THE WEST AFRICAN TRICKSTER TRADITION AND
THE FICTION OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Arvis R. Coleman, B.A., M.A
Denton, Texas
August, 1995
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Analyzing Chesnutt's fiction from the angle of the West African trickster tradition explains the varying interpretations of his texts and his authorial intentions. The discussion also illustrates the influence that audience and editorial concerns may have had on African-American authors at the turn of the century.

The trickster figures' divinatory and interpretative prowess, provocativeness, signifying acumen, ambivalence, and liminality provide a basis from which to interpret Chesnutt's short stories and novels. Specifically, Uncle Julius, Viney of "The Dumb Witness," and Liza Jane of "The Wife of His Youth" are diviners who hold the keys to the past, present, and future.

In addition, Chesnutt himself is a trickster, the consummate signifier. For example, in "A Matter of Principle" and "The Wife of His Youth," he ridicules the pretension of the black bourgeoisie and mocks himself as a member of this group. Furthermore, Chesnutt signifies upon his own texts through various revisions of similar themes and plots. He also signifies upon his audience through Clara of "Her Virginia Mammy," Tom of "The Sheriff's
Children," and Rena Walden of *The House Behind the Cedars*. These mixed-blood characters defy societal norms as products of miscegenation.

Finally, Chesnutt's works typically display many narrative devices which mask his authorial intentions. Thus, the inflamed criticism evoked by *The Marrow of Tradition* may have resulted from his easily detected authorial voice in certain chapters of the book. In effect, Chesnutt--the trickster--removes his mask.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A Nineteenth Century Native Son

One of the most fertile areas for scholarship for the student of African-American literature is the period between 1845-1905, which produced many notable African-American authors. For example, James Monroe Whitfield published his collection of poems entitled America and Other Poems in 1853; in 1854 Frances Ellen Watkins Harper published Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects; and Albery Allison Whitman published his first book of verse, Essays on the Ten Plagues and Miscellaneous Poems, in 1871. Of course, the most famous African-American poet of the nineteenth century was Paul Laurence Dunbar. After the publication of his collection, Majors and Minors (1895), Dunbar became a recognized literary personality, receiving accolades from notable literary figures such as William Dean Howells.

In addition, numerous African-Americans made worthy contributions as writers of fiction during this period. William Wells Brown published Clotel, the first "negro novel," in 1853 (Jackson 326); four years later, Frank J. Webb published The Garies and Their Friends. Another early novel is Martin R. Delaney’s Blake, or The Huts of America.
This novel was first published in serial form in the Anglo-
African Magazine from January to July of 1859. The
nineteenth century also provided a backdrop for the
emergence of the African-American female novelist. Harriet
Wilson's Our Nig appeared in 1859, and Harper published Lola
Leroy in 1892. In 1900, Pauline Hopkins published her
signature piece Contending Forces. Nevertheless, the writer
who may be hailed as the prose counterpart of Paul Laurence
Dunbar is Charles Waddell Chesnutt.

Charles Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, June 20,
1858. His parents were Andrew Jackson Chesnutt and Anne
Maria Sampson, both free blacks of mixed blood living in
Fayetteville, North Carolina. The couple met on a wagon
train headed for Cleveland, in 1857. Andrew's mother, Ann
Chesnutt, was the mistress and housekeeper of Waddell Cade,
a white farmer and tobacco inspector. Andrew was one of
five free mulatto children born to Cade and Ann. Like
Andrew, Anne Maria was also a member of a free mulatto
family. Both Andrew and Anne Maria left North Carolina to
escape the restrictions placed on "free Negroes." After
marrying, Chesnutt's parents lived in Cleveland. The family
later moved to Oberlin. Anne dreamed that her children
would have the opportunity to attend the local college.
Eventually, Anne, Andrew, and their three children moved
back to Cleveland (Keller 26-30).
In 1866, Andrew and his family returned to Fayetteville, North Carolina. With the help of his ailing father, Andrew became proprietor of a grocery store. Young Charles attended the Howard School, a public grade school for African-Americans. While a pupil, Charles began an association with Robert Harris, the leader of the school. This relationship would later be profitable for Charles.

Andrew proved to be an unsuccessful businessman. He eventually relocated his family to a nearby farm, and Anne gave birth to three more children. Sadly, she never regained her strength and died in 1871. Andrew later married eighteen-year-old Mary Ochiltree, a cousin who had been sent to North Carolina by Anne’s mother to care for his children. When Charles turned fourteen, his father decided that he [Charles] must work to augment the family income. Robert Harris secured a teaching position for Charles at a school in Charlotte, where Robert’s brother, Cicero Harris, was the principal. Hence, Charles began his profession as a teacher.

In this same year, 1874, Charles Chesnutt began his first journal, in which he chronicled his travels in his attempts to seek summer employment in rural schools in neighboring areas. In 1877, Chesnutt became Cicero Harris’ assistant in the newly established Normal School in Fayetteville, which purposed to train teachers for black
Schools. During this time, he met Susan Perry, and they married in 1878. Eventually, Chesnutt became the principal of the Normal School.

During his tenure as principal, Chesnutt taught himself stenography. In 1883, he resigned his position and successfully sought employment in New York as a stenographer. In addition, he also served as a reporter for the New York Mail and Express. Susan and the children remained in North Carolina.

In 1884, Chesnutt returned to Cleveland, his birthplace and early childhood home. Susan and their three children moved to Cleveland in the same year, and Chesnutt obtained a position as a bookkeeper for the Nickel Plate Railroad Company. He later became a stenographer in the legal division of the company—a move that prompted him to study law. In 1887, he passed the Ohio bar exam and worked as a court reporter while establishing his law practice. In the meantime, Chesnutt founded a profitable stenography business. Despite Chesnutt's achievements in his many non-literary endeavors, he never abandoned his dream of becoming a successful writer.

The Emergence of a Writer

Helen Chesnutt notes that her father published his first story at the age of fourteen in a Fayetteville weekly newspaper. 4 However, in his journal entry of August 14,
1874, Chesnutt identified his short sketch "Lost in a Swamp" as his first literary effort. He wrote, "The above [referring to the sketch] is my first real attempt at literature. The reader will please pardon all faults and errors and I will try and do better next time. (If any one reads it besides myself)" (Journal 47). Hence, at the age of sixteen Chesnutt anticipated an audience for his sketches, stories, and poems.

Chesnutt's desire to be an author intensified as he grew older. In his March 16, 1880, journal entry, Chesnutt remarked upon the publication of Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand*, which sold for $20,000. He postulated that an African-American writer familiar with Southern mores could conceivably write a more accurate portraiture of Negro life:

. . . why could not a colored man, who has 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; their religious tendencies and habits . . . 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? (125)
Certainly, Chesnutt believed that he might be such a man. Indeed, in his March 29, 1880 entry, he proclaimed his desire to write a book:

I think I must write a book. I am almost afraid to undertake a book so early and with so little experience in composition. But it has been my cherished dream, and I feel an influence that I cannot resist calling me to the task. Besides, I do not know but I am as well prepared as some other successful writers. A fair knowledge of the classics, a speaking acquaintance with the modern languages, an intimate friendship with literature, etc.: seven years experience in the school room, two years of married life, and a habit of studying character have I think, left me not entirely unprepared to write even a book.

(139)

Chesnutt did not publish this book until twenty years later. Nevertheless, between 1885 and 1899, he did publish many short stories, which collectively composed two volumes.

Chesnutt’s first contribution to a major periodical was "Uncle Peter’s House," published in the December 1885 edition of the Cleveland News and Herald. "Uncle Peter’s House" is a sentimental piece describing the efforts of a former slave to build a house, faced with three serious
obstacles: reluctance of Southern whites to sell land to former slaves, dangers of Klu Klux Klan activity, poor health resulting from a fall. Peter dies before he completes his house, but the story ends with his son finishing the construction. After this publication, Chesnutt became a regular contributor to the Cleveland News and Herald as well as to such magazines as Family Fiction, Puck, Tid-Bits, and The Southern Workman. While most of his stories center around the trials and triumphs of blacks during Reconstruction, others deal exclusively with white characters.

In 1887, he published his first story in the Atlantic Monthly. "The Goophered Grapevine" was the first work of fiction written by an African-American to be accepted for print in the esteemed magazine. "The Goophered Grapevine" is a frame story in which a former slave, Uncle Julius, spins an outrageous tale about a "conjured" grape vineyard for his white employer, John, and John’s wife, Annie. At the end of the tale, John speculates that Julius’ story masks his [Julius’] ulterior motive, for Julius has been profiting from the abandoned vineyard. Later Chesnutt published three additional "conjure stories" in the Atlantic Monthly—"Po Sandy" (1888), "Dave’s Neckliss" (1889), and "Hot-Foot Hannibal" (1899).
Critics see Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus tales and Thomas Nelson Page's *In Ole Virginia* as literary precursors of Chesnutt’s conjure stories. Richard Brodhead expounds upon this literary link:

... southern regionalism spawned a specialized subgenre, a form with the more or less overt function of excusing the North’s withdrawal from the plight of the freed southern slave. This subgenre, prefigured in Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus: His Sons and His Sayings* (1880) and perfected in Thomas Nelson Page’s *In Ole Virginia* (1887), deployed a black rustic figure, an ex-slave but still-faithful retainer, to testify to his love of the old days and his lack of desire for equal social rights. ... This literary-historical development set the precondition for Chesnutt’s conjure stories in the most direct possible way. (5)

Brodhead does acknowledge that Chesnutt’s stories deviate from these models. He says, "Nevertheless, Chesnutt makes his adopted form carry other messages than it had in other hands—messages always obliquely conveyed behind an elaborate show of conformity" (6). Further scholarly comments upon the subversive nature of Chesnutt’s conjure
stories will be discussed in the appropriate segments of this study.

