groups were restricted from becoming full U.S. citizens at the onset and had to undergo a process of “becoming white.” Karen Brodtkin’s *How the Jews Became White Folks* (1999) and Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* propound similar points: “Whiteness is not a culture [...] but a reflection of a privilege. Whiteness exists for no reason other than to defend it” (Ignatiev 1996: 132). These studies, which emerge from a larger context, also establish that Scots arriving in America were similarly not regarded as “white” because Celts were not among the privileged Anglo-Saxons to whom the “white race” was generally restricted. Assuming “whiteness” and differentiating themselves from the ultimate non-white – the African slave – enabled white Southerners to link themselves culturally with Scotland and, in addition, to project their inferiority complex onto the blacks.

However, not all Scottish immigrants in the South were slavers or pro-slavery agitators. Alexander Hamilton, the son of a Scottish immigrant and one of the Founding Fathers, abhorred slavery. Likewise, in other states there were efforts instigated by Scots against the institution of slavery. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois reports that “there used to come strong protest against slavery from the Scotch Highlanders [...] down in Darien [Georgia]” (DuBois 1989: 92).

Paradoxically, some famous black slaves had Scottish ancestors, and they often carried their names, often obtaining their names from their owners, such as the slave revolt leader Nat Turner. Some African American writers’ names are obviously Scottish, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and the object of this study, Charles Chesnutt. The famous black abolitionist, born “Frederick Bailey,” changed his name to the Scottish-Gaelic word “Douglass” meaning “black” in order to conceal his identity from the hunters of runaway slaves.⁷⁷ While the novelist and former slave William Wells Brown chose a new name after a white man helping him to escape slavery, the name of his white father mentioned in his first slave narrative, George Higgins, was also Scottish and related to his Scottish master (Brown 2003: 1).

3.3 Chesnutt’s Black and White Scots

Chesnutt repeatedly depicts blacks emulating the Scottish heritage of the white Southern slaveholders. In *Mandy Oxendine* (1997), Chesnutt’s main heroine, a beautiful African American teacher named Amanda Oxendine, a so-called “octoroon,” sings Scottish songs celebrating the royal antics of the Stuart, King Charles:

Come bear me over, come carry me over,
Come bear me over to Charlie,
I’ll gie John Ross a bawbee more,

⁷⁷ One of Douglass’s sponsors, Nathan Johnson of New Bedford, Connecticut, suggested this name after reading “The Lady of the Lake” (1818) by Sir Walter Scott (Douglass 1986: 147).

To carry me over to Charlie. (Chesnutt 1997a: 65)

These songs, Chesnutt writes, were brought over by “the Scotch exiles who with Flora Macdonald had settled on the Cape Fear” region of North Carolina and passed it to the following generations, black as well as white, “but none of them with a clearer note than this” sung by Mandy, “hoe in hand, working in the garden” (Chesnutt 1997a: 65). In Chesnutt’s novel *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905) he describes Napoleon Campbell as a poor but talented black musician who performs beloved Scottish folksongs on his violin such as “Fishers’ Hornpipe”, “Soldier’s Joy” and “Campbells are Coming” at parties in Clarendon, North Carolina (Chesnutt 2005: 100). Chesnutt’s “black Scots” perform Scottish music for whites as well as black and identify the music as their own.

According to a study of early Dixie folk music, Scottish folk music was beloved in the South: “[b]y the 1840’s substituting a southern plantation for a Scottish castle allowed American audiences the balance between remote fantasy and comfortable familiarity [...] in the Scottish myth [...] evoking the lost charms of medieval Scotland” (Glazer and Key 1996: 14). Slaves frequently worked the fields while singing the Scottish songs of their white ancestors.

So many other characters, black and white, have Scottish names and in fact have common ancestors in Chesnutt’s early novel *Mandy Oxendine*, including the leader of a lynch mob Alexander “Sandy” McAllister who is motivated to lynch the negro teacher Tom Lowrey in order to impress a wealthy young woman who is also of Scottish ancestry (Chesnutt 1997: 101).

Chesnutt’s most successful (i.e., both popular and critically acclaimed) fiction, his dialect story collection *The Conjure Woman* (1899), is likewise replete with Scottish slave owners who settled the same region where the stories are set (and

where Chesnutt himself grew up). Uncle Julius McAdoo, a former slave who is named after his owner, Dougal McAdoo, is introduced in “The Goophered Grapevine” as “not altogether African” in appearance and character. This background is attributed to “shrewdness” in his character, synonymous with possessing Scottish blood (Chesnutt 2000: 4). In “Tobe’s Tribulations,” the narrator suggests attributing Uncle Julius McAdoo’s “superstitions, filtered through the negro intellect, [to] the Scotch settlers who had founded their homes on Cape Fear at a time when a kelpie haunted every Highland glen, and witches, like bats, darkened the air as they flew by [...]” (Chesnutt 1993a: 185). The setting of both *The Conjure Woman* and *The House behind the Cedars*, is Fayetteville where Chesnutt grew up from the age of nine, described in a speech as populated by people of all colors, of whom only a small number were “enlightened.” In a speech in November 1900, Chesnutt said that in Fayetteville “[a]ll sorts of old odds and ends of superstition prevailed – remnants of Scotch and English witchcraft, rubbing elbows with obscure survivals of Indian legend and African folk-lore” (Chesnutt 1999a: 138). Repeatedly the penurious nature of Scottish slave masters is highlighted in *The Conjure Woman*. Many of Chesnutt’s stories of the color line such as “The Sheriff’s Children” are also replete with Scottish-Americans.

The neighboring plantations in *The Conjure Woman* are owned almost exclusively by Scottish slavers, including “Jeems McLean,” “Marrabo McSwayne,” “Dunkin McSwayne,” “Jim McGee,” and Colonel Pennington; a downtown store is run by “Archie McMillan” and another store owner is named “Tom McAllister.” While most Chesnutt short stories from North Carolina untiringly refer to white Scots,

inevitably many blacks have Scottish names as well, since Scottish slave masters named them.⁷⁸

In Chesnutt's ninth novel, *The Quarry*, written in 1928, a Scottish American family, Mr. and Mrs. Angus Seton, rejects a child they had legally adopted in Ohio after they are mistakenly informed by the orphanage that their child is African American. After Donald Glover grows up in a loving African American family, earns a doctor of philosophy degree at Columbia University, and takes a job as assistant to the director of the renowned Southern black college (modeled after Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama), he finds out in his late twenties that he is of Italian nobility with no African ancestry whatsoever. Seton then attempts to assist him after finding out that his adopted son is not at all "colored." Hence in Chesnutt's Harlem Renaissance novel written near the end of his life, the Scottish-American continues to exert a pronounced racist presence in his fiction.

With the most substantial signification on Walter Scott, the novel *The House behind the Cedars*, a contested will written by Duncan McSwayne produces the climax in the middle of the novel (chapter 15) when the "aristocrat Scot" George Tryon unmasks the "octoroon," his fiancée passing as white. Just before Tryon's discovery, Chesnutt parodistically links the Scottish custom of the whites to their deeply-felt identity of racial purity revealed moments later:

[...] for among the people of Patesville, perhaps by virtue of the prevalence of Scottish blood, the ties of blood were cherished as things of value, and never forgotten except in case of the unworthy – an exception, by the way, which one need hardly go so far to seek (Chesnutt 1993b: 90).

3.4 Chesnutt's Parody of Walter Scott

⁷⁸ With regard to lighter-skinned blacks, they are more often than not in possession of more Scottish than African ancestry, but the "one-drop of Negro blood" rule keeps them subjugated.

Numerous direct and indirect references to Walter Scott in Chesnut's shorter fiction and his later novels, but above all Chesnut's first published novel, the aforesaid *House behind the Cedars*, is a substantial burlesque of the Southern white vogue for all books by Sir Walter Scott. White Southerners' predilection for chivalry is aptly shown through the genre of the so-called "Southern Romance." As Chesnut's narrator avers, "The influence of Walter Scott was strong upon the old South. The South before the war was essentially feudal, and Scott's novels of chivalry appealed forcefully to the feudal heart" (Chesnut 1993b: 31). The significance implied and propagated in Scott's chivalric novel to white ante-bellum Southerners is that the power which rules behavior of honorable men is not God or Divine Providence but the power of chivalry, the code of honor. Chesnut offers a critico-satirical depiction of a society worshipping a culture of honor and virtue that white Southerners perceived was best exemplified by Scott's fiction.

3.4.1 Parody in "The Passing of Grandison"

Chesnut's first parody and polemic reference in fiction to Walter Scott was published in his second collection of short stories entitled *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899). In a fascinating plot of black sentimentality, feigned loyalty and betrayal, incorporates one of the great tricksters in Chesnut's fiction, a slave named Grandison, owned by Colonel Owens. In "The Passing of Grandison,"⁷⁹ Colonel Owens rejoices in the perceived loyalty of his slave. He enjoys telling his neighbors of the voluntary return of a slave from the North – allegedly kidnapped by abolitionists – and by "keeping his back steadily to the North Star" to return to "the old plantation" a clear reversal of slave narrative escape scenes.

⁷⁹ Charles Chesnut repeatedly chose "The Passing of Grandison" as one of his stories to read before audiences. Either this story received one of the most positive receptions or else it was one of his own personal favorites.

Reversing the slave narrative trope of ascendance, the colonel tells how his slave returned from the North for love of home and security. Grandison feigns hatred of the dreadful abolitionists and loyalty to his master which is rewarded considerably. Considering the decision Grandison has made, Chesnutt has Colonel Owen exclaim, "Why, it's as good as one of Scott's novels!" (Chesnutt 2000: 203). His reaction to the mind-boggling loyalty by a black man returning south to enslavement is as implausible and as fantastic as Sir Walter Scott's fiction. While his son expresses doubt about "that kidnapping yarn," Colonel Owens considers the "infernal abolitionists [...] capable of anything" and his slave's loyalty useful literary material: "Mr. Simms or some other one of our Southern authors ought to write it up!" (Chesnutt 2000: 203). He feeds Grandison exceptionally well, "a slave's dream of pleasure" and keeps him among house slaves so that he can "relate his adventures to admiring visitors" (Chesnutt 2000: 204). Three weeks later, however, the trickster Grandison takes off his mask after organizing his entire extended family, enslaved by Colonel Owens, to make their escape north to Canada via the Underground Railroad.

Henry Louis Gates refers to this story in *The Signifying Monkey* as an example of Chesnutt's "Signifyin(g) revision" or redressing of the slave's escape in chapter XIII of William Wells Brown's last work, nominally a "novel," *My Southern Home; or, The South and Its People* (1880), aforementioned in the introductory chapter. However, Gates does not refer to the underlying parody of Scott. Chesnutt obviously redresses the falsities of nostalgic "happy slaves" represented in plantation literature by Simms (in a rare instance of overt parody as Chesnutt mentions him by name), and also an example of motivated signifying. Chesnutt has Grandison "pass" (hence Chesnutt's title of this story) as a nostalgic slave in order to obtain freedom for his family designated by his owner as "so much valuable property" (Chesnutt 2000: 205).

3.4.2 Parody in *House behind the Cedars*

In *The House behind the Cedars*, John Walden, an “octoroon” who passes as white in order to satisfy an inchoate desire for freedom, reads law books and passes the rigorous bar exam. This ability to pass stems in part from his wide reading of edifying books his deceased white father left in the house behind the cedars, i.e., the house his white father built for his black mistress, John’s mother. John Walden’s posture toward achieving his ambitious potential was to acquire the perspicacity as well as the diction of the white man through his books. These books included Henry Fielding’s complete works, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novels, and “everything that Walter Scott – the literary idol of the South – had ever written” (Chesnutt 1993b:107-9). Reading these books in order to resemble a white man culturally and intellectually, John sought literary means to infiltrate and emulate the character of the Southern white gentleman of honor.⁸⁰

Although a free man, the impoverished, very light-skinned John Walden represents in the second half of the 19th century what Henry Louis Gates emphasized for enslaved blacks in the 18th century to be the ultimate American oxymoron to whites at that time: an intelligent ambitious black person. According to Gates, intellectuals did not judge blacks to be in possession of reason because of their illiteracy and inability to write original imaginative literature. Gates traces this debate, illustrating how Hume, Kant, Hegel and Jefferson judged blacks inferior by absence of reasoning faculties, and much of the debate centered on an assessment of the poetry of the African-born slave Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784). Gates points out that literacy, which had been intentionally offered to this African-born Massachusetts

⁸⁰ As Fanon argues, a primary motive for the oppressed to internalize the views of the oppressor can be sourced in the economic and social advantages that come with embracing whiteness and internalizing the inferiority of blackness (Fanon 1967: 11).

slave, was the measure of blacks being regarded as human beings (Gates 1988:113, 167). Writing was frequently used by enslaved blacks to escape to the north.⁸¹

Although John Walden was born a free colored man near a slave community in North Carolina, the same trope of literacy yielding freedom, or in this case a lack of restrictions, is taken up by Chesnutt. John Walden's great ambition to succeed while passing as a white man directs him to read law, an education this fictional character shares with both authors under discussion, Chesnutt and Scott. He accomplishes his own professional preparation in the 1850s by secretly reading law after cleaning a judge's office. He persuades the local judge, a personal friend of his white father, to allow him to read his law books surreptitiously after sweeping and cleaning up his law office. Part of his successful persuasion of the judge centers on his racial status: John tells the judge that he is white, and pulls up his sleeves to prove it (thereby displaying his blue veins below his palms on his wrists). A little earlier in the novel Chesnutt has John reflect his image of himself in a mirror, seeing an image of his white father rather than his light brown mother. The mirror trope, common to many African American autobiographies, subverts the image the public has constructed of him and his family. "His playmates might call him black; the mirror proved that God, the Father of all, had made him white" (Chesnutt 1993b: 107).⁸² The judge, aware of the "one drop of Negro blood" law, counters with legal aspects of his "Negro" status:

"[...]You cannot travel without your papers; you cannot secure accommodations at an inn; you could not vote, if you were of age; you cannot be out after nine without a permit. If a white man struck you,

⁸¹ For example, by writing their own fake letters of permission or passes, slaves facilitated their own escape or the escape of other slaves, as described eminently in chapter ten of Frederick Douglass's slave narrative (1845).

⁸² Jacques Lacan describes the moment when a child recognizes his own image in the mirror as essential for constituting and projecting his ego (Lacan 1977: 1). Lacan helps explain how alienated John Walden feels when he is classified as black in school. The experience of identifying himself as his father's son rather than his mother's son internalizes his feeling of whiteness. He becomes determined to "become" a white man in the "eyes" of society: by reading books and thereby edifying himself.

you could not return the blow, and you could not testify against him in a court of justice. You are black, my lad, and you are not free” (Chesnutt 1993b: 113).

Despite John’s unfortunate legal status, the judge assists him. The judge is ultimately convinced into helping John after searching the law books and finding out that an octoroon is considered white in South Carolina, “because they have many more blacks than whites, and would like to lessen the disproportion” (Chesnutt 1993b: 115). Legally, John Walden’s race may be black in North Carolina, but he is white in South Carolina because “octoroons” are white enough to serve as a different sort of diminution of the black race and are therefore “privileged” with the right to vote and hold office. The legality of his status was to be most deftly backed up by successfully “making the grade” of a white man of honor and a gentleman through dress, speech, education and occupation.⁸³

While this transformation may appear to be an example of what Leroi Jones called an imitation of “white models” in his 1962 essay “Myth of Negro Literature”⁸⁴ the empathizing judge states the awkward legal facts to John Walden: “You are black, my lad, and you are not free.” In contrast to Jones, Gates utilizes the tale of *The Signifying Monkey* whereby the monkey uses the power of words to manipulate both the lion and the elephant in order to secure his own survival. In the tale Gates draws on to illustrate his theory, the monkey literally has to stay in the tree until the lion leaves, that is, until his surrounding environment is safe (Gates 1988: 55). The feature of the trickster figure is clearly evident in this point of the novel, for John Walden succeeds in manipulating a judge to assist him.

⁸³ This background of “social uplift” through imitation of the white man was one of Chesnutt’s recurring themes in so many of his works.

⁸⁴ This issue of imitation is discussed on pages 20-22 above in the Introduction.

After persuading a judge to let him read law in his office in order to obtain knowledge of the legal profession, John Walden covers his African American ancestral tracks by taking an old name rooted in history as he leaves North Carolina to pass as a white lawyer. “John Walden” becomes “John Warwick,” based on Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, known as the “kingmaker” in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s War of the Roses novel, *The Last of the Barons* (1843). This historical romance, one of John Walden’s favorites, portrays a feudal vision of a lost English cause comparable to Jacobitism, Walter Scott’s lost Scottish cause, or slavery, the lost cause of the white Southerners. John Walden moves from Patesville, North Carolina to Clarence, South Carolina, and prospers while passing in Southern white society as a white lawyer. He marries after some years a wealthy widow of a fallen Confederate soldier. With his white wife, John Warwick fathers a son, though his wife dies at childbirth. He then returns home to ask his sister Rena to help raise his son, requiring her to pass as white and attend a finishing school in Charleston.

Chesnutt plays repeatedly with language in a manner emphasizing the mutability and indeterminacy of racial categories in *The House behind the Cedars*. In the chapter where John Warwick takes his sister Rena aboard a steamer from Patesville, North Carolina to Clarence, South Carolina, John efficiently converses – passing as white – while dining among higher class whites, including the captain:

It was learned that he was a South Carolina lawyer, and not a carpetbagger. Such credentials were unimpeachable [...] Apparently sound on the subject of negroes, Yankees, and the righteousness of the lost cause, he yet discussed these themes in a lofty and impersonal manner that gave his words greater weight than if he had seemed warped by a personal grievance (Chesnutt 1993b: 29).

In this early section of *The House behind the Cedars*, John further enters into a discourse which increasingly endears him to Southerners aboard the steamer:

- “Did your people lose any niggers?” asked one of them.
 - “My father owned a hundred,” he replied grandly.
- Their respect for his views doubled. It is easy to moralize about the misfortunes of others, and to find good in the evil that they suffer; – only a true philosopher could speak thus lightly of his own losses (Chesnutt 1993b: 29).

Through free indirect discourse, one clearly discerns that John has not merely the outward appearance of a white gentleman but that his exterior and his bearing are read by Southern racist whites as a man of honor, as one of an esteemed philosopher. This scene is in fact a repetition and reversal of Chesnutt’s earlier novel/manuscript completed in 1897 entitled *Mandy Oxendine* (first published in 1997). In that novel, a teacher named Tom Lowrey persuades members of an African American community that he is really black. Using free indirect discourse, Chesnutt similarly shows how Tom wins over the approval of this community in spite of the inherent mistrust some blacks maintain against lighter-colored African Americans. As Johanna Cooper points out, “the narrator’s reference to the Tom [sic] as a ‘white young man despite his previous assurance that he is a ‘colored man’ highlights the arbitrary and socially constructed nature of racial categories (Cooper 2009: 123).

Both Tom and John have transformed themselves through edification through self-education out of the “atmosphere of intellectual stagnation” in which they were raised (Chesnutt 1997a: 28), much like Chesnutt himself did in his community of Fayetteville. Both characters travel at the start of the plots southward in their attempt to improve their lot.⁸⁵ In this narrative mode of signifying, Chesnutt revises his earlier novel (in which a light-colored African American teacher is not at first believed to be a

⁸⁵ The move southward reflects Chesnutt’s experience traveling south and teaching in Beach Springs near Spartanburg, South Carolina, the obvious setting for Rosinville (in *Mandy Oxendine*) and Clarence (in *The House behind the Cedars*).

black) by having John, a light colored man, successfully pass as a white man. After some effort, Chesnutt employs free indirect discourse narration to depict both men succeeding in gaining their respective community's respect.

3.4.3 The Tournament

The only parody of Walter Scott most readers take note of at first glance is the obvious tournament burlesque in chapter five of *The House behind the Cedars*, a clear example of oppositional or motivated signifying. The winner of the jousting contest (no valiant contest to the death but merely ring gathering with a wooden lance on horseback), a Southern racist aristocrat bearing the Scottish name of George Tryon, unwittingly picks out a passing "octoroon" as the tournament's "Queen of Love and Beauty." Dropping her handkerchief for "Sir George" to fetch with his lance, the character "Rowena Warwick," as John Warwick renames his sister, reflects the constant reverberations of the conflicts between the Saxons, Normans and the Jew Isaac's beautiful daughter Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*. Echoes of these racial conflicts in *Ivanhoe* are commented upon by characters in this Chesnutt novel. After the engagement of George Tryon and "Rowena Warwick" is made known to his white friends, Tryon's family friends comment on her new first name and surname:

"A good, strong old English name," observed the doctor.

"The heroine of *Ivanhoe*!" exclaimed Miss Harriet.

"Warwick the Kingmaker!" said Miss Mary. "Is she tall and fair, and dignified and stately?"

"She is tall, dark rather than fair, and full of tender grace and sweet humility."

"She should have been named Rebecca instead of Rowena," rejoined Miss Mary, who was well up in her Scott (Chesnutt 1993b: 92).

Their comments specify those racial features that indicate Rowena in possession of the wrong name since her darker features bear more resemblance to

the “dark” Jew Rebecca than Scott’s “fair” Saxon Rowena.⁸⁶ Foreshadowing the unmasking of Rowena’s dark background as well as the failure of an interracial pairing, Chesnutt links Scott’s racial conflicts as well as a racialized allusion to Rebecca’s Semitic beauty expressed in chapter eight of *Ivanhoe* (Scott 1986: 88). Rowena Warwick indulges in excessive ambition not only to pass as white but to climb to the top of white Southern society. Both Scott’s and Chesnutt’s tragic heroines ambitiously attempt to marry into a bigoted society which will never allow them entry, and ultimately both are grievously punished for it. The principal difference between the two women’s ambition is that Rebecca never attempts to assimilate (by means of conversion to Christianity) whereas Rowena integrates by going to a “finishing school” and passing as white.⁸⁷

In Scott’s novel, *Ivanhoe*’s greater attraction and chivalric love for the racial Other, the black-eyed beauty Rebecca, does not overcome society’s demand that he designate the “mild blue-eyed” Saxon Rowena as the “Queen of Love and Beauty.” This decision foreshadows *Ivanhoe*’s ultimate choice of Lady Rowena of Hargottstandstede as his bride, even though numerous exchanges of gifts, chivalric assistance on *Ivanhoe*’s side and Rebecca’s nursing him back to health after he suffered injuries not only express mutual attraction but correspond to medieval knightly love, and mere altruism. In this quick review of Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, Chesnutt unmistakably revises the popular novel for white Southerners by projecting Rebecca into the role of Rena, who fakes the role of Rowena (and even takes her name).

In both the novels by Walter Scott and Charles Chesnutt, the tournament is a public spectacle for all citizens to see and enjoy. The tournament in *The House*

⁸⁶ One scholar, Earle Bryant, even goes so far in his own intertextual reading as to argue that Rena Walden masquerades as a Black Southern Jew (Bryant 1999: 15-21).

⁸⁷ As Frantz Fanon argues, whereas the Jew symbolizes intellectual danger, the black symbolizes biological danger (Fanon 1967: 165).

behind the Cedars, organized by the “Clarence Social Club” in Clarence, South Carolina⁸⁸ was set on “the county fair-ground, where all was in readiness, sparkled with the youth and beauty of the town, standing here or there [...] or moving toward the seats from which the pageant might be witnessed” (Chesnutt 1993b: 31). Chesnutt, like Scott, goes into some detail⁸⁹ about setting of the tournament with only some modest differences here and there.

A quarter of a mile of the race track, to right and left of the judge’s stand, had been laid off for the lists. Opposite the grand stand, which occupied a considerable part of this distance, a dozen uprights had been erected at measured intervals. Projecting several feet over the track from each of these uprights was an iron crossbar, from which an iron hook depended. Between the uprights stout posts were planted, of such a height that their tops could be easily reached by a swinging sword-cut from a mounted rider passing upon the track [...] (Chesnutt 1993b: 31)

Chesnutt’s narrator observes some segregation based on class in the audience very much replicating Scott’s novel *Ivanhoe*. Yet there is a substantial commingling of races and social classes in both works as well.

In *Ivanhoe* Prince John not only talks to the despised Jew⁹⁰ Isaac of York, he demands that Isaac and Rebecca – “the very model of perfection whose charms drove frantic the wisest king that ever lived” (i.e. the bride of King Solomon) – sit in the galley with the highest and mightiest of the Saxons (Scott 1986: 83-84). Moreover, he considers the beauty of the Jewish woman Rebecca to be the greatest,

⁸⁸ His tournament in *The House behind the Cedars* was undoubtedly modeled after “play tournaments” he witnessed in Spartanburg, South Carolina, where Chesnutt lived and taught for one year at one colored Freedman school in 1875.

⁸⁹ Scott uses about eight times as much space describing the armor and devices worn by combatants than Chesnutt.

⁹⁰ While the racial hatred in Chesnutt’s novel is directed by whites toward blacks, in Scott’s novel the Jews are despised by the Saxons as well as the Normans, and the latter two feel racial hatred towards each other as well. Only *Ivanhoe* stresses tolerance toward both groups and he aids both groups as well as his own people, the Saxons.

above even Rowena, whose stock is Saxon and therefore disagreeable to Prince John, a Norman.

In Chesnutt's novel, the racial Other is the African American heroine, Rena Walden, now renamed Rowena Warwick, and passing as white at the tournament. Like Rebecca, her beauty dazzles and her charm is inviting to the crowd. As a new personality in Clarendon, she is admired and wherever she walks, people whisper their questions about who she may be and what rumors have been heard about her. Analogous to the tournament scene in *Ivanhoe*, a couple of racial Outsiders (who are passing as white) manage to sit among the privileged people while poor whites and colored citizens sit segregated along the lists. As the novel's deuteragonist, John Warwick finally introduces his sister to his friend, George Tryon, one of the competing "knights:"

The knights, masquerading in fanciful costumes, in which bright-colored garments, gilt paper, and cardboard took the place of knightly harness, were mounted on spirited horses. Most of them were gathered at one end of the lists, while others practiced their steeds upon the unoccupied portion of the race track. (Chesnutt 1993b: 31-2)

Chesnutt not only shows how the South Carolina tournament falls short of the exuberance of Scott's depiction of the Ashby-de-la-Zouch Tournament fight to the death, but even has characters commenting on the difference. John Warwick, in conversation with a "Mrs. Newberry," an important white woman in society, notes that instead of a Greek portico, Clarence has a pine tree, and in lieu of heavy armor and harness, paper and cardboard "much more appropriately attired, for a day like this," not in the sense of South Carolina summer heat and humidity but because of "new times and circumstances" (Chesnutt 1993b: 32). Mrs. Newberry appears offended, telling Warwick "you're [...] heretical about our chivalry." He responds that

“[W]ounded vanity will take place of wounded limbs, and there will be broken hopes in lieu of broken heads” (Chesnutt 1993b: 33).⁹¹ Hence Chesnutt’s tournament is a burlesque of Scott’s Ashby-de-la-Zouch Tournament.

The romance subplot in *Ivanhoe* during the tournament is echoed in Chesnutt’s novel as well.

The beautiful girl seated by Warwick’s side accidentally let a little square of white lace-trimmed linen slip from her hand. [...] A young rider in the approaching rear rank saw the handkerchief fall, and darting swiftly forward, caught it in the point of his lance ere it touched the ground. (Chesnutt 1993b: 34)

After receiving the approval of John Warwick, the rider of the “crimson sash” “tied the handkerchief around the middle of his lance and quickly rejoined his comrades at the head of the lists.” (Chesnutt 1993b: 34)

Among the crowd of onlookers and admirers of “six Rebeccas and eight Rowenas [...] in the grand stand” was the dark-skinned Walden family neighbor and frequent family servant Frank Fowler whose head was bandaged after broken fragment hit his head. He stood opposite the grandstand, and upon spotting his secret love, mutters to himself:

It’s Miss Rena, sho’s you bawn. She looked lack a’ angel befo’, but now, up dere “amongs” all dem rich, fine folks, she looks lack a whole flock er angels. Dey ain’ one er dem ladies w’at could hol’ a candle ter her. (Chesnutt 1993b: 34)

Fowler ponders her rise from an impoverished, illegitimate African American to her current standing, and postulates her relationship with him: “I wonder ef she’d know me er speak ter me ef she seed me? I reckon she would, spite er her gittin’ up so in

⁹¹ While John Warwick sees through the sham chivalry, he and his sister aim to pass in white society and accommodate the racist society, so his assertions to Mrs. Newberry challenging authentic chivalry is quickly checked, one of many examples of passing blacks masking their views in Chesnutt’s fiction.

de worl' " (Chesnutt 1993b: 34). As in Scott's *Ivanhoe*, others in the crowd whisper as to the identity of the beauty who dropped her handkerchief. The "Knight of the crimson sash", George Tryon, is John Warwick's legal client. Named tournament champion, he upsets Clarence City natives by bestowing the title "Queen of Love and Beauty" to Warwick's sister, an Outsider. In this sense, Chesnutt revises the plot in *Ivanhoe* whereby an open romance develops between Rowena Warwick, a passing mulatto, and George Tryon, one of the town's leading young citizens.

Both novels depict what the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin postulates as aspects of the carnivalization, not only insofar as literary theorists consider the term applied concretely to novels, but in both the language, classes and interactions of people intermingling at the respective tournaments where "it also brings out the crude, unmediated connections between things that people otherwise seek to keep separate [...] (Bakhtin 1981: 170). The tournaments themselves are carnivals as depicted in the two novels.⁹² Descriptions of the rules of fighting, the political, social and romantic discussions, both spoken discussions (between both Warwicks, Tryon and Newberry) and unspoken (by Frank Fowler to himself) are as multifaceted in Scott's novel as it is evident in Chesnutt's fiction. The heteroglossia or conflicting multiplicity of languages defines the dialogical nature of communication. In Chesnutt's folk humor, a great variation of language and social differences becomes evident between Frank Fowler (his use of vernacular) and other characters who are lettered and maintain the locality's highest standards of social grace. In Scott the *de facto* ruler of England, Prince John, can be contrasted not only with Isaac, Rebecca, the Saxons as well as his multitude of advisors and servants, but also the vernacular

⁹² Insofar as participants of the tournaments do not engage in some aspects of laughter a distinction can be made between these two forms of public medieval entertainment, as Bakhtin describes carnivals.

of the two Saxons Wamba and Gurth. Chesnutt's narrative dialogically interacts with the explicit and implied narrative of Sir Walter Scott as argued by Bakhtin.