Much of Chesnutt’s literary fame rests upon the publication of his two short story collections—*The Conjure Woman* (1899) and *The Wife of His Youth* (1899). *The Conjure Woman* is a collection of seven conjure stories. *The Wife of His Youth* focuses for the most part on the domestic intrigues of mixed-blood characters. Interestingly, Chesnutt’s ethnicity was relatively unknown by his audience until after the publication of these two books.²

After the successful publication of these two short story collections, Chesnutt published three novels, closing his stenographic office in 1899 to devote more time to his literary career. The first novel, entitled *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), chronicles the tragedy of a young woman’s attempt to "pass" for white. The second, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), is a fictionalized account of an actual race riot which took place in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898. The novel turns upon several subplots—a murder mystery, a family saga involving miscegenation, and a revenge motif. After the relatively disappointing sales for *Marrow*, Chesnutt reopened his stenography business. However, he continued to write. In his last novel, *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905), Chesnutt attempted to regain his white audience by narrating the action of the story from the
point of view of a liberal white Southerner who wishes to make a place for himself and his young son in the "New" South. The Colonel's Dream was a critical and commercial failure. With the onset of the Harlem Renaissance, Chesnutt submitted two novels for publication—The Quarry and Paul Marchand F.M.C.. However, they remained unpublished.

Although Chesnutt was unable to revive his literary career, he nevertheless continued to lobby for the rights of African-Americans. He also became involved in international affairs—often voicing his concerns about U.S. relations in Haiti, South America, and Cuba. In 1928, the NAACP awarded him its most prestigious honor, the Springarn Award. Chesnutt died November 15, 1932.

Reevaluations of Chesnutt's Fiction

Despite this rather impressive publication record, Chesnutt remained virtually ignored until the 1970's and 80's. There are several possible reasons for Chesnutt's obscurity. First, while both The Conjure Woman and House Behind the Cedars were reprinted during the 1920's, they were victimized by the advent of the "protest" genre, which developed during the 1930's and 40's and reached its zenith during the sixties Black Power movement. Chesnutt's use of dialect and his emphasis upon mixed-blood middle-class characters appeared to support the stereotypes of African-Americans depicted by whites. Additionally, important
critics such as Sterling Brown, Hugh Gloster, and Robert Bone praised the socio-historical importance of Chesnutt's fiction while offering little commentary concerning Chesnutt's literary techniques or devices. Last, many leading literary journals, encyclopedias, and historical references--published before the sixties--ignored Chesnutt's contributions to American literature or grossly misinterpreted the main ideas of his novels. For example, in his 1953 article entitled, "Social Realism in Charles W. Chesnutt," Russell Ames reveals that The Cambridge History of American Literature and Parrington's Main Currents in American Thought disregard Chesnutt completely (199). Also, The Oxford Companion to American Literature (1948) incorrectly summarized The Marrow of Tradition by proclaiming the work to be "about the struggles of Negro and white half sisters" (qtd. in Ames 200). Fortunately, beginning with the resurfacing of some of Chesnutt's works in the late sixties, numerous scholars have made notable attempts to reevaluate Chesnutt's fiction.

In 1968, The Marrow of Tradition and The Wife of His Youth were republished. Additionally, Sylvia Lyons Render edited a volume of Chesnutt's short fiction, released in 1974. The release of these reprints revived scholarly interest in the life and fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt, inspiring Frances Richardson Keller's biography, An American
Crusade: The Life of Charles W. Chesnutt (1978), and three book-length critical studies: J. Noel Heermance's Charles W. Chesnutt: America's First Great Black Novelist (1974), Sylvia Lyons Render's Charles W. Chesnutt (1980), and William L. Andrews' The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt (1980). In addition to the book-length studies, scholars published many fine articles affirming Chesnutt as a major author in the African-American literary canon as well establishing his place in the American literary tradition as a whole. For example, John Wideman argues in his article, "Charles W. Chesnutt: The Marrow of Tradition," that critics have mistakenly identified Dr. Miller, the mulatto doctor of the novel, as the spokesperson for Chesnutt's authorial voice. He comments upon the various narrative stances utilized by Chesnutt, stances that create an open and more complex text focusing upon the "dehumanizing, destructive consequences of racial prejudice" (128). Wideman also postulates that the negative responses to the novel stem from biases based on racial prejudices.

William Andrews also speculates upon the cause for the harsh criticism of Marrow. In his article, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington," Andrews posits a theory to explain Howells' denigration of the novel. He says:
And yet it seems clear that *The Marrow of Tradition* posed a most serious challenge in Howells’s eyes to the whole idea fostered by the example of Booker T. Washington that blacks were a forgiving, patient, even submissive race. Chesnutt’s apparent demand for "justice" rather than "mercy" constituted a further challenge to the theory of race relations and racial progress which Howells had praised a year earlier in his review of Washington as "exemplary citizen." (337)

Critics also reappraised Chesnutt’s short stories. For instance, in "Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Wife of His Youth*: The Unveiling of the Black Storyteller" Lorne Fienberg asserts that the short story collection exemplifies Chesnutt’s maturation as a storyteller. He proclaims, "... Chesnutt’s experiments with the short story form mark his own process of creating a positive identity for himself as a black author at the turn of the twentieth century" (219). Additionally, Eugene Terry in "Charles W. Chesnutt: A Victim of the Color Line" remarks upon the subversive nature of Chesnutt’s story "The Bouquet" to illustrate the need for an overall evaluation of Chesnutt’s fiction:

I have analyzed this story, "The Bouquet," in some detail to make this point---that Chesnutt’s works should all be re-evaluated. We must look beyond
the critics in this re-evaluation, for from the beginning they have guided us not to the man’s work—its art and its meaning—but to the color of his skin. And they have not forgiven him for its pigmentation. We must read these works with a new sensibility: one that is not only intellectually but emotionally firm in the knowledge of the full humanity of black people; one that is informed by our knowledge of ourselves—our thoughts, our feelings, our strengths, and weaknesses, your customs, beliefs, and rituals, and further by our definitions. (43)

Nonetheless, the majority of the recent scholarship has focused upon The Conjure Woman.

Several scholars have reflected upon the complexity of the short story collection as well as the other stories utilizing Uncle Julius as a narrator that are not included in the collection. Robert Stepto, in his study "The simple but intensely human life of slavery: Storytelling and the Revision of History in Charles W. Chesnutt’s ‘Uncle Julius Stories’," proclaims that the Uncle Julius stories form a sequence in which one may chronicle John’s metamorphosis from an unreliable listener to a reliable one. And, Valerie Babb’s article, "Subversion and Repatriation in The Conjure Woman," suggests that Chesnutt’s use of dialect serves as a
tool of subversion. Finally, Richard Brodhead in his 1993 introduction to *The Conjure Woman* asserts that Uncle Julius's storytelling is an instrument of empowerment, further maintaining that Chesnutt uses his stories to "conjure" his audience.

Perhaps, William Andrews best summarizes Chesnutt's literary contribution:

Almost singlehandedly, Charles Chesnutt established a truly Afro-American literary tradition in the short story and the novel. He was the first to make the broad range of Afro-American experience his artistic bailiwick and to consider practically everything therein to be worthy of treatment. . . . Because he was concerned with finding literary modes appropriate to his materials, he left his successors examples of the uses of ironic distance in an Afro-American fiction of manners, a sense of the romance of black folk culture, a concept of tragedy for a people heretofore regarded as merely grotesque or pitiable, and a recognition of the genuinely comic potential for the black writer as manipulator an hoaxter, instead of sentimental entertainer of his white audience. (DLB 51)
Certainly, Chesnutt manipulates his audience in the manner of an authorial trickster. Indeed, many critics have speculated upon the trickster motif as it relates to both Chesnutt and his fiction, specifically *The Conjure Woman*.

The West African Trickster Tradition and Chesnutt’s Fiction

Richard E. Baldwin, David Britt, Arlene Elder, and Melvin Dixon are only a few of the scholars who have elaborated upon the trickster tradition as it relates to *The Conjure Woman*. Undoubtedly, Chesnutt understood the precarious situation of an African-American author writing for a predominantly white nineteenth century audience. He knew that if he wished to eradicate the "subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the negro" he would have to mask any racial ideology that his audience might find offensive (*Journal* 140). His journal entry of March 29, 1880, underscores this awareness when he details the purpose for his writing:

> This work is of a twofold character. The negro’s part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; 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 by [sic] while amusing them to familiarize [sic] lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling. (140)
Baldwin, Britt, Elder, and Dixon have commented upon Chesnutt's narrative techniques that "imperceptibly" and "unconsciously" lead his reader through his Uncle Julius stories.

In general, they maintain that Chesnutt is an authorial trickster who hides his true intentions—the denigration of the institution of slavery—behind a seemingly traditional literary technique where a white narrator's discourse frames the past reflections of a former slave. For example, Baldwin in "The Art of The Conjure Woman" says, "From the beginning Chesnutt has been the ultimate conjure man, hoping that by 'wukking de roots' of black culture he might be able to work a powerful goopher on white America and lead it to accept the equality of the black" (397). In "Chesnutt's Conjure Tales: What You See Is What You Get," Britt concurs:

... The Conjure Woman is primarily a study in duplicity that masks or reveals its meaning according to the predisposition of the reader. All the elements of fiction—structure, characterization, language, and theme—interlock in a subtle portrayal of a black writer 'wukin his roots' on an unperceiving audience. (271)

Finally, Melvin Dixon, in "The Teller as Folk Trickster in Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman," elaborates upon the trickster
technique and its relevance to Chesnutt’s authorial intentions and his characterization of Uncle Julius:

On the first level Julius is both trickster and teller of the plantation tales. Secondly, there is a trickster characterization in the author himself. Chesnutt as a black writer is writing about a white landowner’s re-telling of the stories told him and his wife by the former slave Julius. The novelist here enters the psyche of the white listener as he retells the folktales of Julius. Furthermore, Chesnutt himself is aware that he is writing for a predominately white audience who have a strong nostalgia for the antebellum southern tradition. What the contemporary reader discovers, then, is a complexity of trickery in the narrative focus of The Conjure Woman. (187)

From these articles, I conceived an angle from which to analyze Chesnutt’s fiction. In my study I will decode Chesnutt’s fiction from the vantage of the trickster. However, I have deviated from and expanded upon the aforementioned critical views as applicable to the trickster tradition.

To begin with, I do not focus upon the trickster’s penchant for duplicity as it may relate to Chesnutt or his
characters. While duplicity is certainly the primary weapon of the trickster, the trickster figure is more complex. Next, I trace the trickster perspective throughout the corpus of Chesnutt’s fiction—not just as it may apply to the Uncle Julius stories. Finally, for detailing the elements of my critical frame, I focus upon the trickster in the context of the West African folk tradition.  

Specifically, in identifying what I have designated as the paradigm of the West African trickster, I am relying upon the research of Robert Pelton. In his monograph, The Trickster in West Africa Pelton examines four trickster figures: Ananse of the Ashanti, Legba of the Fon, Eshu of the Yoruba, and Ogo Yurugu of the Dogon.

His analysis of Ananse and Legba provides the nexus from which I examine the trickster tradition. Ananse is a multifarious entity—a cunningly deceitful, vulgar, and self-assertive figure whose trickery often backfires. His humorous antics create chaos and disruption. With his ability to assume both human and animal shapes—a testament to his doublesidedness—he remains elusive.

Yet, underscoring this aspect of his trickster nature are serious cultural implications. For Ananse’s trickery helps to create the world. Pelton explains, "Ananse transforms disruption from a destructive into a creative force" (51). For example, Pelton notes how "in a fit of
pique he [Ananse] causes wisdom to spread, out of greed
disobeys a witch’s magic and fills the world with animals,
through ignorance introduces the hoe to men, or by lust
brings jealousy into society” (28). Hence, Ananse is a
marginal or liminal figure whose significance turns upon
contradiction. This contradictory state is both creative
and boundless. Pelton explains this boundlessness:

He [Ananse] is the image of the openness of the
passageway to transformation—an openness that
again and again brings into relationship center
and boundary, source and resource, and one sort of
potency with another, and thus enables human life
to be made and remade. (67)

Legba shares "Ananse’s randy, lawless, comic
sacredness" (72). He too is a provocateur or signifier. For example the Fon relates a story in which Legba
humiliates his mother, Mawu—causing her to retreat further
away from the earth.

Nevertheless, Legba’s trickery--like Ananse’s--has
cultural implications. Legba serves as the mediator between
heaven and earth. Also, like Ananse, Legba creates order
from disorder. Pelton says, "Legba is at once an agent of
disruption and an agent of reconciliation" (75).

Another way in which Legba serves society is as a
diviner. In Fon society, fa is the term designated for
their system of divination. Fa is also the name given to the god who governs the system. Fa reveals man’s bounded destiny. Legba is a diviner of possibility. He lives on the margins and can go in and out of society at will. Pelton reveals the difference between Fa and Legba: Fa keeps a certain dominion over destiny, or inner space, but Legba’s elasticity gives him mastery over destiny’s paths. Fa must remain stationary, while Legba can roam as he chooses, going in and out to bring men to their destiny, but never ceasing to widen the path for them. (119)

Pelton further clarifies that at moments of great crisis, humans seek divination "to plot the course along which they must move to overcome obstacles and live peacefully with their ancestors, their neighbors, and their own deepest selves" (116).

After reading Pelton’s analysis of Ananse and Legba, I noted three similarities between these figures. First, both Ananse and Legba are ambiguous, doublesided figures who remain in a consistently marginal or liminal state. Second, they are master provocateurs who create chaos and cause disruption by signifying in an indirect, circumlocutory manner upon an unsuspecting target.10 Ironically, this chaos often results in reconciliation, inspiring an open and indeterminate backdrop where new possibilities abound.
Third, these tricksters serve as mediators between the agents of heaven and earth. In the case of Legba, this mediatory function results in his being a vehicle for interpretation and divination.

The previously mentioned divinatory and interpretive prowess, provocativeness, signifying acumen, ambivalence, and liminality of the trickster figures constitute a trickster paradigm. This paradigm is useful in decoding Chesnutt's narrative voices, characterizations, and authorial intentions as I will show by further analysis of various characters, as well as the author himself.

Specifically, Uncle Julius, Viney of "The Dumb Witness," and Liza Jane of "The Wife of His Youth" are diviners who hold the keys to the past, present, and future. In the first of Chesnutt's conjure tales, "The Goophered Grapevine," John—the white Northern narrator—has reached a crossroads in his life. He has relocated to the South and must establish himself in a foreign culture. While John does not consciously seek validation from Uncle Julius, the former slave's narrative reveals John's possible destinies. By interpreting the landscape, Uncle Julius reveals the past—a past that should serve as a warning to John. However, the past also uncovers the avenues for future economic success for John. Notably, Julius is also a diviner and interpreter for the audience. His
self-promoting motive as underscored at the end of the story remarks upon the various tensions that characterized the South during Reconstruction. A similar analysis may be made by examining "Lonesome Ben."

In addition to Uncle Julius, Chesnutt employs other trickster narrators—namely, females. For instance, although Viney is not the narrator of "The Dumb Witness," her silence is an effective manipulative tool. She alone knows the location of the hidden treasure yet refuses to reveal the secret to Malcolm. Thus, she controls the passageway for Malcolm's future successes. Her silence foretells his ruin. She later bestows her revelation upon young Roger Murchison who prospers. Last, Liza Jane is a trickster who describes her past to Mr. Ryder, a past that he has eluded. Nonetheless, Liza's revelations directly influence Ryder's future.

Chesnutt himself is also a trickster. He is the consummate signifier. For example, in "A Matter of Principle" and "The Wife of His Youth," Chesnutt ridicules the pretensions of the black bourgeoisie and mocks himself as a member of this group. Nonetheless, his noncommittal, detached, mildly amused narrative voice does not overtly criticize the mores of the black middle class. In true trickster form, his censure is indirect, thus allowing for a somewhat indeterminate text.
Furthermore, Chesnutt signifies upon his own texts through various revisions of similar themes and plots. According to Henry Louis Gates this form of "Literary Signification" involves repetition and difference, particularly where "a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts" (Gates xxv; xxvii). For example, "A Web of Circumstance" may be analyzed as a revision of "Dave's Neckliss." Both stories describe the plight of an industrious black man's ruin due to a false criminal accusation. One could further speculate that Chesnutt may be highlighting the limitations of Booker T. Washington's accommodationist views. Next, one may interpret "A March of Progress" as a revision of "The Wife of His Youth." In both stories characters must make decisions that underscore the dilemma of the middle-class blacks during the Reconstruction era, whose loyalties from a plantation-life past conflict with their notions of racial progress. Again, Chesnutt's texts defy definitive interpretations.

Chesnutt also signifies upon his audience through Clara of "Her Virginia Mammy," Tom of "The Sheriff's Children," and Rena Walden of House Behind the Cedars. These mixed-blood characters defy societal norms as products of miscegenation. They redefine cultural mores. Tom chastises the white father who has ignored him. Both Clara and Rena
pass for white and fall in love with white men. Not surprisingly, Chesnutt's flirtations with miscegenation provoked numerous reactions from his nineteenth century white audience which was both repulsed by and preoccupied with the issue of miscegenation.

Finally, the inflamed criticisms of The Marrow of Tradition may have resulted from Chesnutt's easily detected authorial voice in certain chapters of the book. While he repeats several of his narrative personas—dialect speaker, detached observer, and the partially omniscient narrative intruder—in some key chapters, Chesnutt speaks in a direct, didactic tone and draws conclusions for the reader. These conclusions were not readily accepted by his turn-of-the-century audience. Although Chesnutt tries to reprise his narrative "trickery" in The Colonel's Dream, he does not succeed in engaging his audience.

Analyzing Chesnutt's fiction from the angle of the West African trickster figure explains the varying interpretations of his texts and his authorial intentions. Also, the approach reveals the need for further Chesnutt scholarship. His texts fit quite nicely into a postmodern schema. My discussion may also inspire more inquiries into the influence that audience and editorial concerns may have had on African-American authors at the turn of the century.
NOTES

1In his study, A History of Afro-American Literature, Vol.1 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989) 370, Blyden Jackson reveals that the novel was published in its entirety between November 26, 1861, and May, 1862, in the Weekly Anglo-African. He further notes that the last six chapters of the book have never been recovered.

2Frances Richardson Keller notes that in 1833 the North Carolina Assembly passed numerous measures to restrict free Negroes. For example, they could not vote, associate with slaves, freely move from state to state, serve on juries, nor own a gun or dog without a license. See Keller’s An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt (Provo: Brigham Young UP, 1978) 28-30.

3Richard Brodhead notes, "Charles Chesnutt kept a journal off and on between 1874 and his departure from the South in 1883. This journal, now in the Special Collections of the Fisk University Library in Nashville, Tennessee, consists of three volumes approximately seven by six inches in size, each with a firm cardboard cover adorned with marbled paper and a leather-covered spine." The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt. Ed. Richard Brodhead (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 37.

In his essay "Post-Bellum—Pre Harlem, Chesnutt discusses the reluctance on the part of his white publishers to reveal his racial background. *Crisis* 40 (1931): 194.

Chesnutt wrote *A Business Career* (1898), *Mandy Oxendine* (1897), *Evelyn's Husband* (1900), *The Rainbow Chasers* (1900), and a four-act play (1906). All of these manuscripts remained unpublished. See Frances Richardson Keller's *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt* (Provo: Brigham Young UP, 1978), 194.

Keller notes that Chesnutt possibly wrote another novel after submitting *The Quarry*. See *An American Crusade* p.194.

"This seems an appropriate choice in light of Henry Louis Gates' groundbreaking study *The Signifying Monkey* in which he traces a historical link between the West African trickster figure and the African-American literary tradition.

"My use of the term "signifier" rests upon the definitions delineated by Roger D. Abrahams in *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972):51-52. According to Abrahams, to signify can mean to "carp, cajole, needle, lie;" the "propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point;" and to make "fun of a person or situation."
Abrahams, in *The Golden Log* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1962): 125, asserts that signifying is the "language of trickery" employing "direction through indirection."