3.4.4 Chesnutt's Satire of Chivalry

Unlike any character in Scott's novel, an issue of "double consciousness" appears in Charles Chesnutt's passing characters that take on the racist attitudes of white supremacists while passing and occasionally articulate these views during their interactions with other blacks. In *The House behind the Cedars* John Warwick, the passing octoroon lawyer, takes on the persona of a white southern racist when he discusses the South's lost property in the form of emancipated slaves after the Civil War, much to the admiration of the white racists he is conversing with (Chesnutt 1993b: 29). The passing trickster propagates racial superiority among white Southerners. Later in *The House behind the Cedars* this occurs even after R(ow)ena is "unmasked" as a passer. In answering George Tryon's letter, who appears to have an interest in a sexual liaison (but not marriage) with his former fiancée, Miss Walden responds in a letter, stating among other things,

You are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black. I accept the classification, however unfair, and the consequences, however unjust, one of which is that we cannot meet in the same parlor, in the same church, at the same table or anywhere...My good name remains my most valuable possession. I beg of you to let me alone (Chesnutt 1993b: 172-3).

After the initial confrontation between George Tryon and his unmasked fiancé, the "racial disgrace" is kept private between a few people. In their exchanged letters Rena denies her blackness, for octoroons are white under South Carolina law, and she therefore regards George Tryon's classification of her as a black woman as "unfair." Her dignified response replicates white politeness and standards of womanly

virtue.⁹³ George Tryon appears to develop either a dishonorable motivation behind his continued pursuit of Rowena, or he still felt he was in love with her.⁹⁴ In spite of her refusal, he tries to corner her when she leaves her place of employment – a colored school – and in avoiding him Rena encounters the lustful Jeff Wain, a villainous married man who appears intent on forcing himself on Rena. She escapes both men by dashing into thick woods but gets disoriented while in fear, eventually getting lost in the woods just as a thunderstorm pours down rain. Rena loses consciousness and develops a fever. After she is found and brought to a bed to recover, Rena Walden decides she must escape and return home before she has had a chance to fully recover from a fever.

When George Tryon learns that Rowena is ill and still left town, he makes an attempt to help out, but unlike *Ivanhoe* he acts way too late. Jeff Wain, analogous to the Templar knight Brian de Bois-Guilbert,⁹⁵ tries through seduction to have his way with Rowena Walden. However, unlike Scott's heroic protector of Rebecca's honor, Chesnutt's tragic mulatto is unprotected from the would-be rapist and escapes on her own.⁹⁶ Eventually she melodramatically dies in her attempt to escape, in obvious sharp contrast to the plot in Scott's novel.⁹⁷ Not only is Rebecca rescued from being burned alive after her trial as a witch (not only because she is Jewish but also because she administers medicine), but Lucas Beaumanoir, the austere and bigoted

⁹³ Since her former lover has no interest in marrying her but movingly expresses an interest in a mere rendezvous, he could only be interested in "sowing wild oats," not an uncommon practice for gentlemen in the South before they became committed to a stifling yet morally commendable marriage. Hence, George Tryon's erotic interest in Rena, a symbolic forbidden fruit much like the Jewish Rebecca in *Ivanhoe* is to the Templar knights, actually increases with her refusal.

⁹⁴ SallyAnn Ferguson interprets Tryon's behavior as unambiguous: Tryon "stands ready to exploit her sexually" (Ferguson 1985: 51).

⁹⁵ Brian de Bois-Guilbert, a respected veteran of a religious war, repeatedly attempts to either seduce or rape Rebecca in a number of chapters in *Ivanhoe* but while "in love" with Rebecca, he is unable to marry her because of her ethnicity she was born into and her steadfastly held religious convictions.

⁹⁶ Lionel Lackey points out that *Ivanhoe* "rescues only Rebecca, not her oppressed people" (Lackey 1992: 153). This would hold true even with a happy end to the romance in both novels.

⁹⁷ While the death of Chesnutt's heroine revises Scott's ending of the self-exiling Jews, the fantastic and melodramatic manner of Rena Walden's death echoes Bois-Guilbert's collapse. John Walden exiles himself north after he is unmasked as a "Negro," so his departure replicates the Jews' fate.

Grand Master of the Templars, puts Rebecca on trial in his misplaced effort to “purify” the aberrant temple.

While escaping a would-be rapist, Rena fantasizes of an Ivanhoe-like knight in shining armor coming to her rescue, but George Tryon’s rescue never materializes, an example of Chesnutt’s “motivated signifyin(g)” on Scott. In her hallucinatory fantasy before her black “servant” Frank Fowler, she envisions her estranged lover George Tryon gallantly saving her precisely as Rebecca was saved, accentuating Chesnutt’s satire. She sentimentally confuses the black servant (who brings her with his mule and cart to safety) with her beloved ex-fiancée:

“George,” she cried, in melting tones, “dear George, do you love me? How much do you love me? Ah, you don’t love me!” she moaned; “I’m black; you don’t love me; you despise me!” Her voice died away into a hopeless wail (Chesnutt 1993b: 192).

Tryon, who on one level is a well-drawn character, represents Chesnutt’s parody of both Ivanhoe specifically and knight-errantry generally, is a scathing caricature of a Southern gentleman. Tryon is nowhere to be seen when Rena needs his assistance. When he belatedly hears of her suffering, he first dithers before finally attempting a search. Instead of the Southern aristocrat, Scottish-American George Tryon, it is Rena’s poor neighbor, the dark black servant and gallant devotee named Frank Fowler⁹⁸ who rescues her near a swamp-like location where Rena had collapsed in a delirium.⁹⁹

The “black knight,” a true servant to an oppressed and defenseless woman, proclaims his chivalric devotion to her: “Frank loves you better’n all de world [...] I’d

⁹⁸ SallyAnn Ferguson calls this character “the most honorable and morally upright character in the novel” and “the only suitor in the book capable of giving Rena the unselfish love she craves” (Ferguson 1985: 47, 48).

⁹⁹ It is impossible to overlook Chesnutt’s exploitation of the trope of the swamp as a necessary means for escape in slave narratives where bloodhounds could not follow the scent of the escapee. Chesnutt however has Rowena escape a rapist.

'a' died, fer you, Miss Rena," (Chesnutt 1993b: 192,195). However, Frank Fowler's attempt to rescue and bring her home to safety is nearly thwarted twice: a young white man asks, "Look a-here, nigger, what are you doing with this white woman?"; later, fox-hunting whites on horseback, following their bloodhounds who sniff around the semi-conscious Rena Walden, question the black man carting her home with a mule, only to leave him swiftly with the white-looking woman when Frank tricks them into believing her ailment contagious (Chesnutt 1993b: 193). Even the black servant Frank Fowler exploits the cowardly character of the Southern white man. Chesnutt's white Southerners never really put themselves at risk, not even when the distressed woman appears white.

"Death is Freedom," as William Wells Brown entitles a chapter near the end of the first African American novel (that was known in Chesnutt's time) *Clotel* (1853), and this trope is echoed as Rena's only freedom as well. Death serves as a means to preserve her honor (i.e., her virginity). Although death ensues in the "tragic mulatto" literary tradition¹⁰⁰ it is not usual to combine death in a scene evoking an escaping slave, but rather following a century-old genteel convention of female malaise, or emotional fever caused by a broken heart, leading to what Leslie Fiedler calls "the bourgeois Liebestod" as exemplified by Richardson's *Clarissa* (Fiedler 1966:62), or what Peter Gay calls "the tender passion" (Gay 1986: 56) Chesnutt combines both conventions in the fragile constitution and death of the escaping Rena Walden. Tryon's failure to consistently behave according to the "code" as Ivanhoe does toward Rebecca, Scott's racial Other, exemplifies Chesnutt's untiring and nearly inexhaustible satirizing of the Southern white "sham" chivalry.

¹⁰⁰ The tragic mulatto literary tradition usually ends or hints at a sentimental tragic ending as evidenced for example in *Clotel, or, the President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (written in the late 1850s) by Hannah Crafts, *Our Nig* (1861) by Harriet Wilson, or – citing an unfinished novel strongly suggesting a tragic ending, *The Curse of Caste* (1865) by Julie Collins. In only the first two of the novels cited above are the tragic heroines legally enslaved.

The satire against the supposed gallantry of southern Scottish gentleman in this novel may be juxtaposed with Chesnut's earlier novel (unpublished in his lifetime, but completed approximately three years before *The House behind the Cedars*). In Chesnut's novel written in 1897 entitled *Mandy Oxendine*, a similar light-skinned woman is attacked by a white man named Bob Utley. He nearly rapes "Amanda," an African American teacher in a white school who is, of course, passing as white. The depiction of the near-rape scene approximates Scott's description of the attack on Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, i.e., the attack is more graphically conveyed than in Chesnut's first published novel *The House behind the Cedars*. In *Mandy Oxendine*,¹⁰¹ an African American man in love with her, risks his life and saves her from the attack at the last instant, but only by killing Utley. Subsequently the light-skinned African American man is nearly lynched for his effort in protecting a (passing white) woman in distress (Chesnut 1997a: 103) because he killed a white man. He is released at the last moment after the mob learns that the man he killed tried to rape a "white" woman.

In racial and cultural terms, Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* depicts a conflict between the Saxons and the Normans which concludes in a peaceful mixture of the two groups. The general peace ensues from their intermarriage historically:

[...] these distinguished nuptials were celebrated by the attendance of the high-born Normans, as well as Saxons, joined with the universal jubilee of the lower orders, that marked the marriage of two individuals as a pledge of the future peace and harmony betwixt two races, which, since that period, have been so completely mingled that the distinction has become wholly invisible (Scott 1986:515).

¹⁰¹ *Mandy Oxendine*, first published in 1997, was rejected by publishers in 1897 in part for a too graphic near-rape scene. Clearly Chesnut wished this unpublished novel to approximate the black rapists of white women depicted in Thomas Dixon's plantation novels.

Interracial marriage was the ideal for Chesnutt as he proposes in his essay published in 1900, "The Future American: What the Race is Likely to Become in the Process of Time," where he envisions the racial mixture as a welcomed solution to the racial troubles, resulting in what he designated a new American race. Chesnutt propounds a mixing of the European, African and Native American races so that a new American race comes about, and envisions the harmony which Scott describes as the English model of the mix of the Normans and Anglo-Saxons. Then again, the American "one drop of Negro blood" rule precluded any chance of the English model succeeding in the United States unless one passed as white. Scott's novel also expresses a limit to mixing as well: Rebecca may assimilate through Christian conversion only – never as a Jew. When offered an opportunity to stay in England at the end of *Ivanhoe*, Rebecca replies most appositely, "There is a gulf betwixt us. Our breeding, our faith, alike forbid either to pass over it" (Scott 1983: 517). Both women at first delighting in the attentions they receive – at the conclusion of the respective novels – lose their illusions about love, ultimately remain unfulfilled in love, and in their own ways eschew the dominant (white) world and return to their own Jewish and African American worlds.

While the heroine, Rena, dies melodramatically with her dream of marrying into the white race unfulfilled, her brother John does for a time succeed in passing as white, marrying and then having a child with a white woman. "Success" for African Americans passing as white is ambiguous in Chesnutt's novel, but not without the ultimate break-up of the African American family. In *Ivanhoe*, a similar ambiguity is expressed, for while the Anglo-Saxons mix with the Normans, Rena's mortal end replicates Rebecca's miserable fate as the "Wandering Jew" at the conclusion of the novel. Rena dies knowing that her racial ancestry brought about her demise while

the Jew Rebecca winds up favoring Muslim-dominated Spain as a more charitable environment for Jews than Christian England. In both novels, the female Other submit in their own fashion to “the will of God” by not putting their beloved men into unacceptable social positions of a mixed marriage.

John Warwick, born Walden, appears similar to Ivanhoe as well, especially in his decisiveness. Chesnutt relocates the notion of the “disinherited knight” in Ivanhoe to the African American experience. John Walden is disinherited by the white descendants of his father’s family. They demand that these “mulatto” children (their half-brother and sister) remain “unacknowledged” black bastards when the deceased’s lawyer¹⁰² attempts to fulfill the unnamed father’s desire to leave a legacy to his “dark family.” Wilfred of Ivanhoe as a Saxon to some extent can be regarded as a cultural, if not racial “passer” when he assimilates Norman values, resulting in his “disinherited” status. Near the opening of both novels, John Warwick and Ivanhoe return home after ten years, both strangers to their own families. Like a modern day Robin Hood, John returns home to Patesville, North Carolina like a criminal in the opening of the novel, attempting to steal blackness (his sister Rena) and transform it (her) to whiteness. Like Ivanhoe, John returns secretly as a prominent member of the Other (race). Whereas Ivanhoe’s alienation from his proud father Cedric continues only until his marriage to Rowena, John must tragically separate himself, his sister and his son from any bond with his mother who “would have given all the world to warm her son’s child upon her bosom; but she knew this could not be” (Chesnutt 1993b:16).

¹⁰² The lawyer of John and Rena Walden’s father in *The House behind the Cedars* is “Judge Archibald Straight” who later trains John Walden in law, doing so out of guilt for not fulfilling John’s father’s wishes that his children with Molly Walden be given financial security. His character is based on the Fayetteville lawyer Robert Strange (1796-1854) a former U.S. Senator and judge.

Shortly after Rowena's unmasking as an African American, John Warwick knows that his own ability to pass is compromised. He sententiously tries to persuade Rena to move out of the Carolinas and pass as white again:

"Listen, Rena," he said, with a sudden impulse, " we'll go [...] far away from the South and Southern people, and start life over again. It will be easier for you, it will not be hard for me—I am young, and have means. There are no strong ties to bind me to the South [...]" (Chesnutt 1993b: 122).

Yet Rena obstinately refuses to pass again. At that point, after bidding farewell to the family friend, John Warwick leaves Patesville for good, never to see his home, mother or sister again.¹⁰³ In fear of further vicissitudes, John takes leave to ensure that he will never be unmasked again. Warwick's complete disappearance from the plot about two thirds of the way in the novel (chapter 19 of a total of 33 chapters) also replicates the fate of wandering Jew Rebecca. Unlike Rebecca who expatriates herself to Spain, the reader has no clear knowledge of John's place of destiny. As an African American passing as white, John Warwick (as well as his young son Albert Warwick) are permanently exiled from family, home and even from the reader of the novel.¹⁰⁴

3.5 Conclusion

Many critics have noted Chesnutt's initial writing method accentuating the more popular romantic or melodramatic style, seeking through the white character George Tryon to infiltrate white readers' racist feelings. Editors indicated to him that this practice was popular and to Chesnutt this appeared to have the best chance for

¹⁰³ As Heather Hathaway puts it, "miscegenation creates, yet destroys, the family." (Hathaway 1989: 154)

¹⁰⁴ A major flaw in the novel is John Warwick's disappearance. He is never heard from again in the final third of the novel, nor is the fate of his son who was cared for by Rowena ever mentioned again.

success in achieving his didactic aim, which was “not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites,” as Chesnutt wrote in his journal (Chesnutt 1993c: 139). This rather traditional African American literary aim goes back to abolitionist slave narratives.

Although Walter Scott is no longer as popular as he was in the 19th century, his influence over Southern culture of Chesnutt’s lifetime made him a target for satire and he still exerts a greater interest among Southerners in the United States. Scott’s interest in romantically depicting the Scottish scene of oppression also had its historical predecessors, as Lincoln affirms:

Scott [...] was motivated in part by a romantic identification with the Iberian patriots [and] echoed the comparison in his poem *The Vision of Don Roderick* (1811) which drew unmistakable parallels between the Spaniards in their struggles against the French and the Scots in their historical struggles against southern invaders.” (Lincoln 2002: 47).

Scott’s impact on African American fiction was enormous, particularly as it influenced the culture and mindset of the South in the U.S. His impact is still felt in modern Southern fiction, most famously and reverently in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Charles Chesnutt was not the only African American writer to “signify” on *Ivanhoe*. With the character “Ras the Destroyer” in *Invisible Man* (1952), a black man in New York City dressed as a modern-day knight on horseback fighting superior white forces. The scene indubitably shows Ralph Ellison’s particularly close affinity to Scott’s romance. Ishmael Reed does likewise in his most famous novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and his satire on the Knights Templar. In my reading of early African American fiction, however, Charles Waddell Chesnutt was the first to do so. Moreover, he was the first writer to parody the construct of Southern white Scottish culture.

4.0 William Makepeace Thackeray's Snobs

The fiction of William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863) was well received in the North as well as the South. His novel *Vanity Fair* (1851) was a best seller in the United States. His satire was also profoundly admired by Charles Chesnutt, who wrote about Thackeray on the day he finished reading *Vanity Fair* on March 26, 1881 in his *Journal*. Chesnutt sought to become “a gentlemen”¹⁰⁵ in the South, which required great knowledge he felt he could acquire through concentrated reading of many books of culture. White Southerners privileged Thackeray’s fiction not only because of his satirical brilliance but also for his pro-Southern political views. Chesnutt was well-read on authors he knew to be popular among white readers in the South such as Thackeray, in particular *Vanity Fair* (1848). Chesnutt read other works by Thackeray and comments about features he admired”, for example, in *Henry Esmond*.¹⁰⁶ He repeatedly praised *Vanity Fair* over the course of many decades, so that one may place that satirical novel as one of significant influence.

¹⁰⁵ A “Gentleman” for Chesnutt may be defined in part as “educated like a white man” (like the semi-autobiographical character John Walden aspires to become in the aforementioned *House behind the Cedars*) and therefore Chesnutt as a youngster emulated the reading habits of Southern whites.

¹⁰⁶ Once a work of literature reached a level of popularity of the likes of *A Fool’s Errand* or *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Chesnutt would eventually read many of the other works by the same author. In his speech “The Writing of a Novel” he lists both *Henry Esmond* and *Becky Sharp* among the “Great characters of fiction” (Chesnutt 1999: 551).

4.1 Introduction

Most scholarly research about the Victorian novel and race do not delve as deeply into the works of the mid-Victorian novelist, short story writers and essayist William Thackeray unless it links him to colonial India. Born to a colonial administrator in Calcutta, Thackeray was half-brother to his father's illegitimate "mulatto" daughter with an Indian mistress.¹⁰⁷ Showing little interest in the economic or sexual exploitation in colonial India or racist slavery in British colonial holdings in the Caribbean, in later life Thackeray became a vocal apologist for Southern slavery. After the Civil War began in 1861, he publicly defended the Confederacy in England until his death two years later (Lockard 2008:18).

Unlike Sir Walter Scott, who had never visited America, Thackeray twice traveled throughout the Northern and Southern portions of the United States, and his writings about America were formed from his personal impressions in his later fiction and nonfiction. Before delving into his fiction, Thackeray's view of blacks, slavery, Southern society in the US as well as his view of abolitionist literature will be examined.

4.2 Thackeray's Polemics Regarding Slavery

Of great influence on Thackeray's views of the south specifically and America generally were his two professional lecture tours to the United States in the 1850s. Thackeray's American visits were certainly very profitable financially, and he met with great luminaries of the American literary and intellectual world, as well as two presidents, one of whom he dined with in the White House. He prepared his lectures after studying (above all the reception of) Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners in*

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Redfield Blechynden (1804-1841) died impoverished and Thackeray, well aware of her rights to inheritance under the terms of their father's will, did little to assist her financially (Taylor 1999:95-99, 173).

America (1832) and especially Dickens' *American Notes* (1842) whose critical recordings of their respective impressions of the United States angered most Americans, and notably both strongly condemned the American practice of slavery in the Southern States. Thackeray evaded controversial issues in the country where he aimed to earn a large income from on the lecture circuit as well as from future book sales.¹⁰⁸ Given the political issue of the day among the American literati after the publication of the sensationally successful novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) directly concerned slavery (famously inspired by passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850), Thackeray initially decided not to commit himself publicly on this volatile issue in America so as to stay clear of domestic controversies and thereby propitiate his American readership.

Thackeray recorded his impressions of the slave society as he saw it (and heard about it) exclusively in his private correspondence, particularly with his mother, Mrs. Carmichael-Smith.¹⁰⁹ Traveling extensively in the South in 1852-3 and in 1855-1856, Thackeray witnessed slavery first hand. His travels assisted in giving his needed knowledge of the South when gathering notes for and composing his final novel, *The Virginians* (1859). Thackeray not only witnessed slavery but was served by house slaves. In a number of letters, Thackeray wrote deplorably racist diatribes while venerating the friendliness and general hospitality of slave-owning whites in the South. Nevertheless, slavery was a minor issue rather than an overriding problem to Thackeray.

Thackeray admired and recorded what was to him particularly "un-English" in America: "Everybody seems his neighbour's equal. They begin without a dollar and

¹⁰⁸ Eventually Thackeray chose to perform an almost anti-English monarchy lecture entitled "The Four Georges" with a clear expression of his disgust for King George IV (Barnaby 2001:52).

¹⁰⁹ The mother of Thackeray, Mrs. Carmichael-Smith, remarried after Thackeray's father had died. She had a significant correspondence with her famous son.

make fortunes in 5 years – ” he wrote at the end of November 1852 (Taylor 1999: 333). With regard to the equality and opportunities, he predictably excludes black slaves from among his “neighbours.” Overall, one can characterize his views on the United States generally as philo-American:

Empires more immense than any in the world has known are waiting their time here... Everyone prospers. There are scarcely any poor. For hundreds of years more there is room and food and work for whoever comes. (Letter to Harriet Thackeray, January 17, 1853)

Unlike his biting satire of English class pretensions in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray’s favorable view of America was symptomatic of his imperialist politics and a proclivity for celebrating hegemony by separating the enslaved African from the American population which has “scarcely any poor.” Edward Said has pointed out that literature was frequently employed in the imperial political project. Said’s comments on Becky Sharp’s famous charades in Gaunt House, performing Clytemnestra following a caricature of an Oriental fantasy emphasizes the social acceptability of obtaining wealth from the colonies but not necessarily the people originating from these same colonies (Said 1983: 270-3). This criticism portends a similar applicability to the African and African American slavery of his time, and it logically follows then that Thackeray would emphasize in his letters a particularly pro-South position, in contrast to the majority of English intellectuals who had visited the U.S.A.¹¹⁰ While his impressions of the South were not exclusively positive, he seemed to be less genuinely heuristic with regard to the reality of slavery and race. One scholar concludes that “[t]he foundation of Thackeray’s pro-South position was his attitude towards blacks” (Lockard 2008: 18).

¹¹⁰ To this day, southern cities have numerous memorials recounting Thackeray’s visit to specific houses and buildings from the two visits in the 1850s (Lockard 2008:17-18).

It has been speculated widely that Thackeray too was himself the product of a distant miscegenation; not so distant that family members were not aware but remote enough that it had become insignificant, and while his daughter talked of this ancestry to one of Thackeray's earliest biographers, Thackeray obviously suppressed it. His maternal grandmother, Harriet Cowper, is believed to be partly of Indian origin. Thackeray's daughter, Anne Thackeray Richie, referred to Harriet Cowper as "my brown [great] grandmother" (Ray 1972:54). Another scholar refers to "the remarkable number of mulattoes and half-breeds which appear in his novels and sketches, and numerous references to miscegenation [...which] may constitute still another autobiographical element in his work" (Davies 1961:326). One may at this point consider Gates's theory on African American rhetoric in view of Western literature more carefully: "To name our tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem" (Gates 1988: xxiii). Based upon his own research, Gates ventures correctly in this case in anticipating some literary antecedents who are likely darker than expected.

In a letter to his mother, Thackeray litotically expostulates that all [African] blacks be understood as a grotesque vacuous Other:

They are not my men my & brethren; these strange people with retreating foreheads, with great obtruding lips & jaws: with capacities for thought, pleasure and endurance quite different to mine [...] (Letter to Mrs. Carmichael-Smith, February 13, 1853).

Referring to blacks as a heterocosmic variety, Thackeray characterizes them as obtuse whereby he argues for the notion of polygenism or that races are innately different, rather than monogenism. He reportorially addresses the conditions of blacks after his initial encounters, witnessing very little before reaching his precipitous

conclusion: “where the two races meet this weaker one must knock under” (Letter to Mrs. Carmichael-Smith, February 13, 1853).

Less than one month later he wrote again to his mother from Richmond, Virginia, complimenting what would later become the capital of the Confederate States of America in plainly racial terms:

This is the very prettiest friendliest and pleasantest little town I have seen in these here parts...The streets swarm with negroes the Inn servants are all slaves – Well, I have never seen in my life so many happy looking people – the little nigger-children trotting about the Streets are the queerest grotesque little imps, they all look well fed and are in the main kindly treated. (Letter to Mrs. Carmichael-Smith, March 3, 1853).

Paradigmatically, many benign letters penned by Thackeray about the conditions of happy, well-fed black slaves and their generous masters were composed while he was busily engaged in directly silencing opposing views. On the same day that the aforementioned letter was penned, March 3, 1853, his lecture circuit manager whom he had befriended a decade earlier while studying art in Paris, the renowned painter and sketch artist Eyre Crowe Jr. (1824-1910), attended a slave auction, mostly out of curiosity.¹¹¹ At the Richmond, Virginia auction, Crowe quickly sketched out his observations. However, the Richmond auctioneer summarily threw Crowe out of the room used for potential buyers for inspecting the slaves up for auction, alarmed at seeing an untrustworthy stranger and suspecting Crowe of possibly making abolitionist propaganda. Crowe shouted back to the hostile dealers, “[y]ou may turn me away, but I can recall all that I have seen” (Crowe 1893:34). Approximately three years later Crowe’s sketch was published in the *Illustrated London Post* (see Fig. 1 below).

¹¹¹ Crowe wished to sketch blacks after his attempt on a railroad car was thwarted six weeks earlier when a conductor asked his subject to remove himself to another carriage after the train had crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and entered the State of Maryland (Taylor 1999:336).

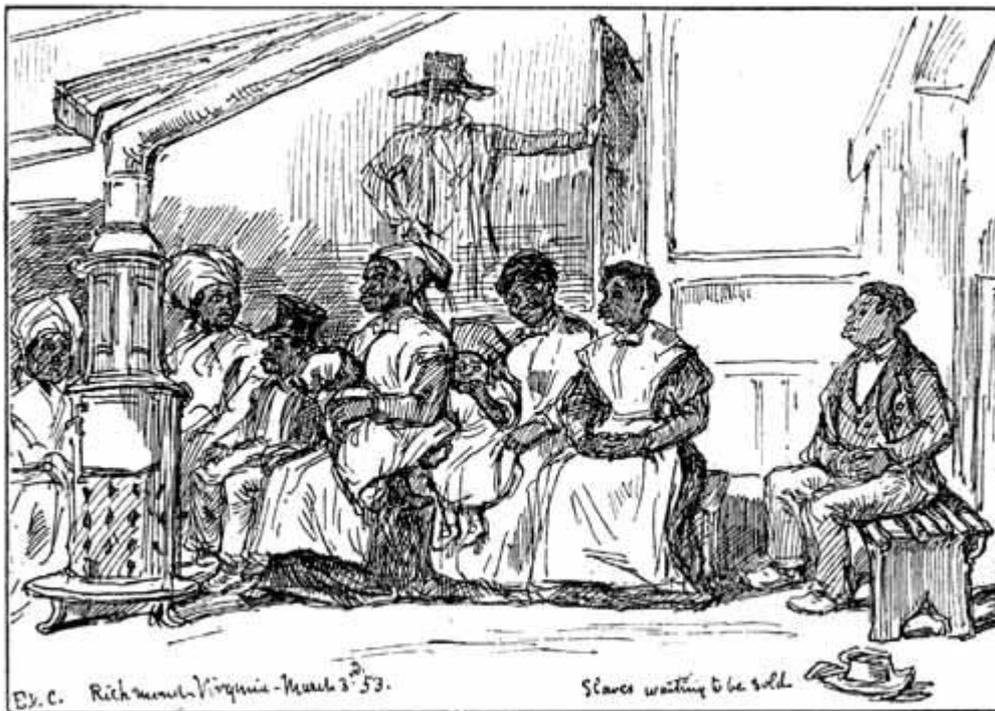


Fig. 1: Crowe Sketch, “Slaves Waiting to be Sold” (dated March 3, 1853)

Sydney Kaplan notes about this Crowe sketch the uncanny scene of bewildering tranquility among the slaves who wait for their own purchase as merchandise, describing it as “the banality of evil,” - - borrowing the phrase employed by Hannah Arendt for the sense of normalcy of mass social crime in the mid-twentieth century (Kaplan 1991: 216). There is no protest or any sign of anger, but rather a resigned expression of dignity among the mothers who passively wait with their children, knowing that these transactions of human beings may separate them from their children forever.

The behavior and countenance of the slave mothers depicted in these illustrations are reflected in one of Chesnut's minor short stories entitled “Aunt Lucy's Search” (1887) in which the heroine is separated from her six children at a slave auction taking place to satisfy her master's creditors. Her demeanor resembles Crowe's slave auction sketch and painting:

She did not cry out; she let them take her children unresistingly; the slave could suffer and be silent. The expression of her grief was restrained by a pride which revealed itself in a stoical semblance of indifference [...] (Chesnutt 1999: 210).

Eventually Crowe's sketch was transformed into one of his better known oil paintings and exhibited eight years later in London, entitled "Slaves Waiting for Sale: Richmond, Virginia."¹¹² While the details of Crowe's work critical of slavery are not germane to this study, more important for the discussion is Thackeray's reaction.



Fig. 2: Crowe Painting, "Slaves Waiting for Sale – Richmond, Virginia" (1861)

Thackeray's perception was that because of Crowe's incident at the slave auction, which had attracted quite a crowd of onlookers, his lucrative lecturing enterprise might be thrown into jeopardy just as he was beginning his journey into the

¹¹² It is one of the few paintings, regarded today as a minor masterpiece depicting a slave auction in the United States.

Southern slave states. Sedulously using all of his connections to expurgate any publicity about the controversial incident from getting in newspapers at all cost, Thackeray wrote of his exasperation in a letter to an acquaintance, stating that “Crowe had been very imprudent” (Taylor 1999: 340).

4.3 Thackeray’s Critique of Beecher Stowe

In roughly the same period that his best novel *Vanity Fair* (1848) was published, American classics such as *Walden*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick* came out as well. Despite its sprawling structure which Thackeray did not keep under control after the serial was finished and the novel was set to be published in book form, Thackeray composed successfully the patronizing snobs in society, or better, in *Vanity Fair*. In due course the values of *Vanity Fair* are shown to be empty, and Thackeray ultimately demonstrates the weakness of human nature. Thackeray famously wrote powerful satire about English cosmopolitan life but he ignored much of the source of cosmopolitan pelf (i.e., colonial exploitation) in spite of the generous backdrop which colonial India has in *Vanity Fair*. Ignoring this unsavory basis of English wealth seems rather off-putting today since Thackeray otherwise dedicated much of his literary skills describing the hypocrisy of cosmopolitan life.

This absence is further impugned given his Calcutta birth and colonial India background, as well as his awareness and feelings of guilt about the death of his impoverished Indian half-sister, Sarah Blethynden, in 1841 (Taylor 1999: 95), all of which seems to attest to his racist attitudes. Deborah Thomas cites particularly Thackeray’s interest in slavery and his “emotional attachment” to Southern slavery, linking them to his “yearning for the lost world of his Indian childhood” (Thomas 1993:10).

While touring the United States, Thackeray's sentiments regarding slaves, while clearly distasteful today, were also alarming to his most frequent correspondent, his mother. A strongly religious evangelical woman, Mrs. Anne Carmichael-Smith (1793-1864), the former Mrs. Richmond Thackeray, had read and strongly admired Harriet Beecher Stowe's (1811-1896) renowned novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and, like a great many other English readers, had cultivated a sympathy for the plight of black slaves and inevitably concurred with the Christian-based argument of moral rectitude behind the politics of the abolitionist movement in the United States. In order to clarify his views of the issue of slavery to his mother, Thackeray necessarily addressed the problems raised in Beecher Stowe's influential novel cursorily and then summarily dismissed them in the same letter to his mother:

They are not suffering as you are impassioning yourself for their wrongs as you read Mrs. Stowe, they are grinning & joking in the sun... Mrs. Stowe has a right to her case of child-separating and woman flogging for it does sometimes happen – but very seldom say the folks here. And in your workhouses aint the relatives separated, and in your villages aren't the people so poor that parents murder their own children for money? Say the Americans. Its true its true. God help us we are no better than our brethren – and the whole scheme of life is but maimed and partial. (Letter to Mrs. Carmichael-Smith, February 13, 1853).

Impervious to the atrocities of slavery or any distressing aspects of slave conditions, Thackeray seems unable to condole with the fate of blacks as so many other English visitors to the South had done. Using arguments Southerners employed in contesting the accuracy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Thackeray generalized about the unrepresentativeness of Beecher Stowe's account, insisting that her successful technique in abundant yet selective portraits of slavery had won over an audience through cheap sentiment and shocking extremes of isolated instances practiced among slave traders and slaveholders. Thackeray confuted few concrete or

specific arguments presented in Beecher Stowe's abolitionist novel. His interest in mocking abolitionist writing actually preceded his trip to America, for in 1851 in his masterpiece *Vanity Fair*, he mocks the abolitionists in the United Kingdom in a roundabout way, disparagingly naming an Englishman who writes on the slavery question "Mr. Quadroon" (Thackeray 1963: 85). Pertinent to his perception of the interests and entertainment of his readership, Thackeray attended a "negro minstrel from America" in April 1847 which he found to be extremely entertaining, and obviously considered the blacks in his fiction best depicted in a correspondingly amusing mood rather than presenting miserable slaves.

The main thesis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* - that slave-holding was unworthy of a Christian - was confronted and handled by Thackeray in another way. Addressing some of the admitted ineluctable and acknowledged wrongs in the slave system, Thackeray tendentiously pursued traditional pro-slavery argumentation, insisting that insubstantial sentiment had to be overcome by cool-headed reasoning and logic: English society had its injustices as well, after all, and Christian morality in every corner of the world is wanting and imperfect. Moreover, he obfuscates the moral issue altogether by claiming that blacks were so ineffective as servants that setting them free would be catastrophic and unchristian, since blacks would never gain employment and consequently starve through their natural slothfulness.

These same paternalistic arguments later appear in Thackeray's fiction, especially in his final novel, *The Virginians* (1859), particularly in his portrait of one of the heroes' valets, a black American slave named "Gumbo," who is variously portrayed as a singing and fiddling musician "composing rude words after the habit of his people" as well as a liar, a lazy yet servile slave, and a wildly exaggerating gossip (Thackeray 1859:138). Later in the novel there is talk of insurrection among the

slaves and the protagonist exclaims how “my mother agreed that the idea of a negro insurrection was the most abominable and parricidal notion which had ever sprung up in her unhappy country” (Thackeray 1859: 825).¹¹³ Moreover, as Maszewska shows, Thackeray’s last novel in this context, *The Virginians*, promulgates in fictional form much of the same racist diatribes Thackeray expresses in his private letters during his American lecture trips (Maszewska 1998: 59-62).

His enthusiasm for the slave-holding South did not get any cooler even after Thackeray felicitously describes a meeting with the world-famous Harriet Beecher Stowe in London in early June 1853, shortly after returning from his first lecture circuit in America:

In place of the woman I had imagined to myself after the hideous daguerreotype I found a gentle almost pretty person with a very great sweetness in her eyes and smile [...] I told Lord Shaftesbury though (who seems to worship Mrs. Stowe) that there were other people besides blacks in America & that there were 23 millions of whites who interested me still more than the niggers (Letter to Mrs. Baxter, June 3, 1853).

Maintaining that blacks were ordinarily treated humanely, Thackeray lackadaisically opines that even if not, they interest him little anyway. It is a view which spills over into his short fiction as well. In a short story entitled “A Mississippi Bubble” Thackeray, an accomplished sketch artist in his own right, opens the narrative by describing his considerable pleasure while sketching a number of black slaves:

That drawing was made in a country where there was such hospitality, friendship, kindness shown to the humble designer, that his eyes do not care to look out for faults, or his pen to note them. How they sang; how they laughed and grinned [...] those negroes of the cities of the

¹¹³ In the name of civil policy for order, Thackeray used his formidable satirical skills to advocate oppression while employing the metaphor of parent (white master) child (black slave) as Southerners did even when describing the potential of slave insurrection.

Southern parts of the then United States! My business kept me in the towns; I was but in one negro-plantation village, and there were only women and little children, the men being out a-field. But there was plenty of cheerfulness in the huts, under the great trees – I speak of what I saw – and amidst the dusky bondsmen of the cities. I witnessed a curious gaiety; heard amongst the black folk endless singing, shouting, and laughter; and saw on holidays black gentlemen and ladies arrayed in such splendor and comfort as freeborn workmen in our [English] towns seldom exhibit (Thackeray 1864: 260-1).



Fig. 3: Thackeray's sketch accompanying "A Mississippi Bubble"

The accompanying sketch by Thackeray of a black mammy¹¹⁴ attempts to visualize a charming scenic element for Thackeray's English readership, and offer his quaint elite projection of the "Other," in great contrast to Crowe's depiction of black mothers and children as merchandise. The English readers of Thackeray's last short stories written just before he died, which were subsequently collected and posthumously published in *Roundabout Papers* (1864), also learn about the basis for

¹¹⁴ A mammy is a black nurse maid who cared for one white infant as well as her own reposing black children, and her duties usually included breast-feeding because Southern white women viewed breast-feeding to be both detrimental to a full figure and draining of energy.

this contentment of the black slave. Again, Thackeray expostulates that so little work is required or expected of the Southern slave at all, especially when compared to the servants of the English nobleman, as articulated in this race-baiting sneer on black slave labor:

In a house in a Southern city you will find fifteen negroes doing the work which John, the cook, the housemaid, and the help, do perfectly in your own comfortable London house. And these fifteen negroes are the pick of a family of some eighty or ninety. Twenty are too sick, or too old for work, let us say: twenty too clumsy: twenty are too young, and have to be nursed and watched by ten more. And master has to maintain the immense crew to do the work of half-a-dozen willing hands. No, no; let Mitchell, the exile from poor dear enslaved Ireland, wish for a gang of "fat niggers;" I would as soon you should make me a present of a score of Bengal elephants, when I need but a single horse to pull my brougham. (Thackeray 1864: 261-2)

Besides questioning the efficacy of American blacks, this pernicious attack conflates free labor with slave labor as well as human labor with the labor of beasts of burden. These markedly pro-Confederacy panegyrics accordingly continue through Thackeray's incessant complementing of the Southern white man's manners and cultivation. In countering the more frequent pro-Union support of the general English population which took particular pride in ending slavery in their colonies decades earlier while condemning Southern white Americans for the continuation of slavery, Thackeray praises them dotingly and in a self-abnegating manner in "A Mississippi Bubble": "How hospitable they were, those Southern men! [...] Find me speaking ill of such a country! When I do, *pone me pigris campis*: smother me in a desert, or let Mississippi or Garonne drown me" (Thackeray 1864: 262).

When this famous critic of snobs is not directly persuading his readers of Black servants' clumsiness or inefficiency, he derogates them in his later novels (*Henry Esmond* and *The Virginians* are mostly set in the United States) by employing

common racial stereotypes – that blacks are happy and irresponsible servants – repeatedly he uses minstrel-like caricatures – without a hint of the ugly brutality of slavery. Instead, Thackeray prettifies in his fiction the peculiar institution and boasts of the devotedness of both slaver and slave, whereby an adult slave is depicted as a child that the thoughtful and kind-hearted master must look after. Heermance mistakenly claims that “[t]he fusion of these two mythic stereotypes – the large-hearted aristocrat and the infantile “Sambo” – did not come until after the Civil War” (Heermance 1974: 22) when he fails to take note of the minstrel stereotype in the fiction of Thackeray preceding the Civil War. Laden with racist stereotypes and episodes demeaning to blacks, Thackeray’s fiction is imbricated with the very strains and feelings of minstrelsy which serves as a signifying system. While critics have noted similar echoes of minstrelsy in the famous novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Mark Twain, these American writers maintain a fundamentally anti-slavery theme or what Harry Wonham terms “benevolent racialism” (Wonham 1996: 7, 11).¹¹⁵ No negative portrait of slavery appears and none of the white characters questions the institution in any of Thackeray’s novels or stories.

Thackeray’s position on the South is symptomatic of his interesting appeasement in his own literary reception in America. Aware of the criticism of slavery published in travel books by both Dickens and Mrs. Trollope, Thackeray profited from his pro-slavery polemics and foresaw greater damage to his popularity and his American readership by any criticism of slavery (or any other American institution, for that matter). In attacking abolitionists, Thackeray, like Hawthorne, also took a misogynist tone, scorning women active in progressive causes. Lockard notes that Thackeray’s “leading motivation for his tours was the repair of his personal

¹¹⁵ For Beecher Stowe, slavery was incompatible with Christianity while Mark Twain’s hero in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* experiences, in brief, a development of a friendship culminating in the realization that returning “Nigger Jim” back to his status of a slave was immoral.

finances, ruined both by a bank failure and his gambling habits;” his lecture and book contract arrangements in the U.S. paid lucratively (Lockard 2008: 21, 16).

With regard to the prospect of slavery in the future of U.S., Thackeray viewed the only viable resolution of the slavery question as the cataclysmic extermination of the black race as one example of his white paranoia explicates: “O it will be a terrible day, when 5 or 6 millions of these blacks will have to perish and give place to the white man wanting work [...] (Letter to Mrs. Elliot and Kate Perry, January 27, 1856). He was not unique in his ethnocidal views,¹¹⁶ for while most British travelers visiting the U.S. condemned slavery in terms similar to Dickens (Lockard 2008:8-9), a minority lent their intellectual support to the continuation of slavery.¹¹⁷ Clearly, the abhorrent view that “5 or 6 millions of these blacks will have to perish” is Thackeray’s most perfidious position, and Charles Chesnut elaborates on even this prospect satirically in one “Blue Vein” story “The Wife of His Youth” as well as in *The House behind the Cedars* in a creative play on the future of black existence itself.

In William Makepeace Thackeray's fiction, the many characters of color in his plots are servants, slaves or else mere caricatures to be laughed at, frequently a variety resembling the minstrel tradition. Clearly the “mulatto” Miss Swartz, an acquaintance of both Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, appears as a laughable creature whose sole redeeming asset featured in the novel is her immense wealth. In *Vanity Fair*, however, that counts for much and Thackeray exploits that asset for his satire accordingly.

¹¹⁶ See Greenberg on the American writer Thomas Roderick Dew’s highly influential pro-slavery essay in the collection *The Pro-slavery Argument as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (1852) which argues, among other points, that “[f]reedom would bring death” (Greenberg 1996: 109).

¹¹⁷ Arguably the most infamous defense of slavery articulated in the United Kingdom was penned by the Scottish essayist, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) whose “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question” (1849, 1853) argues on a number of points similarly to Thackeray (i.e., the English also have their neglected poor; the blacks are in fact happy as slaves; slaves hardly have much work; there is injustice all over the world; ending slavery will result in their annihilation).

4.4 Signifying on Thackeray in Chesnutt's Blue Vein Stories

Charles Chesnutt showed a sustained interest in the works of Thackeray. In his journal dated March 26, 1881, the then 22-year-old teacher working humbly at a rural North Carolina colored school recorded his enthusiasm for Thackeray. His youthful encomium for Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* inspired his dream to make a living as a successful novelist:

I have just finished Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, his first great novel. He had written much previous to its appearance, but with *Vanity Fair* he made himself a reputation. Every time I read a good novel, I want to write one. It is the dream of my life – to be an author! It is not so much the *monstrari digito*, though that has something to do with my aspirations. It is not altogether the money. It is a mixture of motives. I want fame; I want money; I want to raise my children in a different rank of life from that I sprang from. (Chesnutt 1993c: 154)

Among the many characters in literary fiction, Chesnutt assessed Thackeray's Henry Esmond and Becky Sharp as belonging to the immortal characters in Western literature (Chesnutt 1999a: 551). In another essay delivered as a speech in 1916 entitled "The Negro in Literature," Chesnutt refers to "Miss Schwartz [sic], in *Vanity Fair*, the colored daughter of a sugar planter of the West Indies, whose swarthy complexion and crinkly hair are compensated by her millions and her amiable and generous disposition" (Chesnutt 1999a: 432). Chesnutt felt that Miss Swartz was presented sympathetically, and derives his pastiche on Thackeray accordingly. Miss Swartz is Thackeray's exclusive literary portrait of a black person who was neither enslaved nor a servant. Once Miss Swartz departed from the "natural" position (of servant/slave) which Thackeray felt appropriate for a black person, and especially in view of Thackeray's diatribes about blacks in his later fiction and nonfiction alike, one can only conclude that, somewhat analogous to James Baldwin's assessment of

Uncle Tom's Cabin first published in 1949 entitled "Everybody's Protest Novel" (Baldwin 1984: 13-18), Thackeray presents Miss Swartz as a ridiculous black woman who merely entertains avid noblewomen.

Stylistically, Chesnutt emulates Thackeray, especially in his so-called northern "Blue Vein Society" stories, and his letters appear to share much in style with Thackeray as well. McElrath and Leitz, editors of Chesnutt's first volume of letters, refer to Chesnutt possessing the epistolary style of Thackeray (Chesnutt 1997: xiii). Moreover, Chesnutt wrote in his journal in 1877 that it was especially Thackeray who inspired him to change the way he kept his journal from "the art of composition" to recording "my impressions of men and things, and such incidents or conversations which take place within my own knowledge, with a view to future use in literary work" (Chesnutt 1993c: 85). The influence of both *Vanity Fair* and *The Book of Snobs* and their place in Chesnutt's Northern stories of class as well as Chesnutt's final novel *The Quarry* and race is the focus below.

In many of his nondialect stories including the Blue Vein Society stories under consideration, Chesnutt focuses on the bourgeois, black urban life in the North, a representation which Harry Wonham characterizes as psychologically repressive of blackness and the past of a degraded experience of slavery (Wonham 1998:58). Blue Veins are characterized not only by their use of Standard American English but even of a particular bourgeois language. One of his most famous and most frequently anthologized stories, "The Wife of His Youth," was first published in the July 1898 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine. Modeled after the "Cleveland Social Circle" of upper class blacks to which Chesnutt belonged (Keller 1978:153), members of the exclusive "Blue Vein Society" adopted the very sort of color discrimination from which they themselves suffered.

The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a Northern city shortly after the war. Its purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement... members were light-colored ...because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership (Chesnutt 2000: 103).

In other words, restrictions on the basis of race were never acknowledged but nevertheless put into practice by the so-called “talented tenth” (Du Bois 1989: 87). The “Blue Veins” are no invention on Chesnutt’s part nor a matter of only signifyin(g) on Thackeray. Like Thackeray however, Chesnutt has a self-mocking way about the very society he aspired to in these short stories. He wrote in one letter that people who were the basis for the “Blue Vein” characters lived in Cleveland and that he himself had been a member of such an organization (Chesnutt 2002a: 257-8).

Before delving into these stories and Chesnutt’s use and revision of Thackerayan tropes, the historical background of “high society” African Americans and their color will be cursorily presented below.

4.4.1 Historical Origins of the Blue Vein Society

As Chesnutt shows in his novels and stories, African Americans are quite capable of being racist towards other blacks. Slavers often practiced a divide and conquer suppression on blacks on rural plantations since they were often outnumbered. Within the slave plantation community and after emancipation, “class” and “color” were often intermingled, whereby the “whiter” the complexion, the “righter” the person was for society. Many aesthetic biases besides pigmentation included the appearance of hair and the shape of the nose and lips, so that the European physiognomy is regarded as not only more “beautiful” but more “civilized.”

Characteristics separating blacks began early in the practice of keeping black slaves. An elite faction developed essentially from three groups of slaves. The first group, house slaves, attended whites in their mansions, performing housework and raising the white babies. These house slaves accessed white people more often, and acquired their language and behavior patterns more easily.¹¹⁸ Chesnut's narrator Uncle Julius points out a case of this distinction in "A Deep Sleeper" when the slave master's brother, "Kunnel Wash'n'ton McAdoo," picked out a house slave:

Dey picked out de likeliest gal dey could fine 'mong's de fiel'-han's, en' 'cose dat wuz Cindy. Cindy wuz might'ly tickled fer ter be tuk in de house-sarvice, fer it meant better vittles en' better clo's en' easy wuk. She didn' seed Skundus quite as much, but she seed 'im w'eneber she could. Prospe'ity didn' spile Cindy; she didn' git stuck up en' 'bove 'sociatin' wid fiel'-han's, lack some gals in her place 'ud a done (Chesnutt 1993a: 140).

In this citation, Uncle Julius McAdoo how the house slaves frequently stopped being familiar with field slaves, in a sense developing a separate, higher social class of their own on the plantation, once a field hand moved up and enjoyed a position with privileges of better food, clothing and lighter labor to attend to as a house slave.

A second group comprised of a comparatively small number free blacks regularly peopling Chesnut's shorter fiction.¹¹⁹ Most free blacks lived in the South rather than the North. "By 1810 the 108,000 free Negroes were the fastest growing element in the Southern population" and "they composed almost 5 percent of the free population and nearly 9 percent of the black population" (Berlin 1992: 15, 49). Occasionally slaves were manumitted by masters in their will (as practiced by George

¹¹⁸ In contrast, Thomas Jefferson claimed in 1801 that "[t]he improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by everyone, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life" (Jefferson 2007: 564).

¹¹⁹ Famous in early African American writing *The Souls of Blacks Folk* (1903) describes free blacks and their cultural background, specifically W.E.B. Du Bois's paternal Burghardt ancestor who was set free after serving in the Revolutionary War; Du Bois maternal ancestor was fathered by a Huguenot and not only set free but superbly educated by his white father in Connecticut in the first decade of the 19th century (Du Bois 1999: 3-4).

Washington) or had been set free by decree of the federal government after serving in war when white soldiers were scarce.

The third group consisted of the elite, skilled slaves with learned professions which, in the free labor market, made them particularly valuable. If a skill was in particular need a slave could be a larger source of income of a slave master than an unskilled slave, and they were often “leased out” for a set period of time.¹²⁰ Skilled slaves, like house slaves, had greater access to education and often could read or write, and generally they had more opportunity to buy their own freedom from their masters. These elite black Americans had greater social skills which had an effect of making them socially upwardly mobile. Not surprisingly, many free blacks, house slaves and skilled slaves developed a viewpoint like whites that the field slaves were less civilized and intellectually inferior.

Many white plantation owners established clandestine sexual relations with black women working in their mansions. The mulatto progeny were enslaved by law based on a decree of “the condition of the mother.”¹²¹ Thereby a white father would often “own” his own children, but rarely were these children’s paternity acknowledged, as myriad slave narratives attest.¹²² Nevertheless, the living and working conditions of mulattoes were significantly better than the “common lot” of field slaves, with some notable exceptions (usually caused by mistresses who could not confront their husbands but always had opportunities to punish both the mothers and the children). As a young light-skinned house slave, Harriet Jacobs relates in her 1861 slave narrative how her master, ostensibly a gentleman, persistently tried to

¹²⁰ Skilled slaves built the White House, the Capital Building and the original buildings of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Both the University of Virginia as well as Thomas Jefferson’s mansion Monticello and George Washington’s mansion called Mount Vernon were built through slave labor.

¹²¹ “Condition of the mother” was the legal term for defining the status of the baby as free or slave.

¹²² In Chesnut’s novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) a white man actually quietly but legally married his slave, but his marriage certificate was destroyed by his sister upon his death and the daughter with the slave woman was thereby rendered illegitimate and consequently disinherited.

seduce her, and when she refused, disgracefully abused her both verbally and physically.¹²³

These groups of elite blacks were in the forefront of establishing churches, and it was usually free blacks who initiated the establishment of schools for colored children, including the school Chesnutt attended in Fayetteville in the mid 1860s and 1870s. However, these efforts usually did not come without opposition from whites, particularly with regard to the establishment of “African schools” (Berlin 1992: 46-49).

Both in the nineteenth century and especially following WWI, blacks migrated from the rural south to the urban north. As Massey and Denton note in their study of segregation, as blacks began to move north,

[t]he ghettoization [...] seemed to resolve, for a time, the simmering debate between the adherents of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. The rise of a large, segregated black community in the north [was the] fulfillment of Washington’s dreams. The ghetto constituted a city within a city that supported a parallel economy of black-owned banks, real estate companies, newspapers, shops, stores, theaters, nightclubs and factories (Massey and Denton 1993: 115).

Between this ghetto and the white communities stood the Blue Veins, set, as it were, on a tightrope and doing business with both communities. It was in this micro-community that Chesnutt resided in, and he strategically employed and revised Thackeray’s satire on English snobs to depict it. As Chesnutt admitted to a literary critic in a lengthy letter near the end of his life (in August 1930), “I belonged to the ‘Blue Vein Society’ and the characters in ‘The Wife of His Youth’ and ‘A Matter of Principle’ were my personal friends. I shared their sentiments to a degree [...]” (Chesnutt 2002a: 258).

¹²³ See Harriet Jacobs (1987): *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

4.4.2 “A Matter of Principle”

The first among the Blue Vein Society stories under consideration, “A Matter of Principle,” first written in 1897 but not published until Chesnutt’s second volume of short stories, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* came out 1899. Although “A Matter of Principle” appears later than “The Wife of His Youth” in this 1899 volume of short stories, the title story was written after “A Matter of Principle” in magazine publication by a full year. Therefore it should be treated chronologically, and, I will argue below, regarded as a response to its predecessor.¹²⁴

Cicero Clayton, a light-colored black man and a prominent leader in the Blue Vein Society of Groveland, insists both on the brotherhood of man while, as Chesnutt points out, at the same time, “Mr. Clayton’s social creed was that he himself was not a Negro” (Chesnutt 2000: 151) since he had considerably more white ancestry than black. He believes in racial pride and encourages this manner of thinking among his family members as well, and so he rarely associates with dark African Americans. Miss Alice Clayton, Cicero Clayton’s beloved daughter, is a haughty, nearly white young woman in search of an appropriate husband and “she frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely” white (Chesnutt 2000: 152). Both Alice and her family eliminated the majority of African Americans from her target choice due to both color and class. In Cleveland, Chesnutt encountered people like Cicero Clayton, and revealed his feelings about them in a speech in 1905: “I can scarcely restrain a smile when I hear a mulatto talking of race integrity, or a quadroon dwelling upon race pride. What they mean is a very fine thing, but it is not at all what they say” (Chesnutt 1999a: 232).

¹²⁴ Heermance (1974), Fienberg (1990), Wonham (1998), Duncan (2004) and Andrews (2008) erroneously treat “The Wife of His Youth” first and “A Matter of Principle” second and contrast the latter as if it had been written after the former story in their respective studies or introductions to various recent short story editions. However, Redding’s study (1938), as well as Render (1981) and Ferguson (2001) are three exceptions.

In a “phony” Washington, D.C. inaugural ball (since African Americans were not permitted to grace the real one at the White House with their presence) Alice dances with so many colored men and does not remember what one particular African American congressman looks like who subsequently expresses by letter an interest in marriage. This inaugural ball takes place in the 1870s. Thus, the story likely concerns the inauguration of President Rutherford B. Hayes in the spring of 1877.¹²⁵

Hamilton M. Brown, a new South Carolina Congressman, a Republican of light pigmentation, visits Groveland after having become infatuated with Alice Clayton at the dance in Washington, DC. Yet because of the multitude of Alice’s dancing partners at the ball the physical identity of this congressman is unclear, so Mr. Clayton hedges: “If this man is black, we don’t want to encourage him. If he’s the right sort, we’ll invite him to the house” (Chesnutt 2000: 157).

Solomon Sadler of the Blue Vein Society regularly offers information about all the blacks of significance in both Groveland, Ohio and Washington DC. Sadler heuristically concludes that Hamilton Brown was probably nearly white. Employing a signifying agnominatio, Cicero Clayton says to Alice, “I guess he’s all right...we must treat him white”¹²⁶ (Chesnutt 2000: 158) and decides to put on a huge reception party for him with invitations to all Blue Vein Society members stating the plan: “We will

¹²⁵ The Ohio-born Republican chief executive’s controversial election resulted in the end of Reconstruction which resulted in Chesnutt among scores of hundreds of thousand of other blacks to leave the South for the northern states.

¹²⁶ Chesnutt signifies on color and identity with Clayton’s slippage of signifier and signified in “[all] right” – “white” in the citation above. Gates writes that the “[...]relationship that black “Signification” bears to the English “signification” is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity. That [...] is inherent in the nature of metaphorical substitution and the pun, particularly those rhetorical tropes dependent on the repetition of a word with a change denoted by a difference in sound or in a letter [...] These tropes luxuriate in the chaos of ambiguity that repetition and difference (be that apparent difference centered in the signifier or in the signified, in the “sound-image” or in the concept) yield in either an aural or a visual pun” (Gates 1988: 45).

show the darkeys of Groveland how to entertain a Congressman.” The omniscient narrator then makes the following point:

It will be noted that in moments of abstraction or recitement Mr. Clayton sometimes relapsed into forms of speech not entirely consistent with his principles. But some allowance must be made for his atmosphere; he could no more escape from it than the leopard can change his spots, or the — . In deference to Mr. Clayton’s feelings the quotation will be left incomplete. (Chesnutt 2000: 158)

Completing the objectionable quotation, “...or the nigger his skin,” is the racist American adaptation of the Old Testament saying that whites used in their common idiom.¹²⁷ Signifying on the Bible as well as Clayton's contention that he was not a Negro, this cynical remark in Chesnutt’s story shows not only that Cicero Clayton originated from an inescapable uncouth social set, but also that he rhetorically exposes his identity in moments of distress. Evidently the adumbration as Chesnutt uses this phrase hints not only of the unpleasant and undesired reminder of Cicero Clayton’s ancestry (“Ethiopian”), but also the feline reference in the Biblical phrase conveys his “spotted” black pigmentation (“leopard”) which is referencing his moral character just as much as his pigmentation.

Chesnutt echoes the same paradigm of rejecting the racial Other as *Vanity Fair* by the elder Osborne in his “Blue Vein Society” story, “A Matter of Principle.” In a shrewdly designed twist in the plot, while waiting to fetch the Congressman at the railroad station, Cicero Clayton sees “a stout and very black man” with a piece of luggage labeled “H.M. Brown, M.C.” and saw that “the man in the waiting-room was

¹²⁷ These words, spoken by the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, appear in the Old Testament within a context of potential violence. Jeremiah tells the people of Jerusalem – personified in the form of a shepherdess – that the city will soon be attacked by an enemy from the north. The horrible shepherdess has been deserted by society. Jeremiah implores the woman to give up her evil ways and live according to God’s laws. Subsequently Jeremiah realizes that it might be impossible for the woman to heed his warning. He says: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23).

palpably, aggressively black, with pronounced African features and woolly hair, without apparently a single drop of redeeming white blood” (Chesnutt 2000: 161).