Henry Louis Gates' comments upon the theoretical connections between the African trickster tradition and postmodern theories concerning texts, language, and authorship, help to substantiate my claim.
CHAPTER II

CHESNUTT’S TRICKSTER NARRATORS

Uncle Julius McAdoo

In *The Trickster in West Africa*, Robert Pelton describes one role of the trickster as cultural interpreter and diviner. Specifically, Legba of the Fon exemplifies this function. Pelton maintains that Legba’s link to divination "discloses the inner shapes of individual and community, the ways out of social strife, the patterns of times to come, and the true form of the world itself" (114).

In true trickster form, Julius McAdoo of Charles Chesnutt’s "Julius tales" also functions as an interpreter and diviner for his Northern white employer John. Julius’ narratives serve to make John cognizant of the plantation past in Southern culture and the potential for economic success in the present. Julius’ tales also unmask the racial tensions and conflicts underlying the South during the Reconstruction period. Thus, Julius reveals the "true form of the world itself"—particularly the Southern world—for both John and the reader.

At the beginning of "The Goophered Grapevine," the reader witnesses John at a crossroads. He reveals, "Once,
at a crossroads, I was in doubt as to the turn to take, and we sat there waiting ten minutes—we had already caught some of the native infection of restfulness—for some human being to come along, who could direct us on our way" (33).

John is also at a spiritual crossroads. His wife's illness has prompted him to seek a climate more conducive to her health—a Southern climate. He now contemplates buying the McAdoo plantation to raise grapes. However, he is a foreigner to the Southern culture. Fortunately, a young girl directs him to the plantation, where he encounters Uncle Julius, whose close relationship with nature and familiarity with the landscape enables him [Julius] to advise John which "turn to take." R.V. Burnette substantiates this view:

Interpreting this landscape properly so as to find one's direction is no easy matter. Just as the girl points the way in the spatial world of crossroads, so it will be Julius who provides a sense of direction in a more difficult world where past and present exist in a complicated relationship. In this sense, John's destination is not the grape farm, but Julius himself, who embodies both past and the present. (446)

The former slave evokes images of Legba who is "at all life's crossings, not only at thresholds, crossroads, and
marketplaces, but at every moment of meeting and commerce" (Pelton 125). Further, Legba utilizes his memory of the "primordial language" of divination to guide people through these conflicts and crossroads. Similarly, Julius guides John through his [John's] spiritual crisis. Through Julius' divinations, John learns of the "primordial" plantation past—a past that holds a legacy of exploitation and inhumanity. John must understand this in order to avoid making the same mistakes as his Southern predecessors.

Julius' narratives evolve from his ability to interpret the landscape. This landscape of plantation relics becomes a hieroglyphic for a lost culture. Julius' affinity to nature allows him to decipher this hieroglyphic for John. Indeed, in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," John comments upon this association, saying, "Toward my tract of land and the things that were on it—the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees—he [Julius] maintained a peculiar personal attitude . . ." (55).

This attitude is evident in "The Goophered Grapevine." While examining the remains of the vineyard on the McAdoo plantation, John encounters Uncle Julius sitting on a log voraciously feasting upon a bunch of grapes. Soon, Julius launches into a tale describing the fantastic history of the vineyard. According to legend, McAdoo consults a conjurer to place a spell upon the vineyard—a spell designed to
prevent the slaves from eating the grapes. The spell works. The slaves report that eating the grapes results in death. One day Henry, a new slave, tastes the grapes. Aunt Peggy places a "goopher" upon him to prevent death. However, the slaves note that Henry begins to take on "grape-like" characteristics. When they bloom, he blooms; when the grapes wilt, he wilts. McAdoo uses this phenomenon for economic gain--reselling Henry to unsuspecting buyers. To testify to the validity of the tale, Julius offers to show John the location of Henry’s grave. He says, "It’s des ez true ez I’m a-settin’ here, miss. Dey’s a easy way ter prove it; I kin lead de way right ter Henry’s grave ober yander in de plantation buryin’-groun’" (43). Thus, Henry’s grave is a hieroglyphic attesting to a past that only Julius can interpret.

Although the story is fantastic and humorous, there is an underlying pathos in Henry’s predicament. Consequently, John should be warned of the pitfalls of absolute power--both moral and economic. For the tale discloses the corrupting influence of greed upon the master and the slave. McAdoo sacrifices Henry’s humanity for economic gain. Lorne Fienberg concludes, "The soil produced not plantation aristocrats but a mean and grasping group of capitalists" (165). John must take heed Julius’ message if he is to avoid this "sad legacy" whereby the "singlemindedness of the
profit motive" distorts one's compassion and moral decency (165). Indeed, historically, many Northern capitalists who invested in Southern industries eventually espoused the same attitudes as Southerners and "began to complain of blacks' 'shiftlessness' and unreliability" (Foner 138).

"Lonesome Ben" echoes the same admonition for John. In that story Julius deciphers the significance of a yellowish bank of clay. This clay bank symbolizes the tragedy of Ben. Ben is a slave owned by Marrabo McSwayne. His one failing is that he cannot tolerate liquor and after a few drinks wanders onto the road. McSwayne swears that if he ever sees Ben in that condition again, he will give him forty lashes. After a year of sobriety, Ben falls victim to alcohol. Instead of succumbing to the forty lashes, Ben hides out. When he becomes hungry, he eats from the clay bank, and his dark skin eventually becomes yellow from clay poisoning. His wife and child do not recognize him, and he dies a lonely man. His body turns to brick after being exposed to the sun. Ben is a tragic figure whose fear of being beaten—certainly a legitimate fear for a slave—results in his isolation and death.

Ben's tragedy is also ironic since many slaves were encouraged to drink by their masters. As Frederick Douglass explains, alcohol was a method of control used by the slaveholder:
For instance, the slaveholders not only like to see the slave drink of his own accord, but will adopt various plans to make him drunk. One plan is to make bets on their slaves, as to who can drink the most whisky without getting drunk; and in this way they succeed in getting whole multitudes to drink to excess. Thus, when the slave asks for virtuous freedom, the cunning slaveholder, knowing his ignorance, cheats him with a dose of vicious dissipation, artfully labelled with the name of liberty. (300)

For many slaveholders, alcohol became a Pandora’s box. When their slaves were affected in their duties by alcohol, masters such as McSwayne realized the damaging effects. Nevertheless, Chesnutt’s message in some stories is that many of the "shiftless" ways of the Negro could be traced to the institution of slavery and its damaging effects.¹³

Thus, Julius’ story challenges John and the reader to speculate upon the culpability of the white ruling class for cultivating behavior patterns in blacks that elicit disdain or abhorrence from whites. Of course, as a trickster, Julius must not overtly reveal his interpretations because, as Pelton affirms, divination "is an abstract, indirect, and deductive mode of interpreting or revealing the past or the future . . ." (116). Therefore, Julius’ audience must infer
conclusions based on his tale in which magic and supernatural events provide an indirect frame for his divinations."

"Po Sandy" also unveils the cruelties of slavery. The tale chronicles the horrifying death of the slave Sandy. Because of his abilities, Master McSwayne's children all want him to come and serve them. So McSwayne orders Sandy to travel from one house to the other serving his children. During his travels, McSwayne sells his first wife and gives Sandy a dollar to compensate for her loss. Sandy later marries a slave woman named Tenie. Tenie is familiar with the art of conjuring and turns Sandy into a tree so that he does not have to leave the plantation. At night she turns him into a human again. Sadly, one day Tenie is sent away. During her absence, Sandy is chopped down and turned into lumber, which is used for the new kitchen in the big house. However, after the slaves learn of Sandy's death, they refuse to work in the kitchen and it is torn down. The lumber is then used to construct a schoolhouse which a grief-maddened Tenie haunts every night.

This story eerily expresses how white masters ruthlessly destroyed slave families and further illustrates that blacks were valued as commodities. This tendency is also noted by Douglass. He remarks that after the death of his master, the slaves were divided as property:
We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. (356)

Lest John should succumb to the mindset of these Southern plantation owners, he must heed the message of Julius’ portraiture of the past.

Ironically, while revealing the tragedies of the past and how they have affected the present, Julius also provides John with the means for economic prosperity. In "The Goophered Grapevine," John expresses doubt about the soundness of buying the vineyard. After Julius asks him if he is the "Norv’n gemman w’at’s gwine ter buy de ole vimya’d?", John replies, "I am looking at it, but I don’t know that I shall care to buy unless I can be reasonably sure of making something out of it" (34-5). John needs Uncle Julius to confirm the validity of purchasing the vineyard. Julius’ story does reveal—despite the legendary effects of the goopher—that the vineyard has produced fine grape yields in the past and thus would likely do so in the future. Relying on the wisdom of Uncle Julius, John becomes a successful vineyardist, as he says at the end of the
story: "I bought the vineyard, nevertheless, and it has been for a long time in a thriving condition, and is often referred to by the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries" (43).

Similarly, in "Lonesome Ben," after being approached my local capitalists to join in a venture to build a cotton mill, John questions Uncle Julius about the clay bank. He asks, "Do you think that clay would make good brick, Julius?" (147). He finds his answer in Julius’ tale and decides not to use the clay bank, thus saving himself from a possible economic catastrophe. While "Po Sandy" does not provide John with the means for economic gain, Julius’ narrative does prompt Annie to abandon the idea of using the lumber from the school for her new kitchen.  

In many ways, Uncle Julius also profits from the tales. In the "Goophered Grapevine," he receives employment from John who discerns that Julius’ story may have resulted from his [Julius’] desire to maintain his revenue from the vineyard. The ending of "Lonesome Ben," suggests that Julius’ tale may have been motivated by his desire to gain employment for his relative. In "Po Sandy," when Annie decides not to use the lumber for her new kitchen, Julius utilizes the school as a meeting place for his church.
Many critics have down-played Julius' possible self-serving motives. Others feel that Julius succumbs to the values of white capitalism. However, Julius' behavior is in keeping with the trickster as diviner and interpreter. Pelton stresses that Legba's divination is tied to economics. Individuals must offer a sacrifice before divination (125). Thus, one may view Julius' attempts to appease his own economic appetites as his sacrificial due—fostering a "dialectic of exchange" (126).

Nonetheless, Julius' maneuverings may have greater cultural significance, for they delineate the mores and concerns of the freed slave during Reconstruction. Hence, Julius' machinations disclose the "patterns of times to come, and the true form of the world itself."

At the end of "The Goophered Grapevine," John employs Julius as his coachman:

I found, when I bought the vineyard, that Uncle Julius had occupied a cabin on the place for many years, and derived a respectable revenue from the product of the neglected grapevines. This, doubtless, accounted for his advice to me not to buy the vineyard, though whether it inspired the goopher story I am unable to state. I believe, however, that the wages I paid him for his services as coachman, for I gave him
employment in that capacity, were more than an equivalent for anything he lost by the sale of the vineyard. (43)

Julius' predicament exemplifies the relationship between the land owners and the freedman during the Reconstruction period. Blacks negotiated wages for work that they had been forced to do freely under the slave system. While Julius does not become a property owner and an economic equal to John, his familiarity with the former plantation and his knowledge of the community give him a certain amount of bargaining power. Historically, many Southern whites resented this new employer/employee relationship with their former slaves. Eric Foner explains, "For those accustomed to the power of command, the normal give-and-take of employer and employee was difficult to accept. . . . Former slaveholders resented the very idea of having to negotiate with the freedman" (131). Hence, Julius foretells of a continuing pattern for relationships between black laborers and white employers—a pattern that many of Chesnutt's nineteenth century Southern white readers must have resented.

"Lonesome Ben" concludes with Annie beseeching John to get rid of the bed of clay so that others will not have the opportunity to eat from the mound. She reveals that Uncle Julius has a nephew who will gladly remove the clay bed for
wages. John refuses and says that "the best way to stop them from eating it was to teach them self-respect, when she had opportunity, and those habits of industry and thrift whereby they could get their living from the soil in a manner less direct but more commendable" (157).

While Julius' cousin further illustrates the practice of negotiating for wages, John's response echoes the idea that racial and economic progress rests upon the notion of self-help—a popular theory of the Reconstruction era. Foner clarifies that "Such talk of an individual route to advancement that eschewed political action in favor of exonomic self-help anticipated the fully developed conservative ideology associated with Booker T. Washington that would emerge in the post-Redemption South" (546).

In "Po Sandy," Annie reveals to her husband that Julius plans to utilize the school for church meetings:

‘John, there has been a split in the Sandy Run Colored Baptist Church, on the temperance question. About half the members have come out from the main body, and set up for themselves. Uncle Julius is one of the seceders, and he came to me yesterday and asked if they might not hold their meetings in the old schoolhouse for the present.’ (54)
The plight of the Sandy Run Colored Baptist Church epitomizes the growing number of black churches during Reconstruction. Foner explains, "Throughout the South, blacks emerging from slavery pooled their resources to purchase land and erect their own churches. . . . By the end of Reconstruction in 1877, the vast majority of Southern blacks had withdrawn from churches dominated by whites" (90-1). The Sandy Run Colored Baptist Church illustrates the desire of blacks to form their own congregations after the end of slavery. The disagreement among members in the church further illustrates another trend. Like their white counterparts, blacks dissatisfied with the governing policies of a church often formed separate sects.

Thus, while Uncle Julius’ tales couch his interpretations of a cruel slave past and his divinations for possible economic successes, his schemes outside of his narrative give shape to the plight of the freedman during Reconstruction. Like Legba, Julius is a trickster whose powers of divination have ramifications for society as a whole. The cloaking of these divinations within a narrative frame attests to the indirect mode of divination characteristic of the West African trickster. Further, the play of Julius’ words within the backdrop of John’s narrative creates a fictional dialogue that leaves the texts open to varying interpretations.18
Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic offers an angle from which to speculate upon this fictional dialogue. For Bakhtin the sign is not a fixed unit with a self-enclosed meaning and thus cannot be interpreted in isolation from its context. Meaning comes from the interaction between the sign and the expectations and reactions of a receiver. Language is multivoiced or dialogical. Half of what we say is a reflection of the discourse of the Other— the discourse of outside forces that has been internalized both consciously and unconsciously. Bakhtin notes that the best type of discourse is multivoiced. Within this chaos of competing voices is the opportunity to create and recreate. The discourse never becomes closed and fixed (Richter 725).

Specifically, in one section of his essay "Discourse in the Novel" Bakhtin distinguishes between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse. Authoritative discourse is a privileged, closed discourse. There is no interaction between different voices. It is often didactic in nature. Internally persuasive discourse, in contrast, is multivoiced. The discourse projects various ideas and beliefs that contradict each other; therefore, meaning is never fixed. In literature, internally persuasive discourse leads to numerous interpretations (821).

Chesnutt's Uncle Julius tales illustrate the use of internally persuasive discourse. In these stories the
boundaries seem clear. The white narrator appears to be the authority figure. His discourse superficially functions as authoritative discourse. Chesnutt's audience would have willingly accepted the view that these stories are simply humorous tales about a wily former slave's machinations to feather his own nest. Hence, the predominantly white nineteenth century audience would have accepted as truth the narrator's hints that the importance of Julius' stories does not transcend the self-interest of a cunning black man.

However, the boundaries are not clear. When Chesnutt first published his tales, most of his audience did not know he was black. This creates an initial dialogic frame—a black author assuming the posture of a white author. Hence, from the very beginning, any interpretations that posit John as the voice of authority or truth in such texts as "The Goophered Grapevine," "Po Sandy," or "Lonesome Ben" are premature. For Chesnutt's posturing as both a white author and a white narrator creates further dialogic frames and backdrops. Next, the format of the tales--stories within stories--foster a dialogue between Uncle Julius and John that in turn fosters a dialogue between white and black readers.
While Viney is not the narrator of "The Dumb Witness," her silence serves as the catalyst for the narrative event. Furthermore, her voicelessness is in direct opposition to John’s voiced narration. This play of contrasts serves subtly to accentuate Viney’s plight and her eventual victory over her oppressor, Malcolm Murchison. Like the fictional Julius and the mythical Legba, she is a trickster of divine interpretation and divination. She revels in her position as master linguist, for only she can interpret the "text"—in this instance the location of the hidden documents. Her refusal to reveal the hiding place the to Malcolm Murchison is an act of empowerment.

In tracing Viney’s link to Legba, one notes that in Fon mythology, Legba embodies the role of the linguist. Further he functions as the interpreter between mortals and the gods:

To Legba was assigned the role of linguist between the kingdoms of gods and gods, and gods and men. Whereupon, in addition to the knowledge of the ‘language’of Mawu-Lisa, he was given the knowledge of all the ‘languages’ spoken by the other gods in their separate dominions. Therefore if any of the children of Mawu-Lisa, on earth or elsewhere, wish to address their parents or each other, they must
transmit their messages through Legba, for they can no longer communicate directly. (Qtd. in Gates 23-24)

Thus, Legba possesses the power over words. Pelton explains, "The world issues from Mawu's power to bear divine children, but it is Legba who has the 'words' needed to foster and sustain the unseen cosmic relationships on which the visible universe rests" (73).

The "words" in the above reference constitute the 'Book of Fa' or the 'System of Writing of the Creator' (Gates 24). This text can be read and interpreted only by Legba (Gates 24). In this capacity, Legba determines meaning. Gates explains, "Legba, like Esu, is the divine reader, whose interpretation of the Book of Fate determines precisely what this book says. The interpreter governs meaning because he determines our understanding of the text, which in this instance is the Text of Fa" (24-5). Thus, the truth of the text is subjective—-that is subject to Legba's discretion:

The text, in other words, is not fixed in any determinate sense; in one sense, it consists of the dynamic and indeterminate relationship between truth on one hand and understanding on the other. Fa, as the writing of Mawu, can be thought of conveniently as the truth of a text, whereas
Legba's role is to effect and affect its understanding. . . . Meanings, in the Yoruba and Fon systems of hermeneutics, can be both multiple and indeterminate, as underscored by the densely ambiguous and figurative language of which the entire system consists. (25)

In a manner similar to Legba's, Viney manipulates truth and meaning in "The Dumb Witness."

As the story begins, John and Julius have just arrived at the Murchison house. As they approach, they see Malcolm descend upon Viney, imploring her to tell him the location of the important papers. She responds with what John concludes as "discordant jargon" (160). Later Julius tells John the tale concerning Viney and Malcolm.

John reveals to the reader that Roger Murchison, Malcolm's uncle and immediate predecessor, had inherited a large estate. However, he was frequently absent from the property, and his nephew Malcolm managed the property. Malcolm was a bachelor whose house was run by his housekeeper, Viney. When Malcolm announced that he was going to marry, Viney was recalcitrant. She eventually sought the prospective bride and told her something that prompted the lady to end the engagement. Malcolm was furious and beat Viney, proclaiming, "I will put it out of your power to dip your tongue in where you are not
concerned" (165). Ironically, afterwards Malcolm learns from his uncle, Roger, that he [Roger] has hidden some valuable documents on the plantation, but only Viney knows the location. Although Malcolm entreats her to reveal the hiding place, Viney does not. Later, Malcolm becomes mentally imbalanced. After his death, Viney shows his nephew the hiding place.

Like Legba, Viney is a mediator. She is a mediator between Roger and Malcolm and also between the worlds of the master and the slave. The narrative strongly suggests that Viney is of mixed blood—Negro, Indian, and white. Upon first spying Viney, John comments, "She seemed but little younger than the man, and her face was enough like his, in a feminine way, to suggest that they might be related in some degree, unless this inference was negatived by the woman's complexion, which disclosed a strong infusion of darker blood" (160). The narrative also suggests that she is a Murchison. Hence, Viney is a marginal figure who has knowledge of various cultures. She is also knowledgeable of the different languages of these cultures.