Like Miss Swartz whose wealth formed the basis for the Osborne patriarch insisting that his son George marry the “mulatto” in a society where money issues were paramount to assessing a proper marriage partnership, Chesnutt revises this Victorian motif into one of color when his character Congressman Brown is maliciously snubbed by a “Blue Vein” leader Clayton and his family because of Brown’s (imagined) dark pigmentation. Hence George Osborne’s racist attitude is echoed by both Clayton parents: As Alice Clayton’s mother puts it, “That nigger [...] can never set foot in this house [...] Why, she wouldn’t marry him if he was President of the United States and plated with gold an inch thick. The very idea!” (Chesnutt 2000: 164-165). Though the sexual tension of the objectionable further darkening of their racial mixture is understated in Chesnutt more than in the “Hottentot Venus” phrase articulated by the younger Osborne in Thackeray’s novel, the rejection is compensated in both cases by expressions of outright racial hostility.

George Osborne does nothing to conceal his rancorous rejection of Miss Swartz before his own father, though his objections articulated to Amelia were of a nonracial manner. “Brotherhood Clayton” – as younger Blue Vein Society members nicknamed Cicero Clayton and his wife reveal their prejudice overtly only within the confines of their home but under no circumstances does Cicero want to be exposed before the Blue Vein Society as a spiteful African American bigot, and undertakes numerous sly tricks to conceal his bigotry.

“We were fools for not finding out all about this man from someone who knew, before we invited him here. Sadler don’t know more than half he thinks he does, anyway. And we’ll have to do this thing thoroughly, or our motives will be misconstrued, and people will say we are prejudiced

and all that, when it is only a matter of principle with us.” (Chesnutt 2000: 165)

Yet his puerility gets the best of him. Feigning illness, Cicero Clayton arranges by letter an irrevocable subterfuge that “uninvites” the purportedly dark-skinned congressman. In Chesnutt’s last and most cynical stroke of the story, the feckless Cicero Clayton learns that the dark black man he mistook for the congressman was a certain “Bishop Jones” and that Alice’s congressman, with very light complexion had momentarily separated from his luggage. Claiming a contagious illness requiring a quarantine house, Congressman Brown instead stays at William Watkins and becomes engaged to Alice Clayton’s archrival, Lura Watkins. In a quintessential Thackerayan vein Mr. Clayton concludes, “Such luck is enough to disgust a man with trying to do right and live up to his principles” (Chesnutt 2000: 167), whereby the chauvinistic nature of his “principle” is never questioned and his bigotry remains entirely unacknowledged.¹²⁸

The phrase ‘a matter of principle’ with which Chesnutt entitles this short story signifies that one follows or acts out of a superior moral foundation, as a code of behavior more universal which one applies to particulars, even if the particulars beg exception. In contrast to Noel Heermance, who relegates this story to “slapstick in its satire” (Heermance 1974: 174), I would argue that Chesnutt contrasts these Blue Vein blacks with nothing but a bigoted principle. The title is meant to satirize Cicero Clayton’s elevated moral attitude. This Blue Vein Society story should be juxtaposed with its moral antithesis which Chesnutt entitled “The Wife of His Youth.” As noted above, Chesnutt scholars generally treat “The Wife of His Youth” first since it appears first in the second issue of short stories that Chesnutt published in 1899. However,

¹²⁸ As the early African American critic Saunder J. Redding noted in 1939, this story is “[b]ased on the tragic absurdity of colorphobia, the story is a comedy of manners in the Molière sense” (Redding: 1988: 71). While Molière may have similarities in a general sense, no critic up to now has linked the influence of Thackeray.

the fact is that “The Wife of His Youth” followed “A Matter of Principle” in composition¹²⁹ as well as magazine publication by a full year. Consequently I believe this story should be regarded both as a response to its predecessor as well as be treated chronologically. With this in mind, it is my interpretation that Chesnutt signified upon his own story as well as on a part of Thackeray’s novel *Vanity Fair*, as I attempt to establish below.

4.4.3 “The Wife of His Youth”

A shared sequence in both “The Wife of his Youth” and *Vanity Fair*, Chesnutt’s favorite novel, is the motif of triangular desire. Within Thackeray’s great novel, the conflict concerns the mediator of desire, [Mr. John] “Old” Osborne, whose initial interest in his son marrying Amelia Sedley changes when her father goes bankrupt, and Osborne consequently insists that his son George marry in her stead Rhoda Swartz, an opulent woman in her younger twenties of a racially-mixed background (German-Jewish father and African mother) from Saint Kitts in the West Indies (an English slave colony). In Chesnutt’s story the triangle depicted is between Mr. Ryder’s desire for Mrs. Molly Dixon, a wealthy light complexioned widow, and his loyalty to ‘Liza Jane Taylor whom he married and, through illicit attempted enslavement and the confusion of war, lost track of for decades. Ryder contemplates the fact that he is not legally bound to his antebellum marriage with a slave woman, and so from a legal standpoint his relationship is null and void, or as Ryder puts it to ‘Liza Jane, “your marriage doesn’t count” (Chesnutt 2000: 110).

In both stories, misfortune brought about by external circumstances unrelated to the women threatened both Amelia and ‘Liza Jane with matrimonial rejection.

¹²⁹ See the interview with Chesnutt originally published in Boston in 1901, “Mr. Chesnutt at Work: a Talk with an Author on His Methods” (Thrasher 2001: 343).

Through no fault of her own, Amelia's financial ruin is a matter of her father, a stockbroker, and his unfortunate business dealings with, among others, Old Osborne. In the case of 'Liza Jane, her loss was caused by the greed of her slave master Bob Smith, who attempted to illegally sell her husband, a free colored man, who at that time was known as Sam Taylor: "[Smith] knowed whar he could git a t'ousan' dollars for Sam an' no questions axed" (Chesnutt 2000: 109).

The "other" women in the triangles in the fictional relationships depicted by Thackeray and Chesnutt are both "mulattoes." With Thackeray, Miss Rhoda Swartz¹³⁰ is depicted as a highly unusual racial mixture of Jew and black in Victorian England, a character worthy of ridicule. In his infelicitous banter to various audiences, George Osborne accentuates her "Otherness" since Miss Swartz possesses black hair "as curly as Sambo's. I dare say she wore a nose-ring when she went to court; and with a plume of feathers in her top-knot she would look a perfect Belle Sauvage" (Thackeray 1963: 193).¹³¹

Initially it is Miss Swartz's character rather than her race that comes under vicious attack by George Osborne, who describes her in plain words as an unpolished, unrefined woman, incapable of either spelling or mastering the piano. On the other hand, she was noticeably fawned upon by George's two sisters Jane and Maria because of her pelf and the favoritism their father showed towards her as a perspective daughter-in-law. After describing the vulgarly opportunistic interest of the Osborne sisters in the rich "mulatta" purely for her wealth, Thackeray snidely refers to Jane and Maria Osborne as "dear unsophisticated girls" (Thackeray 1963: 194). The Osborne girls are ridiculed for being "sophisticated," that is, socially ambitious,

¹³⁰ The name Swartz is a metonym which means 'black' in Yiddish, the language of her Jewish father.

¹³¹ "Sambo" is the Osborne family's black Indian servant (i.e., not of African origin).

insincere, and materialistic women. One need hardly wonder whether this is because Thackeray also regards Miss Swartz as an impossible match for George Osborne.



Fig. 4: Thackeray's sketch of Miss Swartz and the Osborne Sisters in *Vanity Fair*

In characterizing Rhoda Swartz as unacceptable for marriage, George Osborne moves away from her flaws in education, cultivation and sense of fashion¹³² to the actual basis of his rejection; to her race. Near the end of chapter 21 in *Vanity Fair*, George Osborne vibrantly makes it clear to his father John "Old Osborne" that he will disregard paternal demands and marry Amelia Sedley instead. His father

¹³² With innumerable examples Thackeray shows other Englishman of great means as the "West India heiress" who likewise fall short in areas of education, diction etc but who still are desirable for marriage. For example the dirty, rough, inebriated old Sir Pitt Crawley asks Becky Sharp for her hand in marriage after she had married his penniless but debonair son Rawdon Crawley – Becky weeps "some of the most genuine tears that ever fell from her eyes" (Thackeray 1963: 142).

demands that he marry the rich “Black Princess” Miss Rhoda Swartz, a woman of great means in her younger twenties of a racial mixed background (German-Jewish father and African mother) from Saint Kitts in the West Indies instead of “fling[ing] away eight thousand a-year” (Thackeray 1963: 204). In one of the more memorable moments of *Vanity Fair*, George Osborne responds to his father’s final demand that he marry Miss Rhoda Schwarz:

‘Marry that mulatto woman?’ George said, pulling up his shirtcollars. ‘I don’t like the colour sir. Ask the black that sweeps opposite Fleet Market, sir. *I’m* not going to marry a Hottentot Venus’ (Thackeray 1963: 204).

By eloping with Amelia Sedley, a woman whose father’s business failings downgrade her status in society substantially, George Osborne becomes disinherited. Like many Thackeray characters, George Osborne’s heroic stance is expressed infelicitously, rendering him again, if not as a villainous character at that point in the novel, then at the very least an “unsympathetic heroic” one.¹³³

During his unpleasant confrontation with his father, George’s decision for Amelia instead of the “West India heiress” – who had been described as “such a superb establishment” by George’s sister (Thackeray 1963: 216) – George points to his ultimate reason for rejecting the mulatto woman: her race. George Osborne refers to a historical public figure named Sarah Baartman, a South African slave who was humiliatingly put on display for four years (1810-1814) in London for her exotic appearance. She was designated “The Hottentot Venus” in an advertisement by an Englishman, Dr. William Dunlap, who earned money by putting her in a freak-show. First put on display in London, after four years she was moved to Paris after

¹³³ As John Carey points out, “[t]he solid ground of condemnation or approval dissolves. We are forced to weigh circumstances, and to distrust our own standpoint. There is scarcely a one-sided character in [*Vanity Fair*]” (Carey 1977: 177). The reader knows George Osborne eloped with Amelia not out of love but out of defiance of his father, though race certainly played a significant role as well.

numerous protests against the “freak show,” particularly by anti-slavery activists who were developing an ever stronger popular movement in England (and were satirized by Thackeray). She was exhibited “to the public in a manner offensive to decency. She exhibits all the shape and frame of her body as if naked.” (Edwards and Walvin 1983: 172). Sander Gilman notes that

the iconography of the “Hottento Venus” was a means of differentiating the black female from her white counterpart as a representative of a separate and distinct species...The double sign of the unapproachability of the black woman – her difference as a member of an inherently different race – and her pathological character became a signifier for the European (Gilman 1985: 39)

In Thackeray’s plot, the white counterpart to the Caribbean-born mulatto woman George Osborne derogates as a Hottentot Venus is the somewhat pretty, kind but rather dull Amelia Sedley.¹³⁴ While exhibiting no racial prejudices of her own, Amelia Sedley clearly waits to be taken into the arms of her lover. What is clear in both cases is that both the historical “Hottentot Venus” Sarah Baartman and later in Thackeray’s nonfictional diatribes served the same purpose as George Osborne’s angry repudiation of Miss Swartz in the novel: to locate the racial Other as wholly unacceptable for inclusion into either his family or English society. This conclusion is clearly supplied with evidence of his constant ridiculing of Miss Swartz’s character and color when Thackeray depicts characters clearly inferior to Miss Swartz succeeding in English society. In fact, the only person expressing any interest in marrying Miss Swartz is Old John Osborne, himself a widower: “Gad, if Miss S. will have me, I’m her man. / ain’t particular about a shade or so of tawny.’ And the old gentleman gave his knowing grin and coarse laugh” (Thackeray 1963: 220).

¹³⁴ This exact kind of contrasting by George Osborne is referred to in its historical context by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*: “By 1750, the chain had become individualized; the human scale rose from “the lowliest Hottentot” (black South African) to “glorious Milton and Newton” (Gates 1988: 130).

For Thackeray, Miss Swartz's wealth is used only to test who is the most hypocritical members of Vanity Fair, clearly expressed in Old Osborne's "coarse laugh." The Hottentot Venus expletive is fraught with a very real symbolism of the outsider, or the ultimate Other, who may be welcome exclusively because of her money only by Thackeray's great hypocrites.¹³⁵

With regard to the love triangle in "The Wife of His Youth," Chesnutt's other woman, Molly Dixon is a light-skinned mulatto who stands in stark contrast to the former slave, an older, dark black named 'Liza Jane, whose very name evokes an image of black servitude while Molly Dixon's name sounds solidly Scottish, financially and culturally the most dominating group of whites in the old South. In the eyes of Mr. Ryder, everything about his innamorata is desirable: her name, light skin, opulence, education and cultivation. Mrs. Dixon in fact epitomizes a free white sylph in every way that 'Liza Jane Taylor reminds the members of the Blue Vein Society of their dreadful past lives as chattel black slaves. As the Blue Veins were the first African Americans to assimilate, 'Liza Jane is in stark contrast the embodiment of the lowest members of their racial group from which they wish to disassociate themselves.¹³⁶

Yet, 'Liza Jane Taylor's attributes are truly admirable, proving herself loyal and assured that she will eventually locate her husband. Moreover, 'Liza Jane Taylor has supreme confidence that her husband would not marry another woman (which turns out to be false: he plans his engagement party just before she finds him). In contrast, Amelia has become aware that George Osborne is being pushed to reject her

¹³⁵ The marriages of Thackeray's novel are echoed in the romances of the main characters in Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars*: John Walden Warwick's marriage of convenience and wealth, R(ow)ena Walden Warwick's engagement of love; John's rise, R(ow)ena's fall; John's relentless passing, Rena's steadfast faith in the social uplift of the race.

¹³⁶ Jacques Derrida coined the term "hauntology" to philosophically describe the spectral presence of the past, the ghostly return of the neither-dead-nor-alive generations that preceded us, to reflect on "this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present (Derrida 2004: xviii). 'Liza Jane is therefore to be understood as a spectral past not only for Ryder, but for all of the Blue Vein members.

because of her lower social status. Both Amelia and 'Liza Jane await a decision of acknowledgement and loyalty. While Amelia is ultimately passive in faithfully waiting for George Osborne,¹³⁷ 'Liza Jane shows her prowess by actively seeking out and ultimately finding her husband. She also confides in Mr. Ryder – whom she fails to recognize as her husband – that “[h]e wouldn’ marry no yuther ’ooman ’tel he foun’ out ’bout me. I knows it” (Chesnutt 2000: 110).

Chesnutt’s “signifyin(g)” on Thackeray’s novel can be detected when George Osborne learns he has been disinherited. He exclaims to Dobbins his immediate regrets: “A beggar, by Jove, and all the consequences of my d—d sentimentality” (Thackeray 1963: 232). In castigating his behavior, George Osborne reveals the hatred of his sentimental and honorable actions which have resulted in a substantial financial loss. Chesnutt revises this response by having Ryder place honor and indeed even sentiment above not only the sizable wealth the Washingtonian socialite Mrs. Dixon offers through her marriage, but, more prominently, Chesnutt places honor of his wife above Mrs. Dixon's light complexion, eduification and social respectability.

Ryder paradoxically hears his old wife express her everlasting confidence in him the evening before his engagement ball in which he meticulously plans to make his most glorious effect on the Blue Vein Society members. As the leader among the “Blue Veins,” Mr. Ryder became “the custodian of its standards, and the preserver of its traditions.” Having saved a large amount of money through hard work and thrift at the railroad company, he owned a house on a respectable street and had two live-in servants. “His features were of a refined type, his hair was almost straight; he was always neatly dressed; his manners were inapproachable, and his morals above

¹³⁷ George is persuaded in part by Dobbins to marry Amelia by the moralizing Captain William Dobbin, George’s need to demonstrate independence from his domineering father and his racist rejection of the wealthy but otherwise undesirable mulatto.

suspicion.” Compared to other “Blue Veins,” however “he was not as white” (Chesnutt 2000: 104). This factor did not provide grounds to disqualify him from figuring so prominently that he became the society’s president by the mid-1880s in “Groveland.”

Mr. Ryder is the leader of the Blue Veins because of his wealth and cultivation of manners and class. Ryder had euphemistically deplored “a growing liberality [...] in social manners” among some of Groveland’s African Americans and

had several times been forced to meet in a social way persons whose complexions and callings in life were hardly up to the standard which he considered proper for the society to maintain [...] His ball would serve by its exclusiveness to counteract leveling tendencies [...] (Chesnutt 2000: 106)

Mr. Ryder, a member of the new black literati, is painted like quite a preposterous man in his pomposity and conceit. Chesnutt’s Thackerayan use of irony in Mr. Ryder citing President Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address (“With malice towards none, with charity for all”) undermines his view that marrying Molly Dixon, a wealthy, well-educated African American widow whiter than he would guarantee his descendants “self-preservation.” Survival is his desire, and out of fear of the “extinction in the black [race] [...] is the first law of nature” (Chesnutt 2000:106),¹³⁸ his beliefs as well as his new marriage reveal what little faith Ryder has in the white race’s future charity, the same race into which he wishes to assimilate.¹³⁹

While Henry Wonham emphasizes the racial aspect of the interest Mr. Ryder had taken in the light-complexioned Molly Dixon, other aspects to Mrs. Dixon also

¹³⁸ Chesnutt has his Blue Vein hero recite the same theory of the ultimate extinction of the black race, the theory of Thomas Roderick Dew regarding the extermination of blacks after slavery which Thackeray subscribed to.

¹³⁹ The irony is lost on some critics though: Alice Walker points out that ‘Liza Jane Taylor was “fortunately [...] too old to bear children” so that the issue of the “extinction” of the black race becomes null and void (Walker 1984: 300).

make her more desirable: her wealth which Ryder would marry into, as she had been “left a considerable life insurance,” her youth at about 24 years old (“he was old enough to have been her father”), her education and “refined manners” (Chesnutt 2000: 105). Besides her fair pigmentation,¹⁴⁰ these are other advantages in higher society that had attracted Becky Sharp numerous times.

Ryder was not only dignified in appearance but worked hard to acquire and cultivate good taste. In this way Chesnutt presents the hypocritical behavior typifying the Blue Veins as cultural snobs. Poetic romance is one of Ryder’s means of segregating blacks in the color line. Among the many preparations for the announcement of his engagement, Mr. Ryder recited moments before with avidity poetry by Alfred, Lord Tennyson who was still alive at the time of the story’s plot. A student of prosody, this elocutionist planned initially to propose to the rather pale, young African American recently widowed, Molly Dixon, after his many long years as a “lonely bachelor” was to be accomplished only after subliminal reinforcement through “a little touch of romance” (Chesnutt 2000: 105), namely after reciting Tennyson’s fragment “Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere” (1842) after he had first tested “to judge better their effect” and subsequently rejected Tennyson’s earlier lyric poems “A Dream of Fair Women” and “Margaret,” poems linking whiteness and virtue. However, right after ‘Liza Jane departs from Ryder after telling him of her marathon longing to find him, thereby effectively penetrating Ryder’s hypocrisy, Ryder “wrote [’Liza Jane’s] address on the fly-leaf of the volume of Tennyson [...]” (Chesnutt 2000: 111), her African American slave narrative articulated in vernacular overcomes the venerated white discourse defining beauty and grace so that Ryder eventually abandons his favorite poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

¹⁴⁰ While Mrs. Molly Dixon is not completely white and clearly associates herself with the African American community, this story strongly hints at the start of the black male's sexual desire for a fetishized white woman, a reading in which I see Chesnutt signifying on the Plantation literary tradition.

Between his interview with 'Liza Jane – which included a look at his image from before the Civil War in “an old-fashioned daguerreotype” (Chesnutt 2000: 110) – and his engagement party, Mr. Ryder takes a look at himself in the mirror, obviously comparing himself past mid-life to the image shown to him by his formerly enslaved wife. Mr. Ryder's glance, while not directly reflecting Jacques Lacan's famous description of a child looking in the mirror and projecting his ego (Lacan 1977: 1), nevertheless anticipates the transformation of Mr. Ryder back into Sam Taylor.

After dancing and supper at eleven o'clock, the Blue Vein Society toastmaster, Mr. Solomon Sadler, called the ball to order to inform the society of man's dependency on woman and the rumor that Mr. Ryder, the host of the ball, “too is largely dependent upon the gentler sex for most that makes life worth living [...]” (Chesnutt 2000: 112). However, instead of Tennyson, Mr. Ryder relates “in the same soft dialect [as] the story told by his visitor of the afternoon” – a didactic story and, as one scholar points out, an “embedded narrative” (Duncan 1998: 131-133) much like Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* tales. This moralizing story relates through a varied form of 'Liza Jane's slave narrative of a woman's “fidelity and devotion.” After narrating in the conditional an entrancing account many in the audience had either heard of (or even personally experienced decades before but suppressed), he asks his audience if an honorable free black man escaping enslavement should acknowledge, after two and a half decades, this loyal wife from the ante-bellum period. Then he recites the famous dictum by Polonius to his son Laertes (from act I, sc. iii in *Hamlet*) as he imagines giving advice to a friend:

‘This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.’
(Chesnutt 2000: 114)

After reciting Polonius, Mr. Ryder appositely questions his Blue Vein Society audience: “What should he have done?” and requires of this prejudiced audience the courage to hold on not only to a fundamental moral conviction which in the sharpest way contrasted to the unacknowledged but practiced rules of exclusivity of these socially upward-climbing members of the Blue Vein Society, but in a more profound way for the near-white African Americans to reflect on their past and acknowledge their own people, thereby accomplishing the mandate, “to thine own self be true” set forth by Shakespeare.

Unlike the traditional forms of patriarchal decision-making, Ryder’s cunning performance requires that the Blue Veins and most specifically Molly Dixon decide whom he should marry. Ryder puts the question to Molly whether he should cast ‘Liza Jane away and marry up in society, or remain loyal to both his past as well as his very dark black wife. By doing so publicly, Ryder delegates power to the very group which had distanced themselves from darker blacks, thereby forcing Molly’s and the Blue Vein Society’s hand, so to speak. They are compelled to acknowledge and welcome, even embrace ‘Liza Jane into their society, lest they acknowledge their society’s unspoken and unwritten bigotry (which Clayton in Chesnut’s earlier Blue Vein story avoids revealing at all cost). Ryder thereby not only appears to passively submit to the authority of bourgeois society, but introduces and even incorporates ‘Liza Jane, whom he has accoutered for the occasion, into this society of exclusivity among African Americans.¹⁴¹

In his youth, Mr. Ryder’s name had been Sam Taylor, a free-born mulatto who was almost sold as a slave illegally by his wife’s owner in Missouri. His wife, a slave

¹⁴¹ All three rejected women, Thackeray’s Miss Swartz and Chesnut’s Miss Alice Clayton and Mrs. Molly Dixon, exhibit ebullition of sentiment at their respective losses.

named 'Liza Jane Taylor, warned him of his illicit impending sale by her owner and he escaped, promising to rescue her when he raised the money to buy her freedom. However, as punishment for aiding young Sam to escape, his wife was sold down the river. Sam Taylor was unable to find her. Her devotion in seeking him out after some twenty five years updates this story of utter matrimonial commitment.

In interpreting Mr. Ryder's decision to acknowledge his antebellum slave wife, Chesnutt obviously has his protagonist apply a principle that not only constitutes a pastiche of Thackeray's George Osborne's cruel and malicious behavior toward Miss Swartz, but Mr. Ryder's behavior also is in alignment with Chesnutt's own moral view that in choosing 'Liza Jane over Mrs. Molly Dixon, Mr. Ryder transcends his own hypocritical notions about the color line altogether in making judgments about people. He accomplishes this moral task by inverting the effects of Tennyson's poetry (his original plan as a response to an expected toast to his engagement) celebrating feminine beauty by accentuating the "pale" features (of Molly Dixon) by replacing this romantic poetry with Shakespeare whose quote from Polonius imperatively calls on the duty to be loyal to oneself.

In the context of this story loyalty meant fidelity not only to the first wife but also to one's African American self which encompasses a past including slavery.¹⁴² This is not to mean that Ryder simply reverses his racial prejudice from pro-white to pro-black. Rather than judging people by means of station or color, Mr. Ryder alters not only his choice of a future wife but chooses to express via literary example 'Eliza Jane because of her "humanity." As Chesnutt asseverates in a speech entitled

¹⁴² Chesnutt's narrator states at the start of "The Wife of His Youth" the exclusion of former slaves: "Another alleged prerequisite for Blue Vein membership was that of free birth; [...] If there were one or two of the older members who had come up from the South and from slavery, their history presented enough romantic circumstances to rob their servile origin of its grosser aspects (Chesnutt 2000: 104).

“Race Prejudice: Its Causes and Cures” to the Boston Literary and Historical Association on June 25, 1905,

But of what should we be proud? Of any inherent superiority? We deny it in others, proclaiming the equality of man. Of any great achievement? We are still in the infancy of achievement. [Our development] should promote humanity instead of pride (Chesnutt 1999a: 232).

Any racial pride is linked with race prejudice. To be sure, 'Eliza Jane was an uncomfortable reminiscent for the Blue Vein Society not only because of her black skin, but because of her station or her caste. Her appearance constituted a reminder of the condition many of them used to live in or had descended from. Chesnutt refers to blacks confronting their history of slavery in a letter to Frederick Moore, editor of *The New York Age*. In the letter, dated December 15, 1910, Chesnutt wrote:

Replying to your letter under another cover, requesting my opinion concerning the proper method of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the freedom of the Negro in 1913, I hope you will not think me indifferent in matters of the race, but in this town the Emancipation Proclamation is celebrated by the colored people every year, and I have sometimes thought that it might be well if they could forget that they were slaves, or at least give the whites a chance to forget it. (Chesnutt 2002a: 87)

It is safe to say that assimilating African Americans, such as members of Chesnutt's fictitious Blue Veins, tended not only to be indifferent towards celebrations of the historical event which formally ended the state of bondage they so eagerly sought to put out of their mind, but they sought to emulate the very problem Chesnutt refers to: they remember slavery as something other – significantly darker – blacks, such as 'Eliza Jane, experienced.

Chesnutt's pastiche of Thackeray's marriage triangle in *Vanity Fair*, a novel Chesnutt indicated he admired particularly for the Miss Swartz character, employs

Thackeray's destabilizing plot without a hero with a much sought-after man choosing the less "lucrative" bride primarily out of loyalty to a past relationship. While Chesnut's hero Mr. Ryder is ultimately entirely moral in his choice, Thackeray's "novel without a hero" depicts George not only as a sometime loyal man to the love of his youth but also as a diabolical racist. Thackeray's Old Osborne and Chesnut's Blue Vein Society are the arbiters of power which push for the respective rejected women until it becomes unattainable, and both are thwarted. Chesnut's story is moralistically a perfectly rounded while in Thackeray's novel the rejected woman, Miss Swartz, is castigated for her race and Old Osborne disinherits his son. What makes both men, George Osborne and Mr. Ryder, decide in their triangle relationship, to marry their original beloved women and reject the opportunity to more easily marry into wealth was their own perceived moral imperative. As mediators reminding them of their moral imperative, George has Captain William Dobbin while Ryder is reminded by his fine English poetry.

In addition, both George Osborne and Mr. Ryder, in their respective moral imperative, sympathize with the women they have chosen because the cause of their respective ruin was clearly the greed and immorality of men a generation or two older than they were. Both wedded women ('Liza Jane and Amelia) were thrown out of their homes in their respective societies where the subjugation of women, while certainly different, was the norm. Later, after George Osborne dies in the Battle of Waterloo in *Vanity Fair*, both wedded women share a fate in so far as they are forced to live a life in social and juridical limbo, and both women eventually retrieve their love (Amelia weds Dobbin and Ryder re-marries 'Liza Jane), an example of Chesnut's unmotivated signifying.

Although both Thackeray and Chesnutt depict fascinating male characters with substantial flaws, the men eventually marry women whose sympathy and morality would direct them to choose. Thackeray's George Osborne is a racist and repeatedly acts disloyally towards his beloved Amelia. Mr. Ryder, with his proclivity for lighter-colored, younger and wealthier women, hopes to become progenitor of an 'American race,' since he claims early in the story to other Blue Veins, "[o]ur fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black" (Chesnutt 2000:106). Mr. Ryder does not consider his wife who years ago had sacrificed herself to save him from being sold down the river. In both cases the moral principle is presented with complex male characters who, though flawed individuals, rather than being duplicitous, are directed to choose the right woman for marriage.

In a section entitled "Snobs and Marriage" in *The Book of Snobs* (1848) Thackeray tellingly informs us of the result of "marrying below" one's station: instant repudiation from society and family:

[...] marry poor, and society shall forsake thee; thy kinsmen shall avoid thee as a criminal; thy aunts and uncles shall turn up their eyes and bemoan the sad, sad manner in which Tom or Harry has thrown himself away (Thackeray 1999: 161).

Chesnutt manages to have his hero undermine these expectations of the societal conditions which he himself had help to cultivate among the upper crust African American crowd in the Ohio metropolis seeking to repress the experience of slavery. In the end, Ryder's actions figure prominently as both a moral for the members of society as well as a means of reconnecting them to the origins of the chattel slavery that Blue Vein Society members so eagerly sought to escape.

Snobbery, for the characters Chesnutt produces for his satire in these stories, amounts to a kind of pseudosophistication. In the story, "A Matter of Principle," the

main character is what Thackeray would term “a hypocrite of hospitality” (Thackeray 1999: 38). In “The Wife of His Youth” Chesnut in contrast upholds the unsophisticated bourgeois virtues such as honesty, sincerity, simplicity, and above all, naturalness – values that ordinarily the middle class blacks would fail to uphold. Both Mr. Ryder and Cicero Clayton ameliorate their racism by claiming that they have no racial prejudice.

Chesnut was innovative in his fictional depiction of high society black Americans. As William Andrews puts it,

Through such unprecedented works as “The Wife of His Youth” and “A Matter of Principle” in particular, Chesnut demonstrated that he was ready to break the ice in the American fiction of manners. He would be the first to introduce, with a tonal ambiguity reminiscent of a Henry James or an Edith Wharton, the upper crust of Afro-American society to the upper crust of the white American reading public (Andrews 1980: 104).

Chesnut indicated that he was himself a member of a society much like his fictitiously named “Blue Vein Society” (Chesnut 2002: 86), and as Frances Keller points out, his whole family was active in the “Cleveland Social Circle” of African Americans with light-complexion (Keller 1978: 119). Thackeray, a self-proclaimed “Snobographer” (Thackeray 1999: 161), asserts in *The Book of Snobs* that “[i]t is impossible for *any* Briton, perhaps, not to be a Snob in some degree” and points to “person[s] of the middle ranks of life,” later referred to as “the *respectable* classes” (Thackeray 1999: 33, 37). By no means did Thackeray restrict his snobs to “Blue Blooded” people (from where much of his witticism originates), but like Chesnut, Thackeray looks toward “those unfortunates who go to rack and ruin from their desire to ape their betters [...], ashamed of their father” (Thackeray 1999: 78). Chesnut's

blacks with light pigmentation share with Thackeray's Britons "some degree" of snobbery as well.

At the same time, in "The Wife of His Youth" Chesnutt reverses and redresses a marriage dilemma in his previous Blue Vein story, "A Matter of Principle." Both Congressmen Brown and Molly Dixon are light-skinned African Americans who have come to Groveland from Washington D.C. to seek out a marriage partner, and the sought-out partner for both is from the upper-crust of African American society. Both of these outsiders to Groveland are quite passive in the course of the plot: the other party (Clayton and Ryder) makes decisions which affect them, so much so that even the powerful African American Congressman is jilted on the basis of a misperception of his color. These highly desirable marriage partners are both "rejected" for equally unusual reasons. Yet, Cicero Clayton and his entire family behave repugnantly, following a principle of racial bigotry – whereas Chesnutt reverses the active side when Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor in fact act out of a genuine moral "principle." In "A Matter of Principle" Congressman Brown eventually pursues another person for his marriage partner while Molly Dixon essentially decided for the Blue Vein society that, as a matter of moral rectitude (or principle) Mr. Ryder should reject her and marry the wife of his youth. In the classic theme of pursuing a marriage partner, Chesnutt reverses the repugnant intraracial behavior of a Blue Vein leader into the most ennobling African American fiction plot about marriage in the nineteenth century.

4.5 Descendants of Miss Swartz in *The Quarry* (1928)

In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, John "Old" Osborne not only disinherits his son (who fell at Waterloo) but ignores his grandson George Osborne Jr when he is born to his son posthumously. Later in the novel, he is suddenly wished for by the

grandfather, John “Old Osborne” when he becomes a teenager. Amelia gives up her son George in an emotion-filled sacrifice since the old grandfather is rich and can provide him a great education, while she lives in poverty with her parents.

Charles Chesnutt takes up the theme of a great man of wealth rejecting a child set for his family (in Chesnutt’s novel *The Quarry*, written in 1928, the child is rejected when the very wealthy Scottish-American industrialist Angus Seton discovers that his adoptive son is part African American) and much later changing his mind and tries to take the child back again. However, Chesnutt has a different resolution than Amelia’s sacrifice of her only child: while Donald Glover is adopted, then given up when the adopting white family is informed that the baby’s father was a “light mulatto,” he is subsequently raised by a working class black family. Later, the wealthy white man offers to readopt him as his own. Later Donald Glover is offered a family fortune if he “gives up” i.e., relinquishes his black upbringing (even though he is white). Unlike Osborne, Chesnutt’s very wealthy businessman Seton is unsuccessful in gaining his adoptive son back. The foremost reason Seton wants Glover back near the end of the novel is that Seton has ascertained that Donald Glover is in fact not black, and that years ago the Cleveland adoption agency had made a terrible mistake about his ancestry.

In the latter section of this *bildungsroman* Donald Glover becomes a staff member at a colored industrial college in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (undoubtedly modeled after the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama which Booker T. Washington founded). Glover and the university president named Jefferson receive and welcome two distinguished visitors from England, Mr. Bascomb, who was interested in opening a similar school in an English colony in Africa, and his half-sister named Lady Blanche Merrivale who is described by her half-brother as possessing “some dark

blood” (Chesnutt 1999b: 192). Lady Merrivale “was well read in English literature, and Donald discovered during the conversation that their tastes were quite similar. Among the Victorian novelists she was most fond of Thackeray” (Chesnutt 1999b: 193). Chesnutt brings *Vanity Fair* to life in his last completed novel, particularly as Donald asks why Lady Blanche Merrivale was so fond of Thackeray so much:

“I ought to be,” she said, “for one of my ancestors appears in *Vanity Fair*. She was the original of Miss Schwarz, the West Indian fellow pupil of Becky Sharp at Miss Wilkinson’s Academy” (Chesnutt 1999b: 193)

In Chapter 1 of *Vanity Fair*, Rhoda Swartz is described as a particularly sensitive pupil and close friend of Amelia’s, for she “was in such a passion of tears” when Amelia departs Miss Wilkinson’s academy. Except for a brief mention that “the heiress of St. Kitt’s (who paid double)” was treated kindly at that school because of her riches while lower class women like Becky Sharp was dealt with callously by most of the teachers (Thackeray 1963: 14), Miss Swartz disappears from the novel for nearly two hundred pages until Chapter 20, fresh out of Miss Barbara Pinkerton’s school. Accordingly, she appears to have been younger than Amelia by two years.

Subsequently, Chesnutt’s hero Donald Glover looks the family up in the famous reference book of the English aristocracy, *Debrett’s Peerage & Baronetage*. Here he learns that the basis for Miss Swartz, the original woman who Lady Merrivale referred to, had an English father rather than a German-Jewish father, thereby reducing some of the exoticism of Miss Swartz. Otherwise, she was of fantastic wealth, and later marries well: “[...] this ancestress of Lady Merrivale, whose English father had left her a large estate in British funds and Jamaican lands, had married an English gentleman of good family.” (Chesnutt 1999b: 193) Moreover, Chesnutt follows up on the English society Thackeray critiques in *Vanity Fair*, for this English

gentleman is later knighted by Queen Victoria for using his mulatto wife's fortune to support the Whig party on the eve of an election. In Thackeray's novel, George Osborne refers to her appearance in purely comic tones, and Miss Swartz is more or less a stock figure to be laughed at and condoled with when she is repeatedly referred to as a laughable creature by George Osborne.

Like Rhoda Swartz, Lady Merrivale is regarded as an ideal marital partner for the orphaned but extremely handsome and highly educated Donald Glover. She invites him to visit her at her residence in England. As in *Vanity Fair*, the pursuit of a marriage partner includes grand parties and formal singing performances. Whereas Miss Swartz's piano playing and singing are denigrated by George Osborne, Donald Glover sings "Negro spirituals" as well as classical music as a "tenor solo" to Lady Merrivale's delight. At Lady Merrivale's estate, The Beeches, distinguished for being listed in *The Stately Homes of England*, Glover hears servants connive discussions with Lady Merrivale who tell her in Glover's presence, "[...] he'll be a lucky mon that gets you" (Chesnutt 1999b: 232). All chatter is of a imminent marriage between the two, just as George Osborne's Amelia is according to the hearsay to be replaced by Miss Swartz because of her father's reversal of fortunes.

In many ways Miss Swartz is deemed unworthy of marriage, but ultimately it is her race that makes her unacceptable, though other mixed-race women with serious illnesses did marry in English fiction.¹⁴³ Gilman describes the English view that racial mixing was biologically regarded as the cause of a variety of illnesses, both inexplicable physical and mental illnesses (Gilman 1985: 122). Thackeray carries that tradition forward with his black stock character in the form of Miss Rhoda Swartz.

¹⁴³ A series of 19th century English novels preceding Thackeray's ranging from Jane Austin's "half-mullata" named Adela Lambe in *Sanditon* (1817) to Charlotte Brontë's racially mixed Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre* (1847) include rich woman of mixed ancestry who were either physically or mentally ill, yet still appealing for marital purposes because of their great fortunes.

While George Osborne's description of Miss Swartz in *Vanity Fair* makes her appear almost unworthy of being wedded, Donald Glover's ostensible African American ancestry is no inhibition for his attractiveness within the highest feminine social levels in England in the mid-1920s. Chesnutt redresses George Osborne's marriage rejection when Donald Glover, with equally adamant decisiveness, eventually rejects the fabulously wealthy widow Englishwoman Lady Merrivale with her minor amount of "dark blood" for a poor and darker African American woman from Chicago who attended university with him in the South.

Charles Chesnutt's reception of Thackeray's fiction was ambiguous. The fact that he offered no criticism of Thackeray's often deplorable black characters is recorded, but his steadfast praise of Thackeray's satire is a remarkable lapse in Chesnutt's own appreciation of the man. In two novels, *The House behind the Cedars* and *The Quarry*, Chesnutt refers overtly to the many names of great novelists his African American protagonists read in the course of their ambitious education, but neither of them read Thackeray. Chesnutt openly refers to Scott, Bulwer-Lytton and Simms as either admired or parodied authors. Only in *The Quarry* does Chesnutt create a descendent of Rhoda Swartz (or rather the woman whom Thackeray personally knew and used as the basis for this character) to appear in this *bildungsroman*, and while undertaking all that she can to win over Donald Glover's love, she fails like her ancestor. Like George Osborne – the proposed mate for Miss Swartz – Donald is not only white but he wishes to decisively choose his own wife on his own and not be "directed" by anyone.¹⁴⁴ Yet through the character Lady Merrival, Chesnutt sought not only to pay homage to his favorite novelist, but redress and revise "snobby" characters employing his own satirical strategies.

¹⁴⁴ Forerunner of Philip Roth's counterfactual plots in which Franz Kafka and Anne Frank live among Philip Roth-like characters, *The Quarry* includes a descendent of an African American character Chesnutt felt obliged to import into his own fiction.

5.0 The Great Mentor: George Washington Cable

It is Chesnutt's lesser-known New Orleans novel, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.*, completed in 1922 but rejected for publication during the early phase of the Harlem Renaissance by three different book publishers, which owes a substantial debt to and to a large extent plays off of the themes and motifs in the fiction of George Washington Cable (1844-1925), particularly themes relating *gens de couleur libre* or the free people of color and their conflicts with only nominally "white" relations who usually lived in opulence in New Orleans. Especially Cable's most famous novel, *The Grandissimes, a Story of Creole Life* (1880) and his story of an enslaved German immigrant child, "Salome Müller, the White Slave" (1890) are of significance to Chesnutt's *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* After a preliminary discussion of Cable's influence on Chesnutt, particularly in the area of nonfictional polemics on race, this chapter will be dedicated to an analysis of these two novels, with a side reference to other fiction Cable wrote which Chesnutt revises in representing the fate of "mulattoes" in New Orleans.¹⁴⁵

5.1 Political Nonfiction: Cable-Chesnutt Correspondence

In contrast to Thackeray and Scott discussed above, Charles Chesnutt had written nothing in his journal about George Washington Cable. This seems odd since Cable's story collection *Old Creole Days* (1879) was successful commercially and

¹⁴⁵ While Cable was a ground-breaking Southern writer, he was not the first to write about New Orleans blacks and the system of *plaçage* that developed under French rule. Indeed it seems writers with all major genres wrote the motif of mixed-race relationships with a New Orleans setting. Victor Séjour, author of the antebellum short story "Le Mulâtre" (1857), a tragic mulatto story, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem entitled "The Octoroon" (1842). A novel by the minor Irish-American novelist Thomas Mayne Reid, wrote *The Octoroon* (1856) which formed the basis of a drama of the same title by Dubliner Dion Boucicault, *The Octoroon or Life in Louisiana* (1859), a play performed with a happy ending in England whereby the mixed couples unite, and performed with the reverse sort of ending in the United States (Degen 1975: 176-7). To my knowledge, Julia Collins, whose *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride* (1865) was recently republished in 2006, wrote the only novel by an African American dealing with this Louisiana-specific topic of the tragic mulatto.

critically and his historical New Orleans novel *The Grandissimes* (1880) was one of the best-selling southern novels at the time that Chesnutt was vociferously reading books and particularly eyeing best-selling fiction.

Initially, the significant influence Cable exerted over Chesnutt, according to Joseph McElrath and Robert Leitz, was not necessarily a positive one:

Until he began to correspond with Cable, Chesnutt's writings have been literary rather than political, wholly unconcerned with the need for social change when featuring white characters, and gently reformist in character when focused on blacks (McElrath and Leitz 1997: 21)

While Chesnutt first befriended Cable in 1888 at a time when Cable's *The Grandissimes* and his short stories were the best known among literary works by southern writers, Cable himself had refocused his interests toward polemical essays by criticizing racism and the disenfranchisement of blacks in his essay collections *The Silent South* (1885) and *The Negro Question* (1890).¹⁴⁶ Chesnutt attended a lecture Cable gave in Cleveland, and afterwards he introduced himself as both a writer who was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* as well as a Negro, which surprised Cable since Chesnutt appeared to be white. In the correspondence between Chesnutt and Cable which ensued after this initial meeting, Cable held the position of mentor. The correspondence concerned their mutual interest in Southern and national politics pertaining to race, as well as literature. Cable also advised Chesnutt on personal and professional matters, and unsuccessfully tried to get his non-dialect fiction published.

The first time Chesnutt refers to Cable at all in writing is in his essay Cable had encouraged him to compose entitled, "An Inside View of the Negro Question," completed on January 10, 1889 (Chesnutt 1999a: 57). Cable's initial attraction to

¹⁴⁶ Essays from the latter collection had been appearing in periodicals when the two writers first made their personal acquaintance in December 1888.

Chesnutt was the potential use of his skills as an essay writer, for Cable had been seeking out black intellectuals to support his positions on race, particularly his championing the civil rights of southern African Americans. Rather than discussing with Cable his insightful fiction, Chesnutt was directed to write essays about the state of racial relations from the perspective of a “negro.” Chesnutt resolved to continue fiction writing but also to engage himself polemically to the question of race in America, an activity he continued to be involved in for the rest of his life. As Andrews (1980), McElrath et al (1997) and Wilson (2004) all concur, Cable’s influence unfortunately led to a more didactic and polemic direction in Chesnutt’s fictional writing.

Under Cable’s encouragement, the African American Chesnutt published an article almost menacingly titled “What is a White Man?” in the *Independent* in 1889. In the essay, he breaks down the black-white binary thinking by focusing with irony on the “intellectual scandal” of that “very large class of the population who are certainly not Negroes in an ethnological sense” (Chesnutt 1999a: 68). He cites anti-interracial matrimonial laws in various states in the United States as they stood in 1890¹⁴⁷ and then remarks rather sarcastically about the need for these laws: “[n]ature, by some unaccountable oversight having to some extent neglected a matter so important to the future prosperity and progress of mankind [...]” (Chesnutt 1999a: 71). He contends that the mulatto or “white negro” would force Americans to stop their rigid demarcation of the color line and hence the segregation of the races. In contrast to racial segregationists who contended that racially-mixed Americans would die out, Chesnutt avers that what really distinguished America as a nation was its race-mixing. He most appositely concludes that whiteness is a permeable category

¹⁴⁷ In the Northern states most of these laws were abandoned at the turn of the century. Most Southern states altered their anti-interracial marriage laws in the 1960s and early 1970s. However, interracial marriage became legal in Alabama only in the year 2000!

and that executing segregation laws would require defining what legislature or official was equipped to define consistently: whiteness. Chesnutt points out that a person one-eighth African in North Carolina was legally a “negro” while in the neighboring state of South Carolina such a person would be white if people simply determined “upon the evidence of features and complexion afforded by inspection” (Chesnutt 1999a: 70). Hence if someone looked white or black, that would suffice in implementing the newly established laws of segregation in South Carolina. As Matthew Wilson argues, Chesnutt “was attempting to undermine a generally accepted understanding in the late nineteenth century that race was based on science” (Wilson 2004: 8). Chesnutt might well have chosen, instead of South Carolina, the State of Louisiana, the setting of *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* which was comparatively liberal on the question of determining what a white man was.¹⁴⁸

Chesnutt would follow this essay with another essay entitled “A Multitude of Counselors” (April 1891) and another in the following year “Resolutions Concerning Recent Southern Outrages,” as well as attend, for example, Republican Party meetings and give speeches such as “Why I am a Republican” (1892).¹⁴⁹ His activities in this area of interest, while it robbed him of his time from fiction writing¹⁵⁰ also had the effect of forming in his mind the polemical ideas he would later didactically integrate in so much of his later fiction.

After “What is a White Man?” came out, Cable wrote Chesnutt of his pleasure with Chesnutt’s provocative and insightful argument, stating his hope that Chesnutt would become his ideological ally. He pointed out how this theme was addressed in his fiction:

¹⁴⁸ At the time Chesnutt wrote this essay, Louisiana defined a Negro as having one-fourth African ancestry, though this would be debated and changed in the 1895 Louisiana Constitutional Convention.

¹⁴⁹ The speeches and essays were collected and published in 1999 by Stanford University Press.

¹⁵⁰ At this time Chesnutt only wrote at night or early morning while working full-time in his newly-established legal stenography firm.

I have long thought of this branch of the question and have constantly and patiently watched opportunities to bring it forward. You know that all my earlier stories about quadroons really ask this question, 'What is a white man' – 'What is a white woman?' I thought in the beginning that it was an initial question but believe now it is not, yet it is one that must have its place and time and value in the solution of our great question. (Cable to Chesnutt, June 12, 1889)

For Chesnutt, George Washington Cable undoubtedly represented both an unusual kind of Southerner as well as a sign of potential change in the South as a Confederate army veteran for a strong liberal voice on race.¹⁵¹ After placing Chesnutt's interest in writing and thinking on the essay and polemics, Cable eventually directed his attention in the autumn of 1889 to getting the new non-dialect fiction published which Chesnutt had been finding difficult to place.

5.2 Cable's Influence on "Rena Walden"

When Cable was sent a manuscript of "Rena Walden," the "urtext" of what would later be published as *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), Cable responded in May 1889 that the story was "in a very important relation to the interests of the whole great nation" (cited in Keller 1978: 186). In a letter containing a more detailed response penned September 1889, Cable advised Chesnutt on ways to improve the story, including both technical ways (more "scenery" in the draft's melodramatic conclusion) and ways to address the audience: "You must remember that you are writing for white Americans and English," and most astutely, "remember in your descriptions of persons that the greatest element of strength is to yield all the ground you honestly can to the possible prejudices of your reader" (cited in Andrews 1980:

¹⁵¹ Whereas most white Southerners looked at blacks unsympathetically, Cable took the opposite view. Cable partially inspired Chesnutt's Confederate Civil War veteran character Colonel French in *The Colonel's Dream* (1905) who sympathized with blacks and, as a reform-minded entrepreneur, quickly became unpopular for his efforts within the white community.

25). It is essential to mention that Chesnutt had already published “The Goophered Grapevine” and three other dialect stories in the *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁵² As William Andrews points out, these stories had already “yielded ground” to the prejudices of his white American audience (Andrews 1980: 25) with his mimetic plantation stories of a black man recalling times as a slave on the plantation. In particular, Chesnutt’s dialect stories distance John, the white northern narrator from the story-telling Julius McAdoo, who is described with suspect as overly emotional and superstitious, dreamy, quaint, subservient, shrewd, and as “an old rascal.” (Chesnutt 2000: 23). Julius was also extremely useful to John: his exceptional knowledge of the neighborhood, the business of farming, hunting, fishing, not to mention local history, was profitable to the new white landowners. Also Chesnutt was hardly known as an African American author. Readers assumed that he, like Joel Chandler Harris, the author of *The Tales of Uncle Remus* (1880), was white. In 1900 Howells revealed his African American ancestry in his review of Chesnutt’s story collections, *The Conjure Woman* (1899) and *The Wife of his Youth and other Stories of the Color Line* (1899).

In the 51-page early version typescript of “Rena Walden,” the story is told by a kindhearted black narrator in the segregated South: “I knew Mis’ Molly in the years between 1866 and 1870.” “[as] a young bookish lad, and not too closely looked after, I had scoured the neighborhood for reading matter” (cited in Andrews 1980: 26). Chesnutt promulgated through this story the concept of an intellectually curious and ambitious African American with a black narrator.¹⁵³ Since “Rena Walden” was not a humorous trickster dialect story but a confluence of contrasting themes which depicted self-educated blacks with good diction and a substantial level of edification,

¹⁵² These stories would later be collected with other stories and published in book form under the title *The Conjure Woman* in 1899.

¹⁵³ This change of narrator (from the uneducated ex-slave narrator speaking in vernacular in his conjure stories) suggested that not only the narrator but the author, Chesnutt, was African American.

Chesnutt dropped plantation humor and African American vernacular. He began to write as a substitute stories which concerned the African American people he knew about: intelligent, ambitious and articulate blacks of light pigmentation. Chesnutt still had not adopted the traditional narrative pose of the detached, somewhat condescending observer of the southern black, ambitiously establishing himself in what would appear approximately one decade later as *The House behind the Cedars*.

Cable indicated that Chesnutt was not keeping in favor of the white reading audience in "Rena Walden" by keeping his narrator distant from the black characters. Cable also suggested, especially after reading the comic party scene with the mulattoes of differing social backgrounds and Jeff Wain and Rena dancing, that Chesnutt should exploit further comic possibilities: "[d]o something great in the grotesque, ludicrous, pathetic and barren conditions of colored society" (cited in Andrews 1980: 26). As Chesnutt, citing the rejection letter by *Scribner's Monthly* editor Richard Watson Gilder, complains in a 13 June 1890 letter to Cable about the criticism,

Mr. Gilder finds that I either lack humor, or that my characters have 'a brutality, a lack of mellowness, a lack of spontaneous imaginative life, lack of outlook [...] are uninteresting' I fear, alas! That those are exactly the things that do characterize them" (Chesnutt 1997b: 66).

While Gilder gave the story tepid praise, Chesnutt's African American characters in the early version of *The House behind the Cedars* were, in short, not Uncle Julius, a fictional trickster character speaking in vernacular which America's white readership were accustomed to and found so entertaining. Chesnutt, however, no longer wanted to write this "plantation tale" sub-genre of local color fiction, a genre saliently promulgating a roseate nostalgia for the traditions of privileged white Southern slave

owners. He particularly found it unmanageable as well as disagreeable to write a realistic novel while exploiting specifically ludicrous depictions of black characters common to the plantation tale tradition, particularly folk humor of a minstrel sort so popular from the middle to the end of the 19th century which actually exacerbated his sense of how blacks realistically lived. As Matthew Wilson concludes, “Chesnutt struggled with the intractable problem of how to accommodate his white audience while remaining faithful to the life he knew“ (Wilson 2004: 63).

Famous in his day for a sense of commercial and critical reception of fiction, Gilder, who had published George Washington Cable’s earliest Louisiana stories more than a decade and a half earlier, might well have thought it unrealistic to depict serious and intelligent African Americans like Rena and Wain to the reading market at that time. A dejected Chesnutt groused about his personal feelings in the undelivered draft of this letter:

I am a little surprised of Mr. Gilder’s suggestion of a want of humor in the writer. Almost everything I have written has been humorous and I thought that I had a rather keen sense of humor. But my position, my surroundings, are not such as to make me take a humorous view of life. They rather tend the other way [...] Pardon the references to myself – they are not meant to be egotistical; but, when I first began to think, circumstances tended make [*sic*] me introspective, self-conscious; latterly I fear they have tended to make me morbid. It may be weakness but my mental health and equipoise require constant employment, either in working or in writing. If I should remain idle for two weeks, at the end of that time I should be ready to close out my affairs and move my family to Europe. (Chesnutt 1997b: 67-68).

In the final draft of the letter Chesnutt scrupulously censored his genuine expression of frustration, thus avoiding the reproach of white editors and mentors like Cable who would likely misunderstand Chesnutt’s dissatisfaction. In the same letter to Cable which was indeed sent, Chesnutt relates the concept of portraying blacks altogether different from the blacks in the plantation tradition, finding (like so many

African American writers in the 20th century) solace in representations of blacks in European literary imaginative texts:

The kind of stuff I could write, if I were not all the time oppressed by the fear that this line or this sentiment would offend somebody's prejudices, jar on somebody's American-trained sense of propriety, would, I believe, find a ready sale in England. I have read a number of English and French novels recently in which Negroes, and "Colored people" play either principal or subordinate parts. They figure as lawyers, as doctors, as musicians, as authors, as judges, as people of wealth and station. They love, and they marry without reference to their race, or with only such reference to it as to other personal disabilities. They seem to find nothing extraordinary in a talented, well-bred colored man, nothing amorphous in a pretty gentle-spirited colored girl (Chesnutt 1997b: 67-68).

Chesnutt's "Rena Walden," the *ur-text* or early version from 1890, the second half of the novel published as *The House behind the Cedars* (starting with chapter 21) consisted of Rena wholly identifying herself with colored people and wishing to be involved with the "social uplift movement." In this 1890 version, Rena's move with Jeff Wain, a neighbor's cousin, to teach at a "colored school" in Sampson County, North Carolina, constituted the whole story. Rena's brother John Walden was absent from the story,¹⁵⁴ and the only major difference between the story and the published novel was that Rena married Wain not out of love but for his wealth, thereby lifting herself up socially in a way wholly different from the way she had dedicated her professional life as a teacher of the recently freed slaves.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ John Walden (Warwick) departs for the North and hence disappears from the plot in the final version of the novel at this point as well.

¹⁵⁵ Unlike Frances Harper (1825-1911) and others, Chesnutt critiques some methods of the African American "social uplift" movement such as "marrying up" in his non-dialect stories and passing novels which often directed blacks to decry black culture as barbaric and imitate whites while nonetheless accommodating segregationists. For example a light-skinned black of duplicity appropriately named "Abraham Lincoln Dixon" in Chesnutt's *The Quarry* (1925) who berates the lack of black accomplishments privately then celebrates black pride in a lecture (in Chesnutt's parody of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association), wearing at that lecture brown powder to darken himself while arguing how untrustworthy light-skinned negroes are; in another social uplift organization, a light-skinned Blue Vein Society member denies that he was a negro in Chesnutt's "A Matter of Principle" discussed earlier. Chesnutt's criticism is fully articulated in the tragedy of lost maternity in "Her Virginia Mammy," the near-tragic decision of the protagonist to marry Molly Dixon in

Both Cable and Chesnutt not only successfully published in major journals local color fiction about the South with conflicts concerning light-colored blacks in the South and racial prejudice, even within multi-racial families (Andrews 1980: 108), but both writers were equally committed to political reform and racial justice, writing not only the numerous essays on the political issues during the post-Reconstruction period when Blacks were being disenfranchised, but also committing the expression of these issues less stealthily into their fiction. As Chesnutt wrote on December 10, 1899 to the publishers Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., the collection of non-dialect stories *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*

[...] was written with the distinct hope that [it] might have its influence directing attention to certain aspects of the race question which are quite familiar to those on the unfortunate side of it (*To Be an Author* Chesnutt 1997b: 139-140)

In spite of the conscious didactic purpose Chesnutt ascribes to the stories in the letter to his publisher, these specific stories of the color line have continuously been acclaimed as beautifully-crafted as well as “Chesnutt’s [...] compelling representative[s] of the tendency among newly emancipated African Americans to abandon their cultural foundations in the South to pursue a dream of Northern success” (Wonham 1998: 66). Unlike Chesnutt’s more heavily criticized novels, these stories mark his mildly commercial success but more significantly, over the century since their publication they mark a notable critical success in Chesnutt’s arduous attempt to escape being pigeonholed as a dialect fiction writer of rural settings.¹⁵⁶

“The Wife of His Youth,” and perhaps most vehemently in the tragic pursuit of “The Mental, Moral, Physical, Political, Social and Financial Improvement of the Negro Race [...]” (Chesnutt 2000: 206) in “Uncle Wellington’s Wives.”

¹⁵⁶ The same attempt made by the dialect poet Paul Laurence Dunbar was not as successful.

5.3 Chesnutt's Revision of the 'Tragic Mulatto'

While Cable's early fiction includes biracial characters, baby-switching and passing tropes as well as powerful representations of the horrible effects of slavery on society, he also offers through a Louisiana setting a penetrating analysis of a multinational society torn by conflicting cultural traditions.

The conflicts Cable treated in his fiction center on the traditional Louisianans, i.e., the long-time French-Spanish (Creole) residents and their reaction against being dominated by new White Anglo-Saxon Protestant inhabitants who had taken over administrative power in New Orleans in 1803.¹⁵⁷ While Chesnutt had written about somewhat analogous conflicts between Scots and English American planters, particularly the culture among the Scots and other whites settled in the Cape Fear region of North Carolina (discussed earlier in chapter 3), unlike Cable, he was obviously a stranger to the quaint Louisiana patois as well as the other cultural manifestations local only to Louisiana. Cable not only was a native of New Orleans,¹⁵⁸ he spent years professionally researching its history.

In contrast, by the early 1920s Chesnutt was on the lookout for new settings for his multiracial fiction as he sensed a transformation in the publishing industry during the early period of the Harlem Renaissance with regard to the printing of fiction written by African Americans. After approximately forty years of mining fiction chiefly from his two home states, Chesnutt sought a new locale outside of North

¹⁵⁷ Myriad critics have pointed out Cable's intent of echoing the bitterness of the contemporary military occupation by the Union Army and the ensuing politics of Reconstruction (at the time of *The Grandissimes'* publication in 1880) with the resentment Creoles sensed in 1803 when Anglo-Americans came to dominate Louisiana.