When Malcolm asks Viney to tell the location of the treasure, she responds in a manner that is unintelligible to him:

She rose from her seat, and drawing herself up to her full height--she was a tall woman, though
bowed somewhat with years—began to speak. I thought at first in some foreign tongue. But after a moment I knew that no language or dialect, at least none of European origin, could consist of such a discordant jargon, such a meaningless cacophony as that which fell from the woman's lips. (160)

Possibly Viney's "discordant jargon" is a non-European language of African origin. Richard Brodhead comments, "... the injured heroine of this tale can only babble—unless she is speaking a non-European language that sounds like babble to white folk, an issue the tale leaves wholly enigmatic" (18). At the end of the story the reader discovers that she can also speak the dialect of the slave. After John inquires about Malcolm's nephew, she replies, "Yas, suh, I'll call 'im" (171). Interestingly, in the first version of the story, Chesnutt writes that she states, "Yes, sir, I'll call him." As Brodhead notes, "Chesnutt apparently hesitated as to whether Viney should speak 'perfect' English or black dialect English" (171).

Viney has power over words and is therefore a linguist in a special sense. She alone knows the words that will disclose the location of the treasure, as Roger states: "Viney knows their hiding place. She is devoted to you and to the family—she ought to be, for she is of our blood—and
she only knows the secret" (166). Indeed, only words can reveal the mystery. The narrator reveals that after her wound had healed, she was still incapable of speaking the necessary words that would allow Malcolm to find the valuable documents:

She was fed with dainty food, and such care as was possible was given to her wound. In due time it healed. But she did not even then seem able to articulate, even in whispers, and all his attempts to learn of her the whereabouts of the missing papers, were met by the same failure. She seemed willing enough, but unable to tell what he wished to know. There was apparently some mystery which only words could unravel. (168)

Consequently, the "text" of the hiding place can only be interpreted by Viney.

Viney uses her knowledge to gain power over Malcolm. When Malcolm punished Viney, he proclaimed, "I will put it out of your power to dip your tongue in where you are not concerned" (165). Hence, Malcolm tries to deprive Viney of her power of speech. Brodhead reiterates, "White masters appear in this tale as greed-driven figures who brutalize their slaves, wounding them specifically in their power of expression" (18). However, in reality Viney does not lose
her power of expression; she instead manipulates Malcolm's notions of truth and understanding.

To begin with, Viney deconstructs the privileged Western tongue by juxtaposing her jargon with Malcolm's images of European sounds. As Viney continues her "meaningless cacophony," John notes that the sounds seem to suggest words:

And as she went on, pouring out a flood of sounds that were not words, as clouds suggest the shapes of mountains and trees and strange beasts, the old man seemed to bend like a reed before a storm, and began to expostulate, accompanying his words with deprecatory gestures. (160)

Viney has successfully subverted John and Malcolm's ideas of language. Her possible African structures are in direct opposition to languages of European origins. Words are like clouds, boundless and groundless. Thus, meaning becomes indeterminate, and Viney deliberately inhibits Malcolm's understanding.

Certainly Jacque Derrida's theory of presences and absences has relevance to this analysis. David Richter delineates this theory:

We are used to arguing about various other presences and absences: art vs. genius, culture vs. nature, transcendence vs. immanence, soul vs.
body, divine vs. human, human vs. animal, man vs. woman, being vs. becoming, and so on. In each case, the first term denotes the presence and the second the absence of something. Derrida uses the paradoxes involved in the logic of 'supplements' in an effort to decenter the first term of each pair, to remove it from its privileged position relative to the second. (946)

In Viney’s case, the Western tongue contrasts sharply with her dialect of non-European origin, thus decentering the privileged European languages. 20

Next, Viney manipulates Malcolm’s presuppositions. In pragmatics, presuppositions may be defined as assumptions the speaker makes about the hearer’s preconceived notions and ideas. When Malcolm hires a teacher to instruct Viney in writing, she understands his preconceived stereotypes concerning the mentality of the slave. For as the narrator reveals, "Slaves were not taught to write, for too much learning would have made them mad" (168). Viney pretends not to comprehend the writing lessons. Malcolm does not question her inability to learn:

But somehow she made poor progress. She was handicapped of course by her loss of speech. It was unfamiliar work too for the teacher, who would
not have been expert with a pupil equipped with all the normal faculties. Perhaps she [Viney] had begun too old; or her mind was too busily occupied with other thoughts to fix it on the tedious and painful steps by which the art of expression in writing is acquired. Whatever the reason, she manifested a remarkable stupidity while seemingly anxious to learn; and in the end Malcolm was compelled to abandon the attempt to teach her.

(168)

Viney also perceives that Malcolm attributes to her a certain guilelessness and forbearance that he hopes to manipulate:

'Yes, Viney, good Viney,' he said in soothing tones, 'I know it was wrong, and I've always regretted it—always from the very day I did it. But you shouldn't bear malice, Viney, it isn't Christian. The Bible says you should bless them that curse you, and do good to them that despitefully use you. But I was good to you before, Viney, and I was good to you afterwards, and I know you have forgiven me—good Viney, noble-hearted Viney!—and you are going to tell me.' (161)
Viney of course recognizes the ruse and refuses to reveal the secret. The only visible sign that she is in full control of the situation is a noticeable change in her countenance, specifically in her eyes. John states, "The woman made no reply, but her faded eyes seemed to glow for a moment, like the ashes of a dying fire fanned by some random breath of air" (160).

Clearly, Viney is a trickster and a master manipulator of language. Her silences and "disconcordant jabbering" effectively undercut Malcolm's expectations, assumptions, and desires. She becomes his "master" and controls his destiny. By withholding her divination, she plots his downfall and secures her victory. For although she does not utilize the valuable papers for personal profit, her decision to reveal the hiding place to Malcolm's nephew is an act of vengeance over her old nemesis. Where have these papers been all of these years? Julius tells us, "Dey wuz hid in de seat er dat ole oak a'm-cheer on de piazza yander w'at ole Mars Ma'colm be'n settin' in all dese yeahs" (171).

Liza Jane

Many critics assert that in Chesnutt's collection The Wife of His Youth the short story that most closely resembles his Uncle Julius tales is "The Passing of Grandison." However, the story that best mimics the format of the Uncle Julius stories is "The Wife of His
"Youth," the first story in the collection. To begin with, the selection echoes the story within a story motif of the conjure tales. Also, Liza Jane, like Uncle Julius, is a relic of the plantation past whose story highlights the inhumane treatment of slaves. Finally, Liza Jane is a diviner of the future. Mr. Ryder has reached an impasse in his life and must decide between two women. Liza Jane's narrative reminds him of the past he has tried to leave behind--a past that determines the future course of his life.

Reminiscent of the Uncle Julius stories, "The Wife of His Youth" centers around Mr. Ryder's desire to marry Mrs. Dixon. He plans to ask for her hand in marriage at a ball. On the day of the ball, he has a visitor, Liza Jane. She is searching for her husband whom she has not seen for twenty-five years, after he escaped slavery. Mr. Ryder invites her to tell her story. Liza Jane's narrative describes how she and Sam were initially separated and her tribulations in trying to locate him. Ryder indicates that he has not seen the lost husband. However, that night at the ball, he recounts Liza Jane's story in the "same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips" (20). At the end of his tale, he introduces Liza Jane as the wife of his youth.

While Mr. Ryder is neither white nor the initial narrator, he does evince the same adherence to Western
standards of taste as John of the conjure stories. As a member of the Blue Vein Society, Ryder values English poetry, art, and Mrs. Dixon's "whiter" skin. Indeed, he illustrates a desire to separate himself from the black masses:

'I have no race prejudice,' he would say, 'but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step.' (7)

Hence, like John, Ryder is a figure that Chesnutt's predominantly white audience could easily relate to. Also like John, he serves to shift the audience's focus from Chesnutt's condemnation of the slave institution.

Additionally, Ryder initiates Liza Jane's story telling event. After she asks him if he has seen her husband, he responds, "But tell me your story, and it may refresh my memory" (11). This echoes John's numerous entreaties to Uncle Julius to tell a story. For example, in "Hot-Foot Hannibal" John entreats, "Tell us the tale. Perhaps, by the time you get through, the haunt will go away and the mare will cross" (110). Often when Julius begins a story, he
seems to go into a trance where "his eyes assumed a dreamy expression, and he seemed to lose sight of his auditors, and to be living over again in monologue his life on the old plantation" (35). Similarly, Liza Jane is also an inhabitant from the plantation past, as the narrator reveals, "She looked like a bit of the old plantation life, summoned up from the past by the wave of a magician's wand . . ." (10). Thus, like Uncle Julius, Liza Jane relates her narrative in dialect which in this instance is juxtaposed with the "proper" English of Mr. Ryder.  

Liza Jane begins by identifying herself and describing her life as a slave on a Missouri plantation. While on the plantation, Liza marries a freeborn mulatto named Sam Taylor, who is apprenticed to Liza's master. One day a young maid tells Liza that the master plans to sell Sam down the [Mississippi] river, or to a master in the Deep South—a fate worse than death for a slave—so she helps him to escape. Sam swears he will come back for her on his twenty-first birthday. When Liza's master learns that she has helped Sam escape, he whips her and sells her to a slaveowner in the Deep South. After the Civil War, Liza looks for Sam. She has remained true to her vows for twenty-five years, searching for Sam the whole time. When Ryder suggests that Sam has forgotten her and may have made a new life for himself, Liza remains convinced that Sam
would not abandon her and has probably been looking for her as well. Liza says, "'I's be'n lookin' fer 'im ebersence,' she added simply, as though twenty-five years were but a couple of weeks, 'an' I knows he's be'n lookin' fer me. Fer he sot a heap er sto' by me, Sam did, an' I know he's be'n huntin' fer me all dese years,'--'less'n he's be'n sick er sump'n, so he could n' 'member his promise'" (13).

While one may view Liza's story in terms of a sentimental, domestic tale, clearly the narrative also underscores the harshness of slavery and the greed of the slaveholder. Sam's master plans to sell him even though he is freeborn. Later, Liza is whipped and sold to a plantation owner in the Deep South where her living conditions are inevitably worse. More importantly, Liza's narrative highlights the horrible plight of the slave woman. Gerda Lerner in her monograph *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* points out that the female slave suffered more than the male slave in some instances:

> In general, the lot of black women under slavery was in every respect more arduous, difficult and restricted than that of the men. Their work and duties were the same as that of the men, while childbearing and rearing fell upon them as as an added burden. Punishment was meted out to them regardless of motherhood, pregnancy or physical
infirmity. Their affection for their children was used as a deliberate means of tying them to their master, for children could always be held as hostages in case of the mother’s attempted escape. The chances of escape for female slaves were fewer than those for males. Additionally, the sexual exploitation and abuse of black women by white men was a routine practice. (15) Certainly, Liza’s life has been extremely difficult, quite obviously more arduous than that of Mr. Ryder—her long lost Sam.