¹⁵⁸ Through Cable was born and grew up in New Orleans, he felt like an outsider. His parents were transplanted "Yankees" from the north, he was a devout Presbyterian and he was associated with despised Anglo-Americans moving into the city. While he spoke English at home, most of the other inhabitants spoke French at that time. Finally, his family frowned upon slavery. As Michael Kreyling writes in his "Introduction" to the novel, "[b]eing born in Louisiana was not enough." (Kreyling 1988: xii). Cable's near-contemporary writer Kate Chopin (1850-1904), another outsider who followed her husband from Missouri to Louisiana, found the exotic culture inspirational for her writing. Cable's estrangement had a likewise beneficial effect on his writing about Creoles and their interactions with racial and cultural Others.

Carolina and Ohio for his eighth novel. The setting he sought should moreover appear exotic. As an outsider, Chesnutt came belatedly to the idea of writing a Louisiana novel. Matthew Wilson points out that Chesnutt's thinking changed after rejections and then poor sales of his fiction critical of Southerners. The new thinking after World War I returned Chesnutt

[...] to the genre of local color, which he had explored in one of his first two volumes of short stories, *The Conjure Woman* (1899) [and] also imaginatively reconnected him to Cable, Chesnutt's first literary contact and mentor (Wilson 2004: 184).

To be sure, so much of Chesnutt's plot seemed outmoded for the 1920s though in New Orleans in the 1820 the events might well have transpired. The reception of the three publishing companies that rejected the manuscript in 1922, however, was not lenient. As Robert F. Fleming has accurately pointed out, Chesnutt's 1922 novel's

[...] bizarre and outdated plot, involving duels with swords, babies switched at birth, mistaken identities, and large inheritances, allows Chesnutt the freedom to fictionalize views on race and racism that he had not previously expressed in his published fiction (Fleming 2000: 364).

In Chesnutt's novel, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (completed in 1922) the protagonist, Paul Marchand, raised as a African-American orphan, turns out not to be black but of completely white parentage. Of this ancestry he comes to learn only as an adult, one already married to an African American with two children. The racial misidentification appears at first only to be Chesnutt's reversal of the trope of the "tragic mulatto" in early passing novels by both African American and white authors of

the mid to late 19th century.¹⁵⁹ I would argue that Cable's enslaved German woman described in an 1889 story as well as the myriad characters in *The Grandissimes* specifically inspired Chesnut's racially misidentified character in *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* rather than serving merely as a reversal of sentimental tragic mulatto fiction.

While the intertextual allusions to Cable may be absorbing for the purpose of the reading aimed at in this study, in a number of respects it ruined any chance for a public reception of the novel. As Matthew Wilson states in his introduction to *Paul Marchand, F. M. C.*, Chesnut's novel was rejected in 1922 by three separate publishers who "saw this novel as little more than an anachronism, an imitation of George Washington Cable's New Orleans writings [...] an 'outed genre' of local color (Wilson 1998: viii)

The "tragic mulatto" novels most likely to have influenced Chesnut, targeted to the predominantly white female reading audience, aimed at having this audience identify and hence sympathize with female protagonists suffering from racial obloquy who "grew up white" only to learn later in life that they possessed some "Negro" blood. This strategy was habitually made use of in African-American novels such as Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride* (1865), or in Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), or the white novelist William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty* (1892), the last two titles likely being the only novels among this group of three that Chesnut had read.¹⁶⁰ As Leslie Lewis points out, particularly Harper polemically sought out in her novels to respond to the politics of post-Reconstruction laws in which "white southerners often insisted on the social

¹⁵⁹ In a novel published previous to the composition of *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.*, a similar case of racial misidentification occurs in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1896) in which a switched white baby is raised as a slave and learns of his white parentage only as an adult when he is 25 years old. See Koy (2003).

¹⁶⁰ As Matthew Wilson points out, Chesnut "was attempting to mine and infiltrate readers' feelings [...] Chesnut redirected the readers' attention to George Tryon [in *The House behind the Cedars*], who became a surrogate for the white reader (Wilson 2004: 67)

separation of the races” by pointing out in her fiction “the secrets of white paternity, which have been slavery’s secrets and as such forbidden to be told” (Lewis 2006: 756).

5.4 Cable’s Story “Salome Müller, the White Slave”

In *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* Charles Chesnutt not only developed a reversal of this mistaken racial identity trope. Instead, he followed up on and provided a fictional updating of a story of nonfiction by George Washington Cable. This story, entitled “Salome Müller, the White Slave” (1890) was based on the public record as well as interviews conducted by Cable regarding the biography of Sally Miller, a child immigrant from Alsace, Germany. With her father, sister and brother, she was sold upon arrival in 1818 on a ship (to cover the cost of oversea passage). Common in this time, she was a German “redemptioneer” as a three-year-old little girl. Originally named Salomé Müller, she was separated from her father and siblings, sold as an indentured servant and afterward forced to work as a slave at a sugar plantation in Attakapas, Louisiana.¹⁶¹

In the spring of 1843 a German family friend recognized her while she stood just outside a saloon owned by her “master” near the Vieux Carré in New Orleans. Recognized by her extended family from Germany, she became the center of litigation from January 1844 until the final Louisiana Supreme Court hearing in May 1849.¹⁶² This history, published by Cable just after Chesnutt began to get his first dialect stories published in the most reputable national journals, caught his attention

¹⁶¹ Sally Miller was sold after some twenty years to a saloon keeper after giving birth to four children, two with fellow enslaved black men, and two with white men, one of whom was her final owner.

¹⁶² As a free woman she subsequently moved to California while her three surviving children, two sons named Madison and Charles, and a daughter named Adeline, remained slaves (Bailey 2003, Wilson 1999).

because of the themes of racial (mis-)identification and slavery.¹⁶³ Of great interest to the legally-trained Chesnutt was undoubtedly Cable's detailed description of the court proceedings and arguments about Salome's race which not only concerned whether a white person could be a slave (in Louisiana this was not illegal) but also regarding the honor of the wealthy man who had been accused of enslaving a white indentured servant.

Chesnutt read this short work of nonfiction immediately upon publication in *Century* and wrote Cable in a letter dated May 24, 1889 the following interesting reaction:

Your story of Salome Miller was very interesting, and yet one could not help thinking, while reading it, what a still more interesting work of fiction might have been made of it. (Chesnutt 1997b: 40)

Always with the mindset of historian, Cable negated Chesnutt's claim: "[...] don't found fiction on fact [...] Found your fictions on truth, but stay away from actual occurrences of historical value" (Chesnutt 1997b: 41n). Cable made Chesnutt reflect arduously about the issue of American history and how it might be best presented as nonfiction to edify the public rather than fiction which is directed according to Cable merely toward entertainment.

As "strange" as it may seem (borrowing the term from Cable's collection of nonfiction published in book form in 1890 which included "Salome Müller, the White Slave"), what Chesnutt describes in *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* and what Cable describes in his story of Louisiana (happened and) still happens recurrently, particularly in New Orleans. A recently published example of racial confusion from

¹⁶³ The story was published by Cable again one year later in book form in the collection of seven works of historical nonfiction entitled *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1890). Reference to Salome Müller is also made by William Wells Brown in chapter 14 of his novel *Clotel, or: The Presidents Daughter* (1853), though Chesnutt, echoing Thomas Jefferson on Wheatley, evaluated in his *Journal* Brown's writing as "beneath the dignity of criticism" (Chesnutt: 1993c: 164).

Louisiana is the widely-reported case of Wayne Joseph, a Louisiana native living in southern California who took the DNA test from a Florida-based DNA Print Genomics Inc.¹⁶⁴ When the black activist and *Newsweek* journalist received the outcome, he learned that he was 57 percent European, 39 percent Native American and 4 percent East Asian - - and zero percent African. Joseph describes his intense confrontation with the thought that he was not what he always thought he was: African American. Married to an African American woman and deeply connected to this community in California, Joseph discovered that he had been unwittingly passing for an African American like Chesnut's hero Paul Marchand.¹⁶⁵

In another example from Louisiana, a renowned, long-time literary critic for the *New York Times*, Anatole Broyard (1920-1990) is described by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his book *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1997) as an intellectual passing as white who was descended not only from one distant black (for example a great-grandparent who was black); instead virtually all of his relatives were black. Just like Chesnut and his own parents, Anatole Broyard's light-skinned African Americans ancestors had married other light-skinned blacks. Broyard married a white woman with Norwegian and Native American ancestry and raised his two children as white, allowing his African American ancestry to be revealed to his children only on his deathbed.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ The test was cited and made famous through the media by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (who learned, along with Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, that he had substantial Portuguese-Jewish ancestry). See Gates, "White Like Me" in *The New Yorker* (1996).

¹⁶⁵ Wayne Joseph's mother informed him later that his "grandparents had made a conscious decision back in Louisiana to not be white, claiming they did not want to side with a people who were known oppressors" (Kaplan 2003: 26). In practical terms, the dark-skinned Joseph family would be required to segregate in buses, streetcars and restaurants if married to white people during the Jim Crow era. In Louisiana, sometimes mothers would be segregated from sons, simply because one was lighter than the other. "Determinations of race were entirely subjective and imposed from without, and the one-drop rule was enforced to such divisive and schizophrenic effects [...]" (Kaplan 2003: 27).

¹⁶⁶ His daughter, Bliss Broyard, wrote in a recent book at length of her hidden extended family and also traced Anatole's ancestry back to the early 18th century and learned, among other facts, that her free black great grandmother in Louisiana owned black slaves (Broyard 2007: 323).

Louisiana's long history of race mixing, interracial marriage and of course the system of *plaçage* or organized concubines between married wealthy white men and beautiful free mixed-race women (facilitated at the opulent quadroon balls in New Orleans) served Chesnutt with fascinating material to work with in order to present new opinions about race.

5.5 Chesnutt's Signifying on *The Grandissimes*

Louisiana was a particularly fruitful setting for fiction concerning interracial conflicts. Both Cable and Chesnutt found New Orleans and Louisiana – with Roman Catholic Creoles formerly under both French and Spanish rule – to inspire interesting fictional stories. For Cable, Louisiana also served as a foundation for his polemical essays criticizing Southern post-reconstruction racial policies.

In Cable's masterpiece, *The Grandissimes* (1880), a whole variety of New Orleans Creole denizens from the first decade of 19th century, including the locally-renowned *mise-en-scène* at the city quadroon balls, enslaved as well as free blacks of many shades populate his novel.

Chief among Chesnutt's sundry characters in *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* endlessly emulating Cable's in *The Grandissimes* is Chesnutt's enslaved black street vender Zabet Philosophe who is not only an obvious reincarnation of Cable's Palmyre Philosophe but also of the rice and ginger cake vender on the Rue Royale, Clemence. Chesnutt's Zabet Philosophe is a street vender, an informer, voodoo practitioner, and wise "philosopher" born in Haiti who comprehends the secret racial ancestry of some of the most important "white" men of means in New Orleans. Cable's woman characters such Palmyre, a beautiful manumitted "quadroon" applies voodoo charms to harm her enemies, namely the superstitious Creole Patriarch

Honoré Grandissime, and assists Aurora Nancanou with a love spell. A second character, Clemence, a bilingual Virginia-born slave also applies voodoo charms to terrify Honoré Grandissime.

Chesnutt's magnanimous patriarch, Pierre Beaurepas, replicates to some extent Cable's Honoré Grandissime. Pierre Beaurepas was a long-time widower whose father, Antoine Beaurepas, had built their mansion and wealth up to immense standards primarily through his slave plantations in Haiti. When the Haitian uprising takes place in 1791, all but one of the children of Pierre's brother make their safe escape to New Orleans. This infant daughter dies en route, and Zabet, a slave whose grandson named Philippe, was the child of Pierre's brother with Zabet's enslaved daughter, is switched during their escape on the boat by Zabet and subsequently raised as a white man. Hence, Chesnutt peoples this novel with two cousins of character and honor who grow up racially confused or ignorant as to their origins: a completely white man, Paul Marchand, is made to believe he is black while at the same time a child of a slave, Philippe Beaurepas, switched shortly after birth by his enslaved grandmother, is subsequently raised as a white gentleman of honor.

Although Chesnutt was no orphan himself, but on the contrary knew much of his ancestry and derived some benefits from his white ancestors, financial and educational. Nevertheless, he depicts in his novels and stories so many orphans with an ancestry of either mixed racial background or of a background similar to Salome Müller, i.e., white orphans mistakenly taken for light-skinned African Americans. The feminist critic Nina Auerbach places the orphan in a special place in American culture in her introduction to a volume of her collected essays:

The symbol of the orphan, male and female by turns, inspires everything I wrote, for s/he is a reminder that culture takes inspiration from its outcasts. Apparent power cannot free itself from its myths of the

powerless. All these essays are concerned with the sorts of power the apparently alien and excluded snatch from and wield over citizens who think they are safe (Auerbach 1986: xvii).

The situation Auerbach suggests reflects not only the power of the orphan Paul Marchand, but the power exerted by the slave Zabet who switched the light-skinned babies. While Salome Müller was not switched at birth, her upbringing as a servant and relatively dark skin inspired her master to transform her into a slave, a manipulation by a white man that Chesnutt redressed in his Louisiana novel.

In Cable's novel, refined Creoles scrupulously maintain French decorum at these quadron balls. In *Old Creole Days*, Cable relates the situation after the Louisiana Purchase when American whites behaved appallingly, treating these biracial women disrespectfully, i.e., more like prostitutes, in stark contrast to the Creole men. As a consequence, quadroons were relegated to the lower status of professional dancers, and dissipation had become the norm at the quadron balls. On the other hand, Cable has Creole family squabbles turn violent. In Chesnutt's morally bourgeois novel, Paul Marchand's quadron sister-in-law Lizette "with her very striking beauty" attended such a ball on the Salle Condé. When he announced his plan to "rescue her" although, as Marchand's wife warned, he ran "the risk of insult"¹⁶⁷, Paul Marchand fears more "the risk of dishonor" should Lizette be seduced and her womanhood dishonored (Chesnutt 1998: 53).

Replicating the Cable description of the attack on a white-skinned Negro by old Agricola Fusilier de Grandissime at the quadron ball in chapter three of *The Grandissimes*, the intrepid Paul Marchand is viciously beaten by Hector and Henri Beaurepas, unbeknownst to him or them his own cousins. He is subsequently sent to and immured within the Calabozo city prison where the historical white slave Sally

¹⁶⁷ In fact "insult" was an understatement – the crime of a black man's attendance at these balls was punishable "under pain of death" in Louisiana law at that time.

Miller sat as a prisoner.¹⁶⁸ The description of Paul Marchand's prison experience in the Calabozo in chapter 6 of Chesnut's novel is strikingly similar to Cable's more detailed description in his short narrative "Salome Müller, the White Slave" (1890); it is undoubtedly Chesnut's source for the prison description as well as the experience of a prisoner interned there at that time, describing in particular the stench, the cold stones prisoners slept on, and the obnoxious noise of neighboring prisoners.

Further insults Paul Marchand endures as a "free man of color"¹⁶⁹ include a sharp slap on his face by Raoul Marchand at the *vieux carré* in front of the Cathedral, that is, Raoul slapped Paul as if to make a public spectacle much like Agricola Fusilier at the quadroon ball in *The Grandissimes*.¹⁷⁰ Later in the novel, at an auction, Hector Beurepas insults Paul Marchand with "cochon!"¹⁷¹ and threatens to slit Paul's ears with a knife¹⁷² after disputing a bid. Adolphe Beurepas has a restaurant refuse him service. The only cousin who does not attack him verbally or physically is Philippe, the very man who was switched at birth and is a quadroon. While raised as gentlemen, four of the five Beurepas brothers are intolerant towards any blacks or colored people who may get in their way.¹⁷³ Moreover, they all live beyond their means, having each failed in business enterprises or farm plantations or being engaged in gambling, so that their debts make them all intensely crave for the inheritance that their Uncle Pierre will leave upon his death.

Paul Marchand regards himself as a gentleman of color. New Orleans law however recognized no caste of "colored gentleman." Until his marriage he had lived

¹⁶⁸ Sally Miller was incarcerated in the same prison, the Calabozo city prison, from January 24 to February 1, 1844, until a one thousand dollars bond was remitted – corresponding to her worth as a slave, required for her attendance at the trial she pursued for her freedom.

¹⁶⁹ Marchand is legally designated a "quadroon"

¹⁷⁰ It should be noted that the attack on Paul Marchand at the quadroon ball was quite private and quiet, in contrast to this attack on the main square of New Orleans.

¹⁷¹ "Pig!"

¹⁷² A common punishment for runaway slaves under the French Code in New Orleans.

¹⁷³ The sole Beurepas cousin who behaves gentlemanly throughout the novel including before Paul Marchand's true identity is revealed is Philippe Beurepas, the secretly switched African American.

by means of a trust fund. He was educated like a gentleman by the trust fund which “[...] had sent him, when he approached manhood, to school in Paris [...] finding the opportunity to expand in mind and spirit” (Chesnutt 1998: 14). Noting no color line in France, Paul Marchand thoroughly enjoyed his stay.

Chesnutt’s hero not only experiences an epiphanic moment but one of peripetia when he is declared white and heir to his father’s substantial fortune. Pierre Beaurepas informs the world in his testament that Paul Marchand is his legitimate son, completely white and heir to his fortune if he marries Joséphine Morales (and later produces sons to inherit the name and estate of Beaurepas).¹⁷⁴ Paul Marchand initially demands not only recognition as but also the privileges of a white gentleman of honor. Under New Orleans and Louisiana law, this includes among other things his ability to redress the humiliations he suffered from his white cousins while society understood to belong to the category of *gens de couleur libre* or a free person of color. An unfortunate consequence of his new legal status is that it renders the marriage to his quadroon wife Julie null and void¹⁷⁵ since such mixed marriages were illegal both to the State of Louisiana and the Catholic Church (Chesnutt 1998: 119). Julie takes the news bitterly, and it becomes necessary for her to inform the children of his as well as their new status:

“We have met with a great misfortune – a terrible calamity! Your papa is—”

“Our papa is dead!” they cried, bursting into loud wails.

“No, my children it is not so bad as that, for your papa, but for us it may be worse.”

“What is it, mama?” demanded Celestine.

“Prepare yourselves, my angels, for terrible news. Your papa is—”

¹⁷⁴ As a 13-year-old girl Joséphine had long ago been promised to the heir of Pierre Beaurepas, though she is in love with Philippe Beaurepas, the secret quadroon. This notion of promising one’s daughter to a friend’s son is a common feature of Creole tradition as rendered in the novel *The Granddissimes* by Cable.

¹⁷⁵ With his racially-mixed marriage rendered illegal under Louisiana law, Paul Marchand’s children with her are thereby legally deemed as bastards.

“Our papa is—
“Your papa is—white!”
Loud was the weeping, as Julie gather her chickens under her wings [...] (Chesnutt 1998: 89)

Signifying on the trope of the “tragedy” of learning of one’s colored ancestry in American literature,¹⁷⁶ Chesnutt’s melodramatic scene is read as comic: the light-skinned African American family do not want to be white nor associated with whites. In dealing with his new status, Paul Marchand-Beaurepas for quite a while ignores both his family and Joséphine and instead fully devotes himself to his cousins. In essence, Paul demands satisfaction by dueling with his cousins for the humiliations he had suffered.

5.6 Signifying on the Culture of Dueling in *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.*

In Cable’s *The Grandissimes*, set in 1803, the Southern white gentleman’s sense of honor is regularly put to the test by free people of color as well as black slaves. Any insult between whites of relatively equal status can result in a ritualistic duel of honor. There are many duels between two families, the last caused by an insult between two drinking friends stemming from a gambling debt, a charge of cheating and a challenge. The resulting duel between the distantly-related Agricola Fusilier and Paris-educated de Grapion-Nancanou, resulting in the latter’s death, serves as the background to the main conflict in the novel (Cable 1988: 31). The novel’s hero, Honoré Grandissime, nephew of the successful duelist Agricola Fusilier, seeks and eventually wins the love of Aurora Nancanou, widow of the fallen duelist.

Chesnutt’s novel *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.*, set in 1820, incorporates much of Cable’s story, but instead of duels between white Creoles who are distantly related to

¹⁷⁶ This trope is noted in the tragic mulatto novels of W. D. Howells, Mark Twain and Albion Tourgée and will be addressed in more detail in Chapter 6 below.

one another, he establishes a scenario in which Paul Marchand challenges his four cousins, all of whom are Creoles, to duels of honor. For so long, Marchand was understood to belong to the colored race, and he himself identified with the African American community. After his ancestry is made evident, he is still implicitly African American, or a “constructed colored man.” Legally, he is nevertheless white. As an African American, he suffered degrading and humiliating slights of various sorts but legally could not respond in any way or seek revenge. Once legally recognized as white, however, he could respond to humiliating slights and engage in duels of honor. To receive “satisfaction” for the multitude of these insults he experienced from his consanguineous Creole cousins (who had proved to their late uncle not to be “gentlemen of honor” and as a result disinherited¹⁷⁷), Paul Marchand challenges four of them to duels of honor. Chesnut revises Cable’s dueling distant Creole cousins (for comically superfluous disagreements) with a cousin who duels his cousins for their disgraceful behavior toward a person they mistakenly thought to be racially inferior. Chesnut’s sustained strategy of pastiche of Cable’s novel seeks to break past the Southern trope of feuding families so common in Southern literature, and is a form of what Henry Louis Gates would term oppositional or “motivated” signifying.

Historically, duels were rooted in tradition and people participating in duels were required to follow strict rules meticulously. Chesnut’s novel describes a sudden change in status in the case of a free man of color who not only inherits a great deal of money but learns that he was born white (rather than an illegitimate child of an enslaved or free quadroon or octoroon as the other orphans raised in his orphanage were understood to come from). Paul Marchand always assumed that his father was white but he knew nothing of his mother, and the true identity of neither.

¹⁷⁷ The disinheritance by the pretentious aristocrat Uncle Pierre Beaurepas of Marchand’s cousins for behavior unbecoming of a gentleman echoes the same act of disinheritance by an uncle of another unwitting passer, Tom Driscoll in Mark Twain’s 1894 novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (see Koy 2003: 95-97).

Chesnutt's hero respects the rules of the traditional duel of honor which forbade blacks (free or enslaved) from taking any part. According to Kenneth Greenberg, in the culture of Southern gentlemen of honor,

masters den[ied] their slaves the "privilege" of dueling. Not having the power to duel was one of the distinguishing features of enslavement. The slave was a person who did not have the power to risk his life in a confrontation with a man who tried to unmask him – with a man who "gave him the lie" (Greenberg 1996: 34)

There were number of reasons for a slave lacking this power in Southern culture. For one, slaves were regarded as bereft of any honor in white society. Belonging to the lowest class, no gentleman would stoop so low as to allow a slave the "honor" of fighting a duel, since doing so would elevate the slave to the level of a social "equal." Secondly, not only was a slave regarded as too cowardly to risk his own life¹⁷⁸, moreover a slave did not have the legal right to risk his own life since his life was not his own to risk: his life was in the possession of another, namely his owner. Thirdly and perhaps most obviously, a slave had no training nor possessed any skills with weaponry employed in duels, and as they were illiterate, they could not even exchange notes (one of the significant rituals in challenging a man to a duel).

As to the motif of dueling slaves, two noted exceptions of duels in one form or another in slave narrative literature. Frederick Douglass famously describes in chapter ten of his first slave narrative (1845) how he physically fights with Mr. Covey with the view of risking his life (rather than be whipped and thereby disgraced by failing to be a man). Douglass had been required by Covey to administer to an impossible task and was being punished for incompetence. As Douglass puts it,

¹⁷⁸ The notion that a slave was a coward was bound to the idea that a slave would risk his life to change his status of life-long servitude, and since slaves did not do so, they were ill-fit to do so in a duel of honor.

My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice disappeared, both defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping me, must also succeed in killing me (Douglass 1986: 113).

Reversing chronologically the insults to be satisfied in this duel, Douglass regarded his victorious fight as a duel of honor, minus obviously some of the rituals: “The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself” (Douglass 1986: 113). It was clear also to Mr. Covey that the fight he lost to Frederick Douglass that fateful day in 1833 was a duel of honor, for he had acknowledged his loss of honor by not rectifying it.¹⁷⁹ Douglass inferred that

Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker [...] It was of considerable importance to him. That reputation was at stake; and had he sent me – a boy about sixteen years old – to the public whipping-post, his reputation would have been lost (Douglass 1986: 114).

In this sense, the duel this overseer lost “unmasked” Covey before the witnesses to the fight (who were all black slaves). Nevertheless, Covey was not willing to be unmasked before his white neighbors, for his reputation would be irreparable. In this way Frederick Douglass subversively exploited the white code of honor to end any chance that Covey could ever whip him again.

In Henry Bibb’s slave narrative published in 1849, the Sunday pastime of his Kentucky white masters included (among other secular pursuits) forcing slaves to play-act duels of honor for their entertainment.

¹⁷⁹ For Instance, Covey did not have Douglass punished with the help of others, for instance his white neighbors, for the crime of striking a white man, which in many states such as Louisiana, was punishable by death.

This is urged on by giving them whiskey; making bets on them; laying chips on one slave's head, and daring another to tip it off with his hand; if he tipped it off, it would be called an insult, and cause a fight. Before fighting, the parties choose their seconds to stand by them while fighting; a ring or a circle is formed to fight in, and no one is allowed to enter the ring while they are fighting, but their seconds, and the white gentlemen (Bibb 1999: 16).

While these fights are violent, slave masters are attentive that the show duels do not degenerate into life-threatening bodily harm or grievous injuries for the participants, so that no weapons were allowed. The means of fighting Bibb describes are unmistakably meant to ridicule the slaves as mere caricatures of dueling gentlemen, though the slaves may well have been unaware of it: “[T]hey grab each other by their eyes, and jam their heads together like sheep” (Bibb 1999: 17).

Bibb clearly reveals that these Kentucky slave masters, in putting on their crude amusement show, were careful not to reduce the value of their “property,” should any of the fun get out of hand:

If they are likely to hurt each other very badly, their masters would rap them with their walking canes, and make them stop. After fighting, they make friends, shake hands, and take a dram together, and there is no more of it (Bibb 1999: 17).

As the new head of the Beaurepas family because of his wealth, Paul recites for his cousins the ancient traditions of their noble family which he had undertaken to thoroughly study and preserve since inheriting the Beaurepas name and property. Among the symbols is the family crest, “a mailed arm erect, the hand holding a sword, with the motto “Coup pour Coup”¹⁸⁰ or the principle that any wrong must be avenged. *Coup pour Coup* is unambiguously Chesnut motivated signifying on Cable's famous story within *The Grandissimes*, “the story of Bras-Coupé” in chapters

¹⁸⁰ Coup pour Coup is French for “a cut for a cut,” which may be regarded as the French version of “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

28-29 about a giant-sized royal African-born slave whose desire to be free is almost limitless but could be tamed only by love.¹⁸¹ His story is retold in New Orleans constantly, his character taking on mythical proportions in the oral tradition among Creoles as much as with the colored population.

The African-born slave Bras-Coupé was not easily trained into the common labor on the field. On the contrary Bras-Coupé was accustomed to giving orders rather than obeying them. He showed some flexibility and made certain adjustments to his new status, but he remained a difficult case for his owner. He also exhibited physical strength beyond that of any other single human being, in addition to spiritual powers associated with Voodoo. Eventually he fell in love with another woman who was light-skinned and not enslaved, and his marriage depended upon the whims of his owner and a mistress to whom she served as a servant. To the point, his subsequent violent attack on his Creole master is punishable by death, and is brutally avenged.¹⁸² Bras-Coupé escapes into the marshes, living beyond the reach of the law for many months and condemning his master's plantation via a curse to financial ruin. Ultimately he captured at a dance at Congo Square in New Orleans, taken to the Calaboza¹⁸³, whipped, "his ears shorn from his head, and the tendons behind his knees severed" (Cable 1988: 191), as required by the old French code for runaway slaves.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ In a speech delivered in 1916 Chesnutt described Cable's "Bras Coupé" story "a masterpiece; the character of a Negro who defied the lash, defied his master, and who preferred death to slavery, is a refreshing departure from the popular literary convention of the cringing, fawning menial who would lick the hand that struck him" (Chesnutt 1999a: 433). In an essay published by Du Bois in *The Crisis* in 1926 Chesnutt designed the character Bras Coupé a "super-Negro" (Chesnutt 1999: 492).

¹⁸² Bras-Coupé, as Cable explains, means "the Arm Cut Off... [h]is tribe, in losing him has lost its strong right arm close off at the shoulder... He made himself a type of all Slavery, turning into flesh and blood that all Slavery is maiming" (Cable 1988: 171).

¹⁸³ The Calaboza is the same prison that the nonfictional Sally Miller and the fictional Paul Marchand were incarcerated.

¹⁸⁴ Bras-Coupé is not a fictional invention of Cable but was based on a historical New Orleans figure, a runaway slave whose arm was chopped off by the police. He managed to run away, organized other runaways in the swamps and eventually was captured and executed. He died in July 1837. See Wagner (2005).

The “coup” or cuts endured by Paul Marchand, and arguably all blacks, can now be avenged by Paul Marchand-Beaurepas. While one of his cousins argues against the idea because “[a] white man could not insult a man of color” (Chesnutt 1998: 103) since a colored man had no honor which could be insulted, Paul responds to that abstraction of the white gentleman’s code of honor with his body. His face was slapped, his body was thrown into prison, and he accordingly cannot genuinely serve as the head of the Beaurepas family until each *coup* is avenged.

The duels in Chesnutt are described and Paul Marchand-Beaurepas continues to behave with a black mask. In the first duel, Paul feigns an awkward handling of a sword (though he had expert training in France) and manages to wound Raoul’s left cheek. As Paul tells Raoul after he wounds him, “my sword has scratched you in the precise spot where you so impulsively struck me in the *vieux carré*” and he is satisfied. Hector gets his right ear slit “from the top for about half an inch” (Chesnutt 1998: 111). While Hector is so angered by Paul’s apparent awkwardness, Paul replies:

I crave your pardon, cousin. It is but a little thing – no more than you said, at the cotton market, that you would have liked to do to me had you not feared to defile your sword. It will leave only a slight scar, and I have not soiled my sword. I am entirely satisfied. I trust you bear no malice?” (Chesnutt 1998: 112).

In Chesnutt’s depiction of the duel with the experienced swordsman Henri Beaurepas, Paul cuts his upper thigh, rendering him inept as a dancer at the quadrone balls which is where Henri had assaulted Paul and then had him imprisoned.

Another issue arises concerning race with regard to a romantic subplot. In *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* old Pierre Beaurepas stipulated that the heir to his fortune

must marry the beautiful Creole Joséphine Morales, signifying on Cable's novel *The Grandissimes* where slaves and "free colored" servants are compelled to marry when so ordered by their masters. When the white woman Joséphine Morales hears that the heir is Paul Marchand-Beaurepas, she becomes indignant: "He has been brought up as a Negro. He must feel as a Negro, think as a Negro; I could never be sure of him" (Chesnutt 1998: 119). Interestingly, rather than have Paul express what feelings he must have about his changed status, Chesnutt instead presents only a Creole response until the very end of his novel. In the case of the woman Paul has been arranged to marry, he is denoted by her as "this white-quadroon, or this quadroon-white" (Chesnutt 1998: 119). Chesnutt displays the old social construct of Paul's color which continues to be misconstrued by Creoles even after it has been officially debunked, despite Creoles putting "blood" and family before any other issue of caste such as upbringing, wealth or education. Clearly, Chesnutt depicts Creoles as hypocrites who do not maintain their own standards or adhere to the principles repeatedly featured as the mark of distinction separating them from Anglo-Americans.

This subplot of romantic entanglements is linked to another of Chesnutt's subplot by which he revises another short story of Louisiana by Cable entitled "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" (1874). In this short story, a levee breaks and the Mississippi drowns the daughters of a Creole who attempted to cheat a relative on a real estate deal. The daughters essentially die because of their father's careless greed. In Chesnutt's novel, a Creole woman's life is in danger because slaves are rebelling and seek violent revenge by killing the overseer and breaking the levee to destroy the slave plantation. Paul "Beaurepas" (as he is now named) arrives in time to kill one slave and rescue Joséphine from another slave. Through Paul's heroic

actions, both property and daughter are saved, another “motivated” reversal of Cable’s plot where the would-be rescuer arrives too late.

In Cable’s novel, no one’s racial identity is confused: everyone clearly knows his place in society and that there was no escape from that legal fact played a major role in the tragic fate of many characters of color. In fact, the first three dozen pages of *The Grandissimes* details with conviction the exact lineage of the many Creole characters, including the less-royal native Americans and French prostitutes. Chesnutt departs from this seemingly clear-cut ancestry of the Creoles significantly where racial confusion reigns in his novel. Like Cable, however, Chesnutt is not only parodying the discourse on race but skewering Creole “good blood” and all their aristocratic pretensions. Publishers failed to respond to Chesnutt’s preface in which he wrote that “[t]he student of sociology [...] may discover some interesting parallel between the social conditions in that earlier generation and those in our own” (Chesnutt 1998: xxxvii-xxxviii). Instead of sociology, the hero is overtly and ostensibly too honorable as if he were a creation of romanticism: he renounces his inheritance, turning all of the property to the secret quadroon who had behaved most gentlemanly and remains faithful to his wife and children. Doing so required that he move his family to France where his marriage would still be regarded as legally binding and valid. His chance to marry a young white woman and enjoy prominence and great wealth obtained through slavery was dishonorable. Chesnutt’s hero leaves the United States a bitter man, for as Matthew Wilson concludes, “in finding out that he is biologically white [...] he has become what he hates” (Wilson 2004: 195). Paul Marchand keeps his old name and likewise keeps the secret of Philippe’s African ancestry. As he wrote in his 1889 essay “What is a White Man?” (a signifying reversal of the question usually asked by white Southerners – what is a Negro?),

Chesnutt shows in this novel that race is vastly overvalued in American society and ultimately an absurd and painful social construct.

6.0 Albion Tourgée: The Unionist in North Carolina

Arguably the greatest advocate for Civil Rights among whites in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction periods, Albion Winegar Tourgée (1838-1905) influenced Charles Chesnutt significantly. Both authors were born in Ohio, wrote fiction and nonfictional essays about the desperate situation of Blacks in the South during and after Reconstruction, and both ended their respective careers with a sense that their reception was either ignored or misunderstood.

6.1 Introduction

Albion Tourgée wrote two best-selling novels – *A Fool's Errand* (1879) and *Bricks Without Straw* (1880), both of which were written shortly after he had left North Carolina after residing there for fourteen years. A Civil War veteran and then an attorney who practiced law in New York, Ohio and North Carolina,¹⁸⁵ he authored 18 novels in addition to his extensive political activism and legal work. After being nearly assassinated by the Ku Klux Klan while serving as a judge on the North Carolina Supreme Court (Evans 1974: 146), he is today better known by legal historians for his crucial work on a landmark United States Supreme Court case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* in which he argued against the legalization of racial segregation. He lost the case as most liberal Americans at that point in the post-Civil War period pursued reconciliation with the South and, following the ideals of Booker T. Washington, accommodated Southern segregationists, much to Tourgée's vexation. In the same year (1896), Tourgée wrote the first anti-lynching law (for the state of Ohio). Obviously, Civil Rights greatly interested Charles Chesnutt, though initially he was

¹⁸⁵ Tourgée earned his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Rochester in New York State. He had been accepted to Harvard but could not afford the cost of tuition.

attracted to Tourgée's literary achievements.¹⁸⁶ Very little attention has been dedicated to their literary relationship at all.¹⁸⁷

6.2 Tourgée's Career in Fiction-Writing

Tourgée's first published novel, *Toinette, a Tale of the South* (1874), written while Tourgée served on the North Carolina Supreme Court, deals with a white Southern lawyer, George Hunter, who cannot acknowledge his love for the heroine, his beautiful "octoroon" slave who bears their child. Hunter fights for the Confederacy and is nearly fatally injured early in the war but is nursed back to health by Toinette. When he attempts to renew their intimacy, she demands that he marry her first. He refuses and angrily denounces the idea, claiming her as his own property. She eventually escapes and as a runaway slave, passes for white and establishes herself in Oberlin, Ohio, a renowned station on the Underground Railroad and a longtime center for abolitionist political activism. This sentimental novel was only moderately successful, and did not have an especially striking plot.

Tourgée's second novel was his autobiographical view of Reconstruction and its popular success bestowed on him celebrity status and a significant income. Published anonymously in November 1879 after he had moved to Colorado to work as a reporter on the *Denver Evening Times*, within six weeks *A Fool's Errand* became a national best-seller and the novel for which he is best remembered today.¹⁸⁸ Readers curious to learn the identity of the author undoubtedly aided in the

¹⁸⁶ Later Chesnut was asked to serve officially with Tourgée's "National Citizen's Rights Council," the first interracial organization for Civil Rights in the United States. Chesnut rejected the offer because it was run on an inadequate budget that hardly compensated for the heavy work-load involved.

¹⁸⁷ Brief information is offered in Keller's biography of Chesnut, though it is oriented more toward social history rather than literature. See pp. 119-121. In addition, an article by Bill Hardwig (2002) presents what I regard to be a rather weak link with Tourgée in the short story "The Web of Circumstances."

¹⁸⁸ Sales of *A Fool's Errand* numbered approximately 200,000 copies in Tourgée's lifetime (Gross 1963: 69).

successful sales. This novel was followed up by his second best-seller only one year later. *Bricks Without Straw* told the story of Reconstruction from the point of view of two former slaves, concluding with a plea for greater Federal involvement in the South. None of his later works received either the acclaim or commercial success because, as Mark Elliott puts it, “Tourgéé’s penchant for didacticism increasingly hurt his critical reputation as the rage for unsentimental realism in fiction took hold” (Elliott 2008: 11).

In addition to his work in law and literary achievements, Tourgéé shared with Chesnutt his commitment to the education of African Americans and women. He helped found what eventually became a traditionally African American women’s school of higher education, Bennett College in Greenboro, North Carolina, and just before he left the state permanently, he successfully argued before the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1879 to allow a white woman, Tabitha Holton, to be admitted to the bar and work as a licensed lawyer. Tourgéé’s efforts through litigation resulted in North Carolina becoming the first Southern state to admit women to the legal profession.

6.3 Chesnutt’s Reception of Tourgéé

Tourgéé was influential to many African Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote of the influence of Tourgéé’s fiction on him and also regarded his information on Reconstruction to be valuable for historians (Olsen 1965: 23). The first reference by Chesnutt about Tourgéé appears very early when Chesnutt was not only highly impressed with the \$20,000 compensation for *A Fool’s Errand* but wished at a certain point to model his career after Tourgéé’s, who was one of the leading novelists of that time (Simmons 2006: 174). In his journal entry (dated March 16th 1880),

Chesnutt directly argued that he knew the South and the black people better than two Northerners who wrote such well-received novels about the South: Beecher Stowe's immensely successful *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) and Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879):

Judge Tourgée has sold the "Fool's Errand," I understand, for \$20.000. I suppose he had already received a large royalty on the sale of the first few editions. The work has gained an astonishing degree of popularity, and is to be translated into the French. Now, Judge Tourgee's book is about the South, - the manners, customs modes of thought, etc., which are prevalent in this section of the country. Judge Tourgee is a Northern man... [n]early all his stories are more or less about colored people, and this very feature is one source of their popularity. There is something romantic, to the Northern mind, about the southern negro. (Chesnutt 1993c: 124-5)

At this time Chesnutt was a twenty-one year old North Carolina colored grade school teacher and restlessly dissatisfied with his life in the South as well as his work as a teacher. He subsequently considers in his journal why he might not be better prepared to write a lucrative novel:

[I]f Judge Tourgee, with his necessarily limited intercourse with colored people, with his limited stay in the South, can write such interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of Southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man, who had lived among colored people all his life; who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices; their whole moral and social condition; their public and private ambitions [...] why could not such a man, if he possessed the same ability, write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgee or Mrs. Stowe has written? Answer who can! But the man is yet to make his appearance [...] (Chesnutt 1993c: 125)

As Eric Sundquist has written Chesnutt had a "fixation on the success of Tourgée's novel" (Sundquist 1993: 361). Although the financial rewards Tourgée reaped interested him, the message of justice for the recently emancipated race appealed to Chesnutt as well. Chesnutt notes that Tourgée's writing about the status of African

Americans, following Beecher Stowe's protest novel against slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published nearly three decades earlier in 1851, could still gain a substantial audience during Reconstruction.

Eight years after writing this journal entry, correspondence between the two writers began. Tourgée particularly warned Chesnutt in a letter (dated 8 December 1888) that he should not emulate the realism of William Dean Howells but encouraged him to instead carry on with his own variety of realism (as depicted in "The Goophered Grapevine") which is "true to nature" by staying away from "the fettering ideas" and "narrow rules" resulting in the "falsest and sorriest" fiction (Chesnutt 1997b: 45n).

The lively correspondence between Chesnutt and Tourgée, unlike the beginning of the epistolary exchanges with Cable, was initially linked more closely with his short fiction. In his articles, Tourgée repeatedly published positive reviews of Chesnutt's conjure tales, including the lesser-known "A Deep Sleeper."¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, Tourgée did not reveal Chesnutt's race in these positive reviews. Tourgée also advised Chesnutt in matters of politics and even offered him a position similar to the one Cable had offered Chesnutt, though Tourgée's plans were for a Civil Rights organization.¹⁹⁰

6.4 Revising Tourgée's 'Carpetbagger' in Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream*

In the final novel that Charles Chesnutt saw published in his lifetime, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905), there are continual revisions of *A Fool's Errand* (1879). There is a quarter of a century gap between the publication of these two novels;

¹⁸⁹ See Tourgée's "The South as a Field for Fiction" (1888).

¹⁹⁰ In the autumn of 1893 Tourgée offered Chesnutt the job of associate editor of his Civil Rights publication, the *National Citizen* which Chesnutt quickly turned down for financial reasons. In a letter dated November 21, 1893, Chesnutt turns down the position and the investment opportunity. Tourgée gave up the effort one year later.

indeed, Chesnutt's novel was published the same year as Tourgée's death. On the surface, both novels have a post-Civil War North Carolina setting, and both plots revolve around a reform-minded military hero who impetuously attempts to revive the Southern economy and generally bring about egalitarian political and social changes thereby rendering the respective communities harmonious with the democratic principles of the U.S. constitution. Both heroes are maligned and threatened publicly by white Southerners. Whereas Tourgée's narrator is a detached quipster, Chesnutt shows little of the humor in *The Colonel's Dream* that he exhibits in his shorter fiction. While Tourgée's omniscient narrator repeatedly calls the hero a fool and his benevolent actions naïve, in Chesnutt's revision, Colonel Henry French scrupulously plans business enterprises which should benefit both blacks and whites but he receives (initially polite) criticism expressed by his skeptical friends in the town of Clarendon, including the woman he woos. Both heroes are conscientious but ignore warnings and precipitously carry on with their futile attempts at reforming the South.

Precious little has been written by critics of the intertextual relationship between these novels. William Andrews refers to the fact that Tourgée's bestselling "carpetbagger" novel inspired Chesnutt while composing *The Colonel's Dream* (Andrews 1980: 254). Other scholars such as Duncan (1998) and Simmons (2006) simply repeat the idea that "Chesnutt seems to echo [...] Tourgée" (Duncan 1998: 4) without further explication.

In order to make *The Colonel's Dream* avoid the controversial issue Tourgée incorporated into his novel with a Northern hero emigrating South after the Civil War (a Union Army veteran named Colonel Comfort Servosse), Chesnutt revises Tourgée's "carpetbagger" by making his novel's hero a benign former Confederate officer who before the end of the Civil War had owned slaves and fought loyally for

the South. However, Chesnutt's Colonel Henry French¹⁹¹ returns to his Southern home after living some two and a half decades away up North where he made a successful business career in New York and Connecticut. His absence is the cause of the alleged "estrangement" from traditional Southern ways, according to his fellow Southern whites, while Chesnutt's omniscient narrator asserts that Colonel French steadfastly maintained his "aristocratic" gentlemanly attitude (which was not devoid of latent racism). He therefore acts benevolently toward blacks, in fact as graciously as he had while an antebellum slave master. Another revision of Tourgée in Chesnutt's novel is the respect blacks pay toward this former slave owner. No slave humbly pays respect to any former master in Tourgée's Reconstruction novel.

As Colonel French is a recent widower, Chesnutt incorporated an element of romance central to the plot which is absent for Tourgée's hero.¹⁹² In addition, there is a difference of some 15 years in the plot of the two novels: Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* runs from the Civil War experience of a Michigan lawyer through his move (with his wife and young daughter) down to North Carolina in 1865, a career in farming and then as a judge, followed by his departure from the South after 14 years, reflecting Tourgée's own career in the South ending in 1879. In contrast, Chesnutt's novel begins and ends in the late 1890s.

In both novels, the heroes are tricked into paying higher prices for the property they wish to buy. Tourgée's Comfort Servosse overpays for an estate he purchases from the same man he arrested and imprisoned at the end of the war. This trickster, a mild-mannered Southern racist who feigns compassion for the "weaker race," acts foolishly and stupid in front of Colonel Servosse in the process of cunningly pulling a

¹⁹¹ The name "French" is another perceptible clue that Chesnutt has modeled his hero after Albion Tourgée whose unusual name and ancestry were French.

¹⁹² However, Tourgée's novel includes a subplot near the end of *A Fool's Errand* where Servosse's daughter marries a Southerner just before Servosse dies.

fast sale of a run-down plantation named “Warrington.” In Tourgée’s novel, the transaction is questionable legally, without proper papers. In contrast, Chesnut’s admirable and prosperous African American character William Nichols in *The Colonel’s Dream* is based on Chesnut’s father-in-law, a prosperous Fayetteville barber. Nichols bought the old house Colonel French used to live in twenty-five years before French returned home to Clarendon. Nichols makes a huge profit when he sells it to Colonel French for \$4000. In both cases, Southern sellers take advantage of Northern capital and buyers ignorant of true market prices.

Outside the issues of voting rights and party politics, in both novels most white Southerners are utterly impervious to the necessary reforms that will improve the economy. In Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand*, much greater political ambition is demonstrated in the carpetbagger; Southern whites vociferously argue and fight at political meetings against Servosse’s reform opinions, especially when it comes to the rights of blacks to gain citizenship rights, not to mention the sweeping economic changes planned in Reconstruction by Republicans. In Chesnut’s novel, one Southerner understands the importance of economic reform in the South: General Thornton tries to convince Colonel French to run for Congress as a Democrat. He had earlier been so disgusted with the economic “idiocies” of his party that he considered voting for Republicans except for the fact that it was the party of the blacks:

“There was a clean-cut issue between sound money and financial repudiation, and I was tired of the domination of populists and demagogues [of the Democratic party]. All my better instincts led me toward a change of attitude [...] When I went to the polls, old Sam Brown, the trifflingest nigger in town [...] was next to me in line. ‘Well, Gin’l,’ he said, ‘I’m glad you is got on de right side at las’, an’ is gwine to vote *our* ticket.’” (Chesnut 2005: 169).

The general admits that he could not see himself allied with members of the race he formerly owned as slaves: “the race question assumes an importance which overshadows the tariff and the currency and everything else” (Chesnutt 2005: 169). With his political sentiment resolutely altered back to the Democrats, General Thornton finally reflects: “We had to preserve our institutions, if our finances went to smash” and thus Thornton sanctions prejudice as a natural aspect of human nature (Chesnutt 2005: 170).

Chesnutt metonymizes a single antagonist, Bill Fetters, the opprobrium of Clarendon, who is surrounded by obsequious whites, in stark contrast to Tourgée’s “carpetbagger” who maintains fawning followers (mostly blacks, but some white Southern “scalawags.”¹⁹³ Yet the intrepid Colonel Servosse is surrounded by many more white, independent, and strong-willed racist opponents than Colonel French ever encounters. French himself is never physically threatened by Fetters¹⁹⁴ but just verbally maligned, often in “Clay Jackson’s saloon” in town while Servosse twice narrowly escapes deadly ambushes in a forest.

In both novels the anger of whites in their respective communities is raised when the heroes support educating freedmen. Servosse and his wife even socialize with black teachers (as well as Northern white teachers who have dedicated themselves to educating black children). French spends much time defending the blacks’ rights to raise themselves up through education and hard work, but his arguments fall on deaf ears.

Central to *A Fool’s Errand* is the behavior of violent white mobs active in the Ku Klux Klan. Murdering both black and white political activists, the KKK puts significance to the manner of murder: a white activist who assists blacks in their fight

¹⁹³ “Scalawags” are Southern Unionists or Republicans

¹⁹⁴ Fetter’s name is a metonym for the town’s capitalistic structure of domination which cannot freely arise or develop. It may likewise serve as a Southern small town version of the Gilded Age.

to gain the right to vote is killed inside a courthouse. A black is lynched just outside the same courthouse. In contrast, there are no political meetings attended by Colonel French nor any elections or court cases pending in the plot of *The Colonel's Dream*.

In the classic book of African American literary theory, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates refers to the African American “tropological revision [...which] recurs with surprising frequency” (Gates 1988: xxv). Among these tropes is the vertical “ascent” up from the South to the North (again slave narratives following the North Star as well as the post WWI migration of millions of African Americans to the North).

In *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt's tropological revision of the slave narrative tradition as well as Tourgée's “carpetbagger” does indeed consist in the vertical ascent up from the South to the North. Chesnutt's revision is unusual, as the main protagonist, a white Southerner who used to “own” slaves, migrates North to escape the Southern poverty of prospects twice. First, after the war which his army lost, Henry French goes north to New York to seek and reestablish his former fortune. His ascent is material, spiritual as well as intellectual. When he returns south, the original purpose of his “descent” was to “come back to his old home for a brief visit, to rest and to observe” (Chesnutt 2005: 78) in Clarendon, North Carolina after his wife's death. His interest in his Southern roots is intensified because of a conversation with his boyhood playmate and slave, Peter French, which his family used to “own.” Now a broken down old man, the innocuous ex-slave is the same age as the returning Colonel French. He is hired as a servant after being arrested for breaking a vagrancy law.

Eventually Colonel French resettles with his son in Clarendon and tries to develop its resources and its people, who have declined substantially since the war. Chesnut's fantastic tropological revision really does not concern Colonel French, his white protagonist, but instead consists in the humble African American former slave, Peter French, who "ascends vertically." His ascent is not for a better life, but for a peaceful death. After he dies in a train accident while attempting to save the life of young Phil French (the Colonel's son), the Colonel arranges for his servant to be buried in the family plot, next to his own son. Because that family plot is located in a cemetery reserved exclusively for white people, Clarendon racists exhume the body of the former slave and place it near the Colonel's house to uphold the racial code of segregation in the South. Thoroughly disgusted, the Colonel decides to rebury both his former slave and his son together in the North. Hence, Peter French's corpse ascends vertically in Chesnut's revision.

Both Tourgée and Chesnut demonstrate not only the polite and thoughtful heroes as educated professionals in their respective fields of endeavor, but also show the Southern "Regulators" (the precursors to the highly organized Ku Klux Klan) to be poorly educated. Colonel Servosse receives a threatening letter cited below:

Colonel Comfort Servosse. Sir, - You hev got to leeve this country, and the quicker you do it the better; fer you ain't safe here, nor enny other miserable Yankee! You come here to put niggers over white folks, sayin ez how they should vote and set on juries and sware away white folks rites as much as they damm please. You are backin up this notion by a sellin of em land and hosses and mules, till they are gittin so big in ther boots they cant rest [...] (Tourgée 1966: 98).

Likewise, near the conclusion of *The Colonel's Dream*, the former Confederate officer and hero of the novel receives a letter demonstrating how the author of the epistle,

ostensibly the leader of the mob engaged in a ghoulish deed of exhuming the remains of his deceased black servant, is barely literate:

Kurnell French:

Take notis. Berry yore ole nigger someware else. He can't stay in Oak Semitury. The majority of the white people of this town, who didnt tend yore nigger funarl, woant have him there. Niggers by there selves, white peepul by there selves, and them that lives in our town must bide by our rules. (Chesnutt 2005: 294)

Significantly for the plot, Tourgée's narrator presciently frames Comfort Servosse's failure in reform from the start. Chesnutt however describes Colonel French's many difficulties with a constant illusion for the reader of hope that he may indeed succeed, if not in his reform efforts, then at least within the romantic subplot (which nevertheless not only accompanies but is tightly linked with reform, since she and her enlightened Southern friends offer the Colonel strong, socially persuasive alliances at difficult moments). All the more fervid is Colonel Henry French's failure, which concludes not only with his failure at reform and in wooing a beautiful new wife, but also in the emotion-wrought death of his son and the black servant to whom he was quite close.

Chesnutt makes significant revisions of Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* by replacing his Yankee "carpetbagger" hero¹⁹⁵ with a reform-minded Southern-born ex-Confederate officer returning home. In revising the hero in this manner, Chesnutt demonstrates that place of origin or background matters less than one's views on the role of blacks in post-Civil War southern society.

¹⁹⁵ Charles Chesnutt likely replaced the Northern reformer from his otherwise kindly and reform-minded hero in his novel because Northerners moving South ("carpetbaggers") were no longer regarded by American population at large as anything but greedy and corrupt men with their own commercial interest at heart, especially after successful polemical attacks against corruption during the era of Reconstruction made such persons no longer "heroic."

6.5 Religion in Southern Ideology during Reconstruction

After the Civil War, the effort to deflect attention from the immoral behavior of holding human beings as slaves began in earnest. Since religion played a significant role in the social and spiritual lives of white Southerners, it stands to reason that the ideology of post-Civil War Reconstruction necessitated a church which was redolent with the implications of the just lost cause. The role of the Southern church became more overt than even in the antebellum period where efforts to defend slavery by means of theology were rampant. Yet as Charles Reagan Wilson shows, throughout the former Confederate States in Protestant Churches, stained glass windows were put up depicting military generals such as Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, or the President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis. They were not only set within particular scenes from the Old Testament, but placed next to Jesus, Joseph and Mary (Wilson 1980: 224). The ideology of “redemption” through post-Civil War violence via the Ku Klux Klan gained much of its authority in Christian symbols and was exemplified in Christian rituals (as well as Scottish traditions aforementioned in chapter three).

In his chapter called “Balak and Balaam,” Tourgée shows how Southerners cover over the crime of slavery as a moral mark of shame by intensifying bitter feelings against both Northerners generally and the newly emancipated African Americans. Tourgée writes that Southerners believed themselves to have acted “in a great measure fair, upon the principle that all in war is fair” (Tourgée 1966: 175). Tourgée’s hero is nicknamed by Southerners a “carpetbagger” (a term of hatred for Northerners living in the South) for having warned Southerners not to resist emancipation and the enfranchising laws for blacks. Like the abolitionists before the Civil War, Tourgée argued that the harsh treatment of newly freed blacks was against

the basic principles of Christianity which among other tenets advocated feeding the poor, healing the sick and clothing the naked. In naming his chapter “Balak and Balaam,” Tourgée’s chapter clearly replicates the Old Testament book called Numbers, chapters 22-24 in which Balaam, a prophet, travels to Moab and blesses the Israelites (instead of cursing them once God sent an angel to stop him from cursing them). Balaam’s blessing is unpopular with Balak until he informs them of the Prophecy and the words of God. Tourgée sees his novel’s hero Colonel Servosse in a similar role to that of Balaam’s. Shortly thereafter white religious missionaries preaching the Gospel with an understanding that God was against slavery were attacked by the klan, tied to trees and subsequently whipped (Tourgée 1966: 203).

Before the Ku Klux Klan murders a “radical” (and native-born Southerner), he is “expelled from his church on account of his political opinions” although he is described as having “maintained a good Christian character” (Tourgée 1966: 209). Tourgée shows how Christianity was an effective tool in pursuing political ends. Calling the Ku Klux Klan “this band of Christian thugs” (Tourgée 1966: 247), Tourgée depicts a barely fictionalized young man with a guilty conscience who had prepared for the ministry while whipping blacks and murdering white Republicans¹⁹⁶ (Tourgée 1966: 312). His hero, Colonel Servosse,

could not understand how men of the highest Christian character, of the most exalted probity, and of the keenest sense of honor, could be the perpetrators, encouragers, or executors of such acts. He thought that the churches ought to be hung in black, that the pulpit should resound with warning [...] (Tourgée 1966: 316).

¹⁹⁶ This man who studied for the ministry while serving as a member of the North Carolina chapter of the Ku Klux Klan is based on a historical figure Tourgée had actually sentenced to prison in 1870s while working as a judge in North Carolina. Likewise, the lynchings of “Uncle Jerry” and “John Walters” are based on the actual murders of prominent Republicans just outside the courthouse Tourgée served as a judge. See the “Introduction” by Frederickson in the Torchbook edition of *A Fool’s Errand*.

Charles Chesnutt revises *The Fool's Errand* by writing a more intellectually-grounded theological explanation to the Southern church and its rejection of the role free blacks have in society. At a meeting among select gentlemen of Clarendon, Colonel French is confronted with a racist social Darwinist. Colonel French regards his stance on race as unusual given his profession. Dr. Mackenzie, a Presbyterian Church minister, chides the colonel for wasting money on various plans connected with the improvement of the former slaves: "The Negroes are hopelessly degraded. They have degenerated rapidly since the war" (Chesnutt 2005: 167). After Colonel French cites some exceptions, Mackenzie replies to the contrary. Rather than pursuing "racial uplift," the minister expostulates that the South must encourage the divine and "natural extermination" of the black race:

It is God's will. We need not stain our hands with innocent blood. If we but sit passive, and leave their fate to time, they will die away in discouragement and despair. Already disease is sapping their vitals. Like other weak races, they will vanish from the pathway of the strong, and there is no place for them to flee (Chesnutt 2005: 167-8).

Linking Darwinism to a racial Divine Providence of the extermination of the black race,¹⁹⁷ the authority of this highly educated minister (holding a doctorate of divinity degree) explains the reverse of Christian brotherly love customarily shown toward the down-trodden. The Presbyterian minister concludes: "It is the law of life, which God has given to the earth [...] It is His will that the fittest should survive, and that those shall inherit the earth who are best prepared to utilize its forces and gather its fruits" (Chesnutt 2005: 168). In Chesnutt's novel, Southern mobs act violently while the

¹⁹⁷ This race extermination theory was a commonly held belief among intellectuals since the 1830s and was cited in one of Thackeray's letters in chapter 4.

educated elite do the theologizing and justifying of their racist behavior.¹⁹⁸ While Tourgée generally shows the educated classes to have more sympathy towards reconstruction and reform, Chesnutt redresses them in *The Colonel's Dream*: a highly educated white Southerner preacher forms his racist convictions based on “scientific” justifications.

6.6 Revising Tourgée’s “White Negro” in *The Quarry*

Hot Plowshares (1883), Tourgée’s fifth novel which received neither critical interest nor popular acclaim, has as its plot a woman who attends a private school for girls among very wealthy classmates in a small town in New York State. Hilda Hargrove then becomes despondent when she finds out that she is not pure Caucasian. Her teachers and fellow pupils react in a variety of ways to the information that she is “tainted” by Negro blood.¹⁹⁹ Tourgée then assesses the various ways that racist thinking finds expression among the “better” or supposedly more enlightened people of the Northern United States. After the initial response of horror, Hilda resolutely bears the burden of her mixed ancestry. Later, concealed documents are found proving Hilda to be wholly Caucasian after all, justifying her marriage to Martin Kortright, the longed-for lover of substantial wealth.

Chesnutt was critical of Tourgée’s capricious character Hilda who was vexed with her (erroneous) understanding of her ancestry. In a letter to George Washington Cable dated June 13, 1890, Chesnutt gripes about the representations of black

¹⁹⁸ Likewise, in the novel *Mandy Oxendine* (completed in 1897 but published a century later), a preacher is brought to a lynching of a black teacher. The preacher leads the mob in prayer to “ask the divine blessin’ on the whole thing” (Chesnutt 1997a: 103).

¹⁹⁹ A similar plot appears in Tourgée’s lesser-known novel *Pactolus Prime* (1890) in which a near-white wealthy heiress, daughter of an octoroon, joins a convent because she cannot marry within her “race.” Chesnutt briefly refers to this novel in a speech he delivered in 1916 (Chesnutt 1999a: 433).

Americans in novels, and then directs some criticism toward Tourgée's *Hot Plowshares*:

Judge Tourgée's cultivated white negroes are always bewailing their fate, and cursing the drop of blood that "taints" – I hate the word, it implies corruption – their otherwise pure blood (Chesnutt 197b: 66).

While Chesnutt has a number of "white negroes" populating his stories and novels, none of them behave as Hilda Hargrove does in this sentimental novel. Only in one story, "A Matter of Principle" does Chesnutt include a nearly white African American, a young woman named Alice Clayton, express anything close to those melancholic sentiments – and they are stated once in the words of the omniscient narrator: "She was nearly white; she frankly confessed her sorrow that she was not entirely so" (Chesnutt 2000: 152). In the end of this Blue Vein story, Chesnutt's character proves to be her own worst antagonist because of her disdain for dark blacks (as discussed above in Chapter 4).

Chesnutt alters the gender and the predicament in the North for his "white negro" protagonist in *The Quarry* (1999). The last protagonist penned by Chesnutt, Donald Seaton Glover, is raised as a black after his adoptive white parents, the Seatons of Cleveland Ohio, reject him because he may possess the physical appearance of a "negro" infant. He is then raised by a black family in the South whose means are limited but whose love and determination to get Donald Glover to help "uplift" the black race is insurmountable. Ambitious and brilliant, Glover obtains a PhD degree from Columbia where he engaged in "[...] discussions cover[ing] the whole field of race and race relations [...]" with fictionalized intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Franz Boas who "[...] helped to fix Donald's determination to devote his life to the advancement of his people" (Chesnutt 1999: 182).

Chesnutt's Donald Glover is in part a revision of the romantic subplot in Tourgee's *Hot Plowshares* which he had written grumblingly to Cable about in the letter cited earlier. When Donald learns as an adult that both his biological parents were in fact white, he decides to keep it to himself. Without informing her of his ancestry, he marries Bertha Lawrence, the black daughter of an important Chicago church leader he had fallen in love with during his undergraduate days at Atlanta University.²⁰⁰ He continues to have a feeling of "racial pride" in the racial construct he was raised in, namely the African American construct, since this community remained loyal to him unlike the white community.

In contrast to his feelings for the black community, his first adoptive [white] family demonstrates insensitivity to the orphan when he was a very young boy. Thirty years later, however, his white family (that originally adopted him but subsequently gave him away) become annoyed with themselves when they learn of Donald's background as a descendent of an esteemed family consisting of "a governor, a famous general in the [American] Revolution, college presidents, ministers, senators, authors [...]" on the father's side and from "a noble but impoverished Sicilian family" (Chesnutt 1999b: 259) on his maternal side. Only then does Angus Seaton, a Scottish-American wish to "re-adopt" the protagonist, Donald Glover, as well as secure him financially. When he comes to inform him of his ancestry, Angus Seaton is described as welcoming Donald Glover "warmly, more warmly, Donald thought, than their previous acquaintance could account for" (Chesnutt 1999b: 273). Now that he is white, Seaton becomes much friendlier.

²⁰⁰ A white scientist and explorer famous among cultured circles in New York named Clarence King (1842-1901) passed as a light-skinned African American naming himself "James Todd" in order to marry a dark black woman. Leading a double life, he passed as black when he lived among them and as white when associating with luminaries as the President of the United States or William Dean Howells. After many years of keeping his secret, he revealed his race to his wife at his death bed. See *Passing Strange* by Martha Sandweiss (2009) for a comprehensive study of his deception.

Like Paul Marchand in the novel completed approximately six years earlier, Donald Glover rejects the inheritance he is due after it is established that he is a white man of noble birth. He loyally remains a member of a black community, though unlike Paul Marchand he remains an American resident. In essence, he knowingly and consciously passes as a black man and keeps the secret of his completely white ancestry hidden from his family. While Paul Marchand feels his inheritance is repulsive to him since it was gained through slave labor, Donald Glover simply embraces the community he has always felt comfortable with.

7.0 Conclusion

As a young married man of 24, Chesnutt wrote indignantly of the racism he experienced in Fayetteville in his journal on March 7, 1882:

I hear of colored men speak of their “white friends.” I have no white friends. I could not degrade the sacred name of “Friendship” by associating it with any man who feels himself too good to sit at table with me, or to sleep at the same hotel [...] (Chesnutt 1993c: 172)

He recorded in his *Journal* of personal experiences of racism, for instance, being removed to a second-class railroad car once the train passed the Mason-Dixon Line and travelled further southwards, and of a local white man named McLaughlin he knew telling an acquaintance that Chesnutt, despite his learning and other accomplishments, was just “a nigger, and nothing in the world can make him anything else but a nigger!” (Chesnutt 1993c: 161). Chesnutt wrote stylish condemnation through his fiction of white racism against blacks like himself or against darker blacks. As William M. Ramsey cogently puts it, Chesnutt’s social criticism “launch[es] a broad, creditable, and incisive assault on American prejudice in any form” (Ramsey 2001: 37). His early biographer, Frances Keller, maintained that

[h]is agenda required attacking color discrimination where it stood when he encountered it – in the hearts and minds of ordinary people. In youth he had conceived a project to realign the underpinnings of a caste society; he never changed this project” (Keller 1978: 141).

His *Journal* indicates direct knowledge of the limitations that African Americans had to overcome in the South in order to achieve ambitious goals. Given his personal experiences as a young man of white complexion and African American heritage, through sophisticated forms of mimesis of the many literary masterpieces he read,

both contemporary and classical, Chesnutt audaciously sought to articulate the African American experience as he saw it, with a particular didactic aim of “uplifting” white readers. His journal, clearly indicating an ambition to make out of himself a man of letters, also critiques works which, though usually divorced from the racial obstacles he faced, were recognized as great works of art. Among the many works he read and recorded his impressions of in the *Journal*, Chesnutt did not read African American fiction, but only histories or nonfiction by minor African American church leaders and one book of memoirs by William Wells Brown. Clearly the greatest source of inspiration came from Europeans. Regardless, in his analysis of signifying, Gates also cites a considerable impact of white texts on black slave narratives: “[...] as early in the Anglo-African tradition as 1787, black texts were already “mulatto” texts, with complex double, or two-toned, literary heritages” (Gates 1988: 152).

As Henry Louis Gates shows in *The Signifying Monkey*, Chesnutt worked with virtually no African American author preceding his own publications and regarded himself as the first black author of serious fiction.²⁰¹ As he grew older (and no longer saw his later novels accepted or published), Chesnutt clearly became aware of his contemporary black fiction writers. Yet, as to those novels and short stories published in his lifetime, none show influence of the minor African American fiction writers who preceded him. In his speech accepting an award from the NAACP for his contribution to literature, Chesnutt indicates that he sought out fame as a writer *per se* rather than fame as an African American writer, even though most of his literary efforts concerned the fate of black Americans. Moreover, as he states in his speech on July 3, 1928,

²⁰¹ In secondary literature I have noted exceptions to include only repeated tropes appearing in slave narratives generally and one convincing study about the last sentence of Chesnutt's final novel *The Quarry* redressing the final sentence of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* (1912).

I tried to write of them not primarily as a Negro writing about Negroes, but as a human being writing about other human beings, and whenever I let my feelings get the better of me and become dogmatic and argumentative in a book, I found that its artistic quality suffered, and its success accordingly. (Chesnutt 1999: 514)

It is with this sense that I understood the relevance of Chesnutt looking at successful writers as his models, frequently projecting or revising the characters, plots or motifs of writers such as Ovid, Apuleius, Scott, Thackeray, Cable and Tourgée into an African American setting, or redressing African American characters depicted by these authors. As William Andrews avers, Chesnutt was “the first African-American writer of fiction to enlist the white-controlled publishing industry in the service of his social message” (Andrews 1992: vii). Hence, this study of Chesnutt focused on those writers who Chesnutt veritably read and in a motivated or unmotivated manner signified upon their fiction as it suited his artistic and often didactic purposes. I have analyzed those authors' works from which he borrowed, revised and redressed, or even parodied and lampooned in the manner described in sections of *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates.

After the critical and theoretical introductory chapter, the second chapter was devoted to revealing how Latin authors impacted Chesnutt and the means by which he deployed his knowledge of the Latin language and some of the Roman literary classics. Chesnutt employed unmotivated signifying in the borrowings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* characters Cupid, Peneus, Python, Daphne, Dryope, Narcissus, Pan, Tereus, Procne and Philomela in his conjure stories “Po' Sandy”, “Sis' Becky's Pickaninny”, “Lonesome Ben” and “The Conjuror's Revenge.” Chesnutt's unmotivated signifying on the mortuary meditation in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in “Lonesome Ben” is also explored. It was indicated that in Chesnutt's redressing of plantation

literature's trope of the slave's nostalgia for home in "Lonesome Ben," the escaping slave can neither go home nor go away. Moreover, it was shown how in the story "A Deep Sleeper" Chesnutt skillfully deployed Latin, firstly, as standard Latin is transmuted into African American vernacular Signifyin(g) through the use of Latin cardinal numerals. Like Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*, Chesnutt also employed a beast of burden symbolizing the slave to provide an insight of power as well as strategies of resistance. Chesnutt redressed the ass as a mule to both reflect the American setting and to exploit the mule-mulatto motif in his conjure story "The Conjuror's Revenge," and two novels, *The House behinds the Cedars* (1900) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). It was concluded that with the conjure tales written in African American vernacular, Chesnutt exhibits what appear, because of the dialect usage, to be folklore-inspired stories but which in point of fact demonstrate greater influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. A thorough examination and comparison of African American folklore showed no similarities in plot or character with Chesnutt's conjure stories, but only a loose structural similarity with the Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris.

Chapter three was concerned with how Charles Chesnutt's fiction elaborated on Walter Scott's influence on the Southern culture by parodying the received cultural identification white Southerners assumed about Scotland generally, and about the plots and romantic notions of Walter Scott's fiction specifically. The multitude of black and white Scottish characters in Chesnutt's short fiction and novels were examined. The explicit and implicit allusions to (as well as motivated signifying in the form of literary puns about) Scott's most popular romance among Southern whites, *Ivanhoe* (1819) was examined in Chesnutt's first published novel, *The House behind the Cedars* (1900). The research into Scott included Scott's and Chesnutt's dialogic

nature of communication (the “carnavalesque” as Bakhtin puts it) in the tournament setting of the parodied *Ivanhoe* and Chesnut's *The House behind the Cedars*. Chesnut likewise signifies on the trope of literacy as a means of ascent in traditional slave narratives in both *The House behind the Cedars* as well as his story “The Passing of Grandison.” Moreover, free indirect discourse was interpreted as a mode of signifying in two of Chesnut's novels as they pertain to passing. Two light-skinned male protagonists in two early novels are compelled to make unambiguous their racial identity (or in the other case, pass as white) within their respective communities, a means by which Chesnut's John Walden redressed both Scott's character *Ivanhoe* and the Chesnut character Tom Lowrey (in his unpublished novel *Mandy Oxendine*, written in 1897).

After preliminary discussion of issues concerning William Makepeace Thackeray's polemic arguments about race and slavery was addressed, chapter 4 was dedicated to the manner by which Chesnut employed Thackerayan satire in his northern “Blue Vein” society stories “A Matter of Principle” and “The Wife of His Youth” as well as his final novel *The Quarry* (completed in 1928, published in 1999) whereby Chesnut revised and redressed sections of Thackeray's unwieldy plot and a number of characters in *Vanity Fair*, Chesnut's favorite novel. In assessing Thackeray, Chesnut made a distinction between the popular and the august, viewing Thackeray's satire in the latter category. Moreover, Chesnut's motivated signifying of Thackeray is revealed through the puns and slippage in language between signifier and signified, a particular African American rhetorical play of language, linked not only with a relation to racial identity but as an indirect means of representing suppressed anxieties and desires (as Gates shows in his examination of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in *The Signifying Monkey*). In both of his “Blue Vein”

stories, Chesnutt's white-men-in-the-making suffer defeat amusingly in attempting to lose their blackness.

Chesnutt's mentor in essay and fiction writing, Louisiana-born author George Washington Cable, was shown in chapter 5 to direct Chesnutt toward more overt didactic writing modes. Chesnutt's second-to-last novel, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* (completed in 1922, first published in 1998), echoes and revises much of the setting, plot and racial issues in Cable's novel *The Grandissimes* and his stories "Salomé Müller, the White Slave" and "Belles Demoiselles Plantation." In addition to a white orphan raised as a colored man, Chesnutt was shown to have revised Cable's family dueling, code of honor, marriage and Creole characterizations. Chesnutt's language play with the French word "coupé" in the great Creole family tradition of the Beaufort family revises Cable's black slave character "Bras Coupé" in a form of motivated signifying. Lastly, Chesnutt's sustained strategy of pastiche of Cable's novel attests to his break with the trope of feuding families so common in Southern literature of this period.

Albion W. Tourgée, the author of two novels which substantially impacted Chesnutt's third published novel *The Colonel's Dream*, is the issue taken up in the sixth chapter. In *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt redresses *The Fool's Errand* by Tourgée in the manner in which a white man heroically seeks to reform a southern town to a progressive future. Chesnutt redresses Tourgée's hero Comfort Servosse (in both works a man of French descent) by inversion: the northern "Carpetbagger" reformer is redressed into a Southern-born veteran of the Confederate Army named Henry French. Echoing the substance of Tourgée's mob characters' religious racism as part and parcel with the Ku Klux Klan, Chesnutt poignantly amends and extends it even further to encompass the well educated whites who theologically endorse

“natural” extermination of blacks through natural selection inspired by social Darwinism. Chesnutt metonymizes his novel's antagonist named “Fetters.” Chesnutt further reverses Tourgée's novel's romantic happy ending with utter tragedy: Henry French's loyal black servant dies a heroic death but remains a victim of racism after his remains are exhumed by local racists. French has the favorite servant and his son reinterred in the North, an example of Chesnutt's tropological revision of the vertical “ascent” up from the South to the North, a common trope of slave narratives described by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*. As Ishmael Reed, a novelist as well as critic, states in his introduction to a recent edition of *A Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt

challenged the prevailing attitudes of his time, writing in a period when Americans were undergoing a reconciliation after one of the bloodiest wars in world history, and when some influential opinion makers were remembering with affection the plantation [...] (Reed 2005: viii-ix)

Chesnutt impugned these attitudes expressed in plantation fiction to the detriment of his popular success in his final four novels, and he admitted in his aforementioned speech that directly attacking racism and social injustice also negatively impacted his artistry.

While Chesnutt is recognized by Henry Louis Gates as an important, early contributor to the African American literary tradition, rarely does he cite Chesnutt as an antecedent of writers he has undertaken to analyze such as Hurston, Reed or Walker, each of whom he dedicated a chapter to in his seminal study *The Signifying Monkey*. In those three chapters by Henry Louis Gates plus his “talking book” section (chapter 4), Charles W. Chesnutt does not figure as a source for signifying or revision, even though Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker, for example, have both

published on Chesnutt's fiction.²⁰² Indeed, in distinguishing Hurston's narrative use of African American vernacular with that of Jean Toomer's in *Cane*, Gates defines “a speakerly text” as “primarily to be oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral tradition to be found in classical Afro-American vernacular literature” (Gates 1988: 181) but excludes Chesnutt in even this discussion. Instead, Frederick Douglass, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, James W. Johnson and Jean Toomer are extensively cited in for example, Gates's Hurston chapter. While I have not addressed Chesnutt's influence on African American writers in this dissertation, I wish to remark here that substantial work employing the theory of Gates is sorely needed in this respect. I consider his theory as heuristic in many more ways than have been applied in this dissertation.

²⁰² Additionally, contemporary influential African American authors such as John A. Williams and John Edgar Wideman have written on Charles Chesnutt.

8.0 Czech Summary

Jako čtyřadvacetiletý ženatý muž píše Chesnutt ve svém deníku 7. března 1882 s odporem o rasismu, který zakoušel ve Fayetteville:

Občas slýchávám, jak se barevní muži baví o svých „bílých přátelích”. Já žádné bílé přátele nemám. Nemohu poskvřnit slovo „přátelství” tím, že ho spojím s někým, kdo se pokládá za příliš dobrého na to, aby se mnou zasedl u stejného stolu nebo se spal ve stejném hotelu jako já [...] (Chesnutt 1993c: 172)

Ve svém *Deníku* píše o osobních zkušenostech s rasismem, například jak musel přestoupit do vagónu druhé třídy, když vlak přešel Mason-Dixonovu linii a pokračoval dále na jih, anebo o místním bělochovi jménem McLaughlin, který prý jednomu svému známému vyprávěl, že Chesnutt navzdory svému vzdělání a dalším úspěchům zůstane „jen negr a nic na světě z něj neudělá nic jiného než negra!” (Chesnutt 1993c: 161). Chesnutt napsal ve své próze stylový odsudek rasismu bílých vůči černochem, jako byl on sám, nebo ještě více černým. Jak výstižně podotýká William M. Ramsey, Chesnuttova sociální kritika „spustila širokou, důvěryhodnou a břitkou kritiku amerických předsudků v jakékoli formě” (Ramsey 2001: 37). Jeden z jeho prvních životopisců Frances Keller tvrdí, že

ve své práci se musel zaměřovat na boj proti diskriminaci tam, kde byla nejvíce usazená – v srdcích a myslích obyčejných lidí. Již jako mladý muž si vytyčil projekt, jehož cílem bylo změnit nastavení kastovní společnosti; tento svůj projekt nikdy nezměnil (Keller 1978: 141)

Z jeho *Deníku* je patrné, že si byl vědom překážek, s nimiž se Afroameričané musejí potýkat na jihu, kdykoli chtějí dosáhnout nějakého ambicióznějšího cíle. Vzhledem k těmto osobním zážitkům, které zakusil jako mladý muž bílé pleti a afroamerického původu, se Chesnutt prostřednictvím miméze literárních skvostů, které četl – jak současných, tak klasických – pokoušel vyjádřit afroamerickou zkušenost tak, jak ji

viděl, přičemž měl didaktický záměr „pozdvihnout“ své bílé čtenáře. Jeho deník jasně ukazuje ambici stát se literátem a zároveň kritizuje ta díla, která – ačkoli neměla nic společného s rasovými překážkami, jimž byl nucen čelit – byla považována za velká umělecká díla. Mezi díly, která četl a z jejichž četby si zaznamenává dojmy ve svém *Deníku*, není afroamerická beletrie, ale pouze historie nebo literatura faktu z pera nevýznamných církevních představitelů a jeden text paměti Williama Wellse Browna.

Jak píše Henry Louis Gates ve své knize *The Signifying Monkey*, Chesnutt nespolupracoval před započítím své literární dráhy s prakticky žádným afroamerickým autorem a sám sebe považoval za prvního černého autora seriózní beletrie.²⁰³ Jak stárnul (a jeho pozdější romány nebyly přijímány nakladateli ani vydávány), si Chesnutt zcela jistě byl vědom toho, že vedle něho existují další černí autoři beletrie. Přesto – pokud jde o romány a povídky publikované za jeho života – žádný z jeho textů nevykazuje vliv méně významných autorů beletrie, kteří publikovali před ním. Ve svém proslovu při přebírání ceny od NAACP za svůj přínos literatuře Chesnutt říká, že se snažil prosadit jako spisovatel, nikoli jako afroamerický spisovatel, i když ve většině svých literárních děl se věnoval osudu černých Američanů. Navíc, jak říká ve své řeči z 3. července 1928:

Snažil jsem se o nich psát ne jako černochoch, který píše o jiných černoších, ale jako člověk schopný psát o jiných lidech a kdykoli jsem se příliš nechal unést svými pocity, stal se dogmatikem, příliš argumentoval, zjistil jsem, že umělecká kvalita trpí a odráží se to i na úspěchu. (Chesnutt 1999a: 514)

Právě v tomto smyslu jsem chápal význam Chesnuttova ohlížení se za úspěšnými autory jako svými vzory, kdy často projektoval postavy, zápletky nebo motivy

²⁰³ V sekundární literatuře jsem si povšiml výjimek ze zahrnování pouze opakovaných tropů obecně se objevujících ve vyprávění otroků a jednu přesvědčivou studii Chesnuttova posledního románu *The Quarry*, v níž se vrací k poslední větě románu *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* Jamese Weldona Johnsona.

spisovatelů, jako byli Ovidius, Apuleius, Scott, Thackeray, Cable a Tourgée do afroamerického prostředí. Jak říká William Andrews, Chesnutt byl „prvním afroamerickým autorem krásné literatury, který pronikl do tradičně bílého nakladatelského průmyslu ve službě svého sociálního sdělení“ (Andrews 1992, vii). Proto se tato studie zaměřovala hlavně na ty autory, o nichž víme, že je Chesnutt skutečně četl a že motivovaným nebo nemotivovaným způsobem odkazoval k jejich dílům podle toho, jak to vyhovovalo jeho uměleckým a často didaktickým účelům. V některých případech si vypůjčoval, revidoval, ba dokonce parodoval tyto autory ve stylu, jenž popisuje Henry Louis Gates.

Po kritické a teoretické úvodní kapitole jsem se ve druhé kapitole věnoval tomu, jak Chesnutt ovlivnili latinští autoři a jak své znalosti latiny a římských klasiků uplatnil ve svém díle. Chesnutt použil motivovanou signifikaci ve výpůjčkách z Ovidiových *Proměn*, ve svých jeho povídkách „Po' Sandy“, „Sis' Becky's Pickaninny“, „Lonesome Ben“ a „The Conjuror's Revenge“. Navíc bylo ukázáno, jak v povídce „A Deep Sleeper“ Chesnutt umně použil latinu, nejprve jako standardní latinu transmutovanou do mluvy Afroameričanů prostřednictvím římských číslovek. Podobně jako Apuleius ve *Zlatém oslu* i Chesnutt používá dobytče symbolizující otroka, aby čtenářům nabídl pohled na moc a možné strategie odporu. Chesnutt namísto osla používá mulu – ta v jeho případě lépe odráží americké prostředí a umožňuje mu pracovat s motive muly-mulata v jeho povídce „The Conjuror's Revenge“ a dvou románech *The House behinds the Cedars* (1900) a *The Colonel's Dream* (1905).

Ve třetí kapitole ukazuji, jakým způsobem Charles Chesnutt rozpracoval Scottův vliv na jižanskou kulturu parodií přijatých kulturních identifikací, které vycházely z předsudků jižanů o Skotsku obecně, a o dějích a romantických pojmech

Scottových knih. Zaměřil jsem se na černé a bílé postavy v Chesnuttových povídkách a románech. Ve svém prvním publikovaném románu *The House behind the Cedars* (1900), jehož součástí je bachtinovské pojednání o rozdílu mezi Scottem a Chesnuttem, zkoumá Chesnutt explicitní a implicitní aluze (stejně jako motivované označování v podobě literárních vtípků) ke knize *Ivanhoe* (1819). V románu *The House behind the Cedars* stejně jako v povídce „The Passing of Grandison” se Chesnutt dotýká tropu gramotnosti jakožto způsobu vzestupu v tradičních vyprávěních otroků. Navíc volný nepřímý diskurs byl interpretován jako signifikující způsob ve dvou Chesnuttových románech: dva protagonisté světlé barvy v raných románech jsou vyzváni, aby jasně stvrdili svou rasovou identitu (jinými slovy, aby řekli, že jsou běloši) - stejným způsobem Chesnuttův John Walden pojímá Scottovy postavy *Ivanhoea* a Tom Lowrey (v nepublikovaném románu *Mandy Oxendine*, napsaném v roce 1897).

Po předběžné diskusi o otázkách týkajících se Thackerayho polemik o rase a otroctví jsem se ve 4. kapitole věnoval způsobu vyprávění, kde Chesnutt použil Thackeraho satiru ve svých povídkách ze společnosti: „A Matter of Principle” a „The Wife of His Youth”, stejně jako ve svém posledním románu *The Quarry* (dokončeném v roce 1928, publikovaném v roce 1999), v němž Chesnutt revidoval a přepracoval několik sekcí zápletky a postav z Thackerayova *Jarmarku marnosti*, což byl jeho oblíbený román. Vedle toho je motivované označování Thackerayho vidět na hříčkách a jazykových posunech mezi označujícím a označovaným, specifické afroamerické rétorické hře s jazykem, spojené nejen s rasovou identitou, ale též pojímané jako nepřímý prostředek pro vyjádření úzkosti a tužeb (jak ukazuje Gates ve své interpretaci *Their Eyes Were Watching God* v knize *The Signifying Monkey*).

V kapitole 5 jsem se věnoval Georgi Washingtonu Cableovi, mentorovi Chesnutta v oblasti psaní esejů a beletrie. Pokusil jsem se ukázat, jakým způsobem vedl Chesnutta k výrazněji didaktickým způsobům psaní. Chesnuttův předposlední román *Paul Marchand F.M.C.* (dokončený 1922, poprvé vydaný 1998) je ozvěnou a zároveň revizí velké části původního ladění, zápletky i rasových otázek v Cableho románu *The Grandissimes* a jeho povídce „Salomé Müller, the White Slave”. Vedle toho, že Chesnutt byl jakožto běloch vychován jako černocho, nabídla práce nový pohled na tradici soubojů v Cableově rodině, na kodex cti, manželství a kreolské charakterizace. Chesnutt si pohrává s francouzským slovem „coupé” ve velké kreolské rodinné tradici Beaurepassových a reviduje postavu černého otroka „Bras Coupé” ve formě motivované signifikace. Je třeba též zmínit, že Chesnuttova strategie pastiše Cableova románu se snažila narušit jižanský tropos zneprátelených rodin, který byl tak častý v jižanské literatuře daného období.

Albion W. Tourgée, autor románů, které výrazně ovlivnily Chesnuttův třetí vydaný román *The Colonel's Dream*, je hlavní postavou diskutovanou v šesté kapitole. V románu *The Colonel's Dream* se Chesnutt kriticky vyjadřuje k *The Fool's Errand* od Tourgéeho, a to tak, že čtenáři předkládá postavu bělocha, který se hrdinsky snaží změnit jižanské město a nasměrovat ho k pokrokové budoucnosti. Chesnutt nově pojímá Tourgéésova hrdinu Comforta Servose (v obou dílech jde o muže francouzského původu) transformací „Carpetbaggera” do jižanského veterána jménem Henry French. V reakci na náboženský rasismus Tourgéeevých postav Chesnutt svou kritiku rozšiřuje i na teologicky posvěcený darwinismus. Chesnutt pak nahrazuje romantický šťastný konec Tourgéeho naprostou tragédií: věrný sluha zhyne hrdinskou smrtí, nicméně zůstává obětí rasismu poté, co jsou jeho ostatky exhumovány. French si nechá svého oblíbeného sluhu a jeho syna pohřbít znovu na

severu, což slouží jako příklad Chesnuttovy tropologické revize vertikálního vzestupu z jihu na sever, což je běžný tropos otrockých vyprávění, o nichž píše Gates v knize *The Signifying Monkey*. Ishmael Reed, spisovatel a kritik, píše v úvodu k nedávno publikovanému vydání *A Colonel's Dream*:

Chesnutt zpochybnil převládající postoje té doby, psal v čase, kdy se Američané snažili vyrovnat s důsledky jedné z nejkrvavějších válek v historii a kdy někteří s láskou vzpomínali na plantáže (Reed 2005:viii-ix)

Chesnutt tyto postoje zpochybnil na úkor svého úspěchu u posledních čtyř románů, a ve výše zmiňované řeči rovněž podotkl, že to mělo vliv na jeho umělecký vývoj.

Henry Louis Gates pokládá Chesnutta za významnou osobnost rané fáze afroamerické literární tradice, ovšem jen zřídka ho cituje jakožto předchůdce autorů, které se sám rozhodl analyzovat, jako byli Hurston, Reed nebo Walker, každému z nichž věnuje kapitolu ve své zásadní studii *The Signifying Monkey*, V těchto třech kapitolách a v části „upovídání knihy“ (kapitola 4) nevystupuje Charles W. Chesnutt jako osobnost, jež by měla být podrobena revizi, byť Ishmael Reed a Alice Walkerová o něm psali. Namísto něho jsou citováni Frederick Douglass, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W.E.B. Du Bois, James W. Johnson a Jean Toomer. Přestože se tato práce nesoustřeďuje na vliv Chesnutta na současné americké spisovatele, chtěl bych podotknout, že je třeba pokračovat v práci, kterou započal Gates. Jeho teorii pokládám za přínosnou v mnoha různých ohledech, než jaké byly aplikovány v této disertaci.

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10. Author's Vita:

Christopher Erwin Koy was born on January 16, 1963 in Chicago Illinois (USA). He graduated from Palatine High School in Palatine, Illinois in 1981. He studied at Beloit College in Wisconsin, graduating in 1981 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. After three years of teaching English (in Zell-am-See, Baden bei Wien, Austria and Stuttgart, West Germany), he resumed his studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, obtaining a Master of Arts degree in 1990. He subsequently taught at Illinois Wesleyan University, Westmar College and Southeast Missouri State University before moving to the Czech Republic in 1994. From 1994 to 2006 Koy taught English at ZČU in Plzeň. Since 2006 he has taught in the English Department of the Pedagogical Faculty at JČU in České Budějovice. He married Daniela Soldánová in 1991 and has three children, Adriana (1994), Kristina (1996) and Daniel (1999).