Liza’s narrative also reveals the hardships of slave families after emancipation. Many families who were separated during slavery found it very difficult and even impossible to locate loved ones during the Reconstruction period. Liza’s quest to find her husband exemplifies this phenomenon. Furthermore, Ryder explains the conditions that upheld the legality of slave marriages—conditions that further eroded the black family.

Also, like Julius, Liza Jane’s tale foretells of the future for many black women. To support herself, Liza has labored as a domestic worker. Her predicament heralds the growth of the black female domestic worker in our society—a phenomenon that has remained relatively unchanged since Liza’s lifetime:
There is always domestic work. The pattern has changed very little since the days of slavery. Domestic service is the occupation in which the largest number of American women work. Of the nation's 2,275,000 domestic workers, 1,017,000 are black women. While 5.6 per cent of all employed white women are in domestic work, 30.3 per cent of all black women are so employed. Their hours are longer than those of any other group of workers, their wages low, their working conditions generally poor. As late as 1935, black women did housework and laundry for $3 a week, and washerwomen did a week's wash for 75 cents.

(Lerner 226)

Nonetheless, Liza's most important role is that of diviner for Mr. Ryder.

One may argue that Liza may be aware that Mr. Ryder is the husband of her youth. When Ryder suggests that she may no longer recognize her husband, she scoffs and proclaims, "'I'd know 'im 'mong's a hund'ed men'" (15-16). If this is the case, Liza is a trickster in the traditional sense. Her actions garner a husband and security from the drudgery of trying to support herself on her meager earnings.

However, Liza's role as a trickster may encompass a more
complex function. For she is a diviner of Ryder's past, present, and future.

Mr. Ryder has reached a crucial moment in his life. He has decided to marry. If he marries Mrs. Dixon, he successfully closes the door upon his slave past. Mrs. Dixon is nearly white, educated, wealthy, and refined—at least by European standards. Ironically, he is quoting a poem that celebrates those qualities of womanhood adored by traditional European dictates when Liza knocks upon his door. Liza's reentry into his life—with her dark skin, calico dress, and worn features--forces him to confront this rejected past and make a decision that affects his future.

Lorne Fienberg argues that Liza's storytelling event forces Ryder to acknowledge his superficialities as a member of the Blue Veins and also encourages Ryder to confront his true identity. He further asserts that Ryder's initiation of Liza's story "is an invitation to the storyteller to break down the barriers between the present and the past, and to admit the listener to a recognition of his origins" (223).

Indeed, Liza forces Ryder to do some soul searching. The narrative reveals that after Liza's departure, "he went upstairs to his bedroom, and stood for a long time before the mirror of his dressing-case, gazing thoughtfully at the reflection of his own face" (17).
Ryder decides to acknowledge his marriage to Liza. At the ball where he has planned to propose marriage, he retells Liza's narrative instead:

He then related, simply but effectively, the story told by his visitor of the afternoon. He gave it in the same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips, while the company listened attentively and sympathetically. For the story had awakened a responsive thrill in many hearts. There were some present who had seen, and others who had heard their fathers and grandfathers tell, the wrongs and the sufferings of this past generation, and all of them still felt, in their darker moments, the shadow hanging over them. (19-20)

Liza's tale has apparently transformed Ryder, as Fienberg states: "Liza Jane's story becomes for Ryder the means of recasting his identity and creating the terms under which he will remain an admired center for the Blue Veins" (224).

Liza's plight also serves to awaken a sense of awareness in the other members of the Blue Veins--urging them to acknowledge the shadow of slavery that hangs over all black Americans. One hopes that "henceforth not property, nor the veneer of culture, nor specious distinctions of race will constitute the dominant values of
their little society, but eloquence, theatricality, moral responsibility, and human compassion" (Fienberg 225).

Thus, Liza Jane may be viewed as a trickster. Her seemingly coincidental meeting with Ryder effectively secures her future with the husband of her youth. On a cultural level, her narrative unmasks the atrocities of slavery. Finally, for Ryder and his peers, her tale evokes the past—a past that reshapes the present.
NOTES


13 This same theme reverberates in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," "Dave's Neckliss," and "A Victim of Heredity."

14 This interpretation has ramifications for those critical studies that note Chesnutt's desire to cloak his denigration of slavery and those who supported it due to his awareness of his white audience. For example, see Melvin Dixon's "The Teller as Folk Trickster in Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman." College Language Association Journal 18 (1974): 186-197.


17 For example, see Fienberg's "Black Storytellers at the Crossroads."
While many scholars have commented upon the various voices present in the Uncle Julius stories, none have rooted their analyzes in Bakhtin's paradigm.

This story is the only Uncle Julius tale in which John narrates the tale of slavery.


For example, see Arlene Elder's "Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Art or Assimilation?" in *The Hindered Hand* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978).

Another interesting parallel between "The Wife of His Youth" and the Uncle Julius tales is that a character named Liza Jane appears in "A Deep Sleeper."
CHAPTER III

CHESNUTT SIGNIFIES UPON HIS CLASS,
HIS TEXTS, AND HIS AUDIENCE

A Trickster's View of the Black Bourgeoisie

In the preceding chapter, I examined Charles Chesnutt's trickster narrators. In this section, I will analyze Chesnutt's "trickery" as relevant to his omniscient third-person narrative voice in The Wife of His of Youth. In this volume of short stories, Chesnutt abandons the narrative strategy exemplified in The Conjure Woman and his related Uncle Julius tales. One could argue that to a certain degree "The Wife of His Youth" and "Her Virginia Mammy" are exceptions. In both stories, a former slave relates a story set in the slave past.

Nevertheless, in many of the stories in this collection, Chesnutt employs a tongue-in-cheek detached narrator whose sleight-of-hand manipulation of the text inhibits a definitive interpretation. This technique is especially evident in "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle."

In those stories the narrator slyly signifies upon the mores of the middle class. As delineated by Roger Abrahams, to signify means to "talk with great innuendo," "to carp,
cajole, needle, and lie," and "making fun of a person or situation" (qtd. in Gates 75). He further defines signifying as "to imply, goad, beg, or boast by indirect verbal or gestural means. A language of implication" (Gates 75). The key words are "imply," "indirect," and "implication."

In "The Wife of His Youth" the narrator implies that the Blue Veins are superficial, intraracial bigots. Criticism is indirect--attributed to the nebulous "envious outsider." In "A Matter of Principle" the narrator is more openly critical of middle-class values. Ironically, through his texts, Chesnutt also signifies upon himself as a member of the black middle class.

Nevertheless, one should be cautious before proclaiming Chesnutt a staunch champion of the "black masses." While one may safely surmise that Chesnutt is critical of middle-class blacks who emulate white racial stereotypes and prejudices, his characterizations also reveal his own divided class loyalties. For one thing, he appears to approve of the black bourgeoisie's emulation of the aesthetic values of white society. Furthermore, one may concede that Chesnutt creates some very admirable "full" black characters, though he also exalts Eurocentric standards of beauty.
Much of Chesnutt's ridicule of the black middle class of the late nineteenth century has a historical basis. The black middle class originated from miscegenation, most often between a white master and a female slave. The mixed offspring of this union were often given their freedom. Eventually, this mulatto population of freed slaves began to represent the top of the social pyramid among free Negroes (Berzon 163). Because of their light skin, these mulattoes were sometimes admitted to institutions banned to the darker members of free society, who could not as easily play down their link with the Negro masses. Thus, light coloring became a status symbol for the black middle-class's cultural similarity to white society (Berzon 165).

This tendency to view dark skin as inferior and light skin as superior is showcased in "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle." As summarized in the preceding chapter, "The Wife of His Youth" centers upon Mr. Ryder, a member of the prestigious Blue Veins, who plans to announce his engagement to Mrs. Dixon, a light-skinned widow, at a society ball. However, on the day of the ball, Mr. Ryder receives a visit from the very dark, unfashionable Liza Jane. At the end of the story, Ryder acknowledges Liza Jane as the wife of his youth. Most readers surmise that Ryder's decision to acknowledge Liza evinces his realization that the standards he has heretofore championed as a member of
the Blue Veins are elitist and detrimental. Yet the audience comes to this conclusion without any explicit statements or judgments on the part of the narrator. Throughout the story, the narrator has avoided any direct censure of the Blue Veins. Thus Chesnutt manages to support the morally correct position without really condemning class stratification per se.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator describes the Blue Veins. The reader suspects that this club practices and maintains exclusionary policies—especially in regard to blacks with dark skin. However, as the second paragraph of the story illustrates, the narrator very carefully avoids any overt criticism of the society:

Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins. The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a certain 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. By accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more white than black. Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership
who was not white enough to show blue veins. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not of the favored few, and since that time the society, though possessing a longer and more pretentious name, had been known far and wide as the "Blue Vein Society," and its members as the "Blue Veins." (1)

Certainly the narrator signifies upon this group. Critical remarks are couched, implied, and indirect. In the first line of the passage, the narrator uses the conditional verb might. The use of this verb leaves the text open and, more importantly, destabilizes the characterization of Ryder. The phrase a certain Northern city further underscores the openness of the text. In the fourth sentence, the word perhaps presents two possibilities: either chance or design has dictated that most of the Blue Veins are light skinned blacks. Whether by chance or design, the narrator doesn’t dispute the fact that the members in general are fair skinned. In the next line, the narrator attributes to "some envious outsider" the allegation that the club did not admit dark-skinned members. In this way, the narrator avoids direct confrontation. Finally, these outsiders rename the club The Blue Vein Society. While the narrator attempts to remain objective, his use of the appellation--Blue Vein--throughout the remainder of the text substantiates the
allegations made about the society. Lorne Fienberg notes that:

The effect of the narrative voice, however, is everywhere to undermine the validity of the Blue Veins' social stance, as it calls into question all fixed positions and standards. The first verb in the passage, "might aptly be called," with its conditional passive voice and embedded adverbial qualifier, subtly undercuts Mr. Ryder's position of leadership. There is an archness to the narrator's initial refusal even to name the "certain Northern city" in which the Blue Veins' social successes are being played out. (222)

The narrator also rebukes Mr. Ryder as the "custodian of its [the society's] standards" (3). When describing Mrs. Dixon's charms, the narrator seems to be looking at her from the vantage point of Mr. Ryder:

She possessed many attractive qualities. She was much younger than he; in fact, he was old enough to have been her father, though no one knew exactly how old he was. She was whiter than he, and better educated. She had moved in the best colored society of the country, at Washington, and had taught in the schools of that city. Such a superior person had been eagerly welcomed to the
Blue Vein Society, and had taken a leading part in its activities. Mr. Ryder had at first been attracted by her charms of person, for she was very good looking and not over twenty-five; then by her refined manners and the vivacity of her wit. Her husband had been a government clerk, and at his death had left a considerable life insurance. (5-6)

Beginning with the statement "She possessed many attractive qualities," the narrator appears to be talking from Ryder's point of view. The passage assumes a speaking quality, with Ryder's voice reverberating throughout the text. One could speculate that Chesnutt is using some type of indirect speech. The formality of the language and the method of listing Mrs. Dixon's "fine" qualities underscore Ryder's formal, methodical nature. Beginning with the statement "Mr. Ryder had at first been attracted by her charms of person, for she was very good looking and not over twenty-five," the passage reverts to the narrator's voice. The fact that the narrator essentially repeats the information given earlier about Mrs. Dixon substantiates this reading. The narrator moves back into Ryder's consciousness with the sentence "Her husband had been a government clerk . . . ." (6). Thus, Ryder's attraction to Mrs. Dixon rests upon
superficialities—her youth, whiteness, education, and money.

Ryder's superficial standards for judging people is further emphasized by his attitude regarding race: "Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn't want us yet, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step" (7).

Obviously Ryder feels superior to the black masses. Ironically, he takes this step "backward" when he acknowledges his slave wife. However, the reader views Ryder's acknowledgment of his wife as indicative of his growing compassion, tolerance, and humanity. William Andrews concurs, saying, "In taking the 'backward step' toward the uncouth black woman of his past, he actually takes a step forward morally, proving his worthiness by his honorable behavior, not by the lightness of his color" (Literary Career 115).

In "A Matter of Principle," Chesnutt continues to deride the intraracial tendencies exhibited by many members of the black middle class. In that story Mr. Cicero Clayton's daughter Alice receives a letter from a prominent Washington congressman announcing his intent to visit her at her home. Clayton asks, "What color is he?" (Collected Stories 156). Alice responds that she cannot remember.
Clayton knows that the congressman is a Negro. Thus, he is concerned about the man's complexion. After questioning a prominent citizen in the town, Cicero and his daughter learn that Representative Brown is fair skinned, and the family immediately extends its welcome to Brown.

However, on the day that they are to meet him at the train station, a mishap occurs. Brown is traveling with a very dark-skinned gentleman. Clayton mistakenly believes that the dark-skinned gentleman is Brown. When he informs his daughter, they hatch a plan to dissuade the young man from visiting. The family announces that Alice is sick and that the house is quarantined. Later, Clayton learns that Brown is indeed a handsome fair-skinned young man and that he has made a serious mistake. However, it is too late for Alice, because Brown has become engaged to her arch rival.

The plot of the story clearly underscores the negative results of color prejudice. Yet, the narrator never alludes to this prejudice and leaves all value judgments in the capable hands of the reader. Hence, again Chesnutt's use of a trickster narrator indirectly guides the reader through the text.

At the beginning of the story, the reader learns of Clayton's desire to be disassociated from the black masses:

Of course we can't enforce our claims, or
protect ourselves from being robbed of our
birthright; but we can at least have principles, and try to live up to them the best we can. If we are not accepted as white, we can at any rate make it clear that we object to being called black. Our protest cannot fail in time to impress itself upon the better class of white people; for the Anglo-Saxon race loves justice, and will eventually do it, where it does not conflict with their own interests. (95) Clayton’s logic is obviously flawed; however, the narrator does not make a judgment for the reader. He says, "Whether or not the fact that Mr. Clayton meant no sarcasm, and was conscious of no inconsistency in this eulogy, tended to establish the racial identity he claimed may safely be left to the discerning reader" (96). Nonetheless, by giving the reader a choice, the narrator undercuts Clayton’s stance. The use of the term eulogy hints that Clayton’s racial attitude has outlived its time. "A Matter of Principle" also underscores the class bigotry of many members of the black middle class. Living with the Clayton’s is a poor relative named Jack. Jack loves Alice, but her parents deem him an unsuitable prospect. It is ironic that Jack is the one who mistakenly identifies Brown as the dark-skinned gentleman. He is also the one who helps to concoct the scheme whereby Alice will
be too sick to receive the young representative. As critics have noted, Jack may be a trickster whose machinations gain him Alice's hand in marriage. It is also possible that Alice is in cahoots with Jack. The narrator makes this rather perceptive statement concerning Alice's relationship with Jack: "He was sometimes sent to accompany Miss Clayton to places in the evening, when she had no other escort, and it is quite likely that she discovered his good points before her parents did" (101).

The narrator also delineates the conflict experienced by the young women of the black middle class. Because of the intraracial prejudices of their parents and the racial prejudices of white society, these young ladies were limited in their choices for mates:

Miss Clayton and her friends, by reason of their assumed superiority to black people, or perhaps as much by reason of a somewhat morbid shrinking from the curiosity manifested toward married people of strongly contrasting colors, would not marry black men, and except in rare instances white men would not marry them. They were therefore restricted for a choice to the young men of their own complexion. But these, unfortunately for the girls, had a wider choice. In any State where the laws permit freedom of the marriage contract, a
man, by virtue of his sex, can find a wife of whatever complexion he prefers. . . ." (99)

So the narrator offers yet another way to read the text. If Alice is aware of Jack's trickery, then the story becomes a study of how a young girl outwits her parents to marry the man of her choice. This interpretation would have been even more intriguing had Jack not been fair-skinned also.

So once again, Chesnutt achieves a narrative coup. His signifying appears non-judgmental, ironic, and indirect. Andrews elaborates upon this view:

For the most part Chesnutt writes in "A Matter of Principle" as the unperturbed ironist confident in his ability to discern the presence of false racial superiority behind whatever mask, and amusedly serene in his conviction that such pretense must betray itself. Such a narrative stance became increasingly difficult for Chesnutt to maintain in his later writing as he became more the literary polemicist and less the Horatian ironist. But in such stories as "A Matter of Principle" and "The Wife of His Youth," a confidence and optimism preserves the emotional balance and the narrative control. (113)

Consequently, both "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle" exemplify Chesnutt's signifying upon
his peers; for Mr. Ryder and Mr. Clayton were indeed his peers. As mentioned in the introduction, Chesnutt was an extremely fair-skinned man who could have passed for white at any time. He chose not to do so. Also, Chesnutt himself belonged to an exclusive social club—an organization upon which the Blue Vein Society may have been modeled. Arlene Elder explains, "In some degree at least, this group might correspond to the Cleveland Social Circle, which the Chesnutts were asked to join after they had lived in that city for several years" (164). From this perspective, one may postulate that Chesnutt also signifies upon himself as a member of the black middle class.

But can one definitively state that Chesnutt was free of these same color biases? Sylvia Lyons Render says, "Chesnutt's writing . . . reflects none of the color prejudice often attributed to very fair Negroes; on the contrary, he roundly condemned it, as he did any such discrimination in real life" (30). She further maintains, that "Chesnutt saw beauty in all the rich variegation of color among his people . . ." (30). However, William Andrews believes that Chesnutt was ambivalent about his view of the black masses. Andrews states, "Between these poles of opinion "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle" oscillate, suggestive of Chesnutt's own unsettled
feelings about the aspiring mulatto's relationship to the rest of the race" (110).

While Chesnutt realized the insidiousness of intraracial prejudice, he desperately strove to inculcate white values concerning art, often evinced a distaste for the average black, and, despite his avowals for universal suffrage, saw the average Black as an inferior being. Chesnutt’s journal entries highlight his interest in classical Greek and Roman history, mythology, and rhetoric. He taught himself German and Latin while reading Goethe, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Swift, Byron, Cowper, and the Dumas brothers. In addition, he often compares himself to Benjamin Franklin and Horace Greeley. Chesnutt’s interests reflect his indoctrination into the standards dictated by his Anglo counterparts—standards which effectively distance him from the black masses. Richard Brodhead explains, "Chesnutt is estranged from the black community by the superiority of his education—and no doubt by the attitude of superiority he derives from his education" (25).

Indeed, there are numerous entries in Chesnutt’s journal that give credence to the notion that he was as alienated from the black community as the middle-class characters in his short stories and novels. In a March 16 entry, Chesnutt notes the Northerners’ propensity for romanticizing the "southern negro, as commonplace and vulgar
as he seems to us who come in contact with him every day" (125). Chesnutt’s language—the use of "us" and "him"—constitutes a barrier which serves to identify him more with whites as opposed to blacks. This subtle distinction is in addition to his view that the "southern negro" is both commonplace and vulgar.

Admittedly, Chesnutt’s entry was written almost twenty years before he published his short story collection The Wife of His Youth. Hence, one could argue that he gained a greater awareness of his elitist attitude during the course of those twenty years. Certainly his correspondence with Booker T. Washington reveals a man who is very passionate about the need for all Blacks to have equal opportunities. In a letter written on August 11, 1903, Chesnutt rails against the use of educational and property tests as conditions for voting, since these measures place blacks at a disadvantage:

Every individual Negro, weak, or strong, is entitled to the same rights before the law as every individual white man, whether weak or strong. I think that by dwelling upon and recognizing these distinctions, and suggesting different kinds of education and different degrees of political power and all that sort of thing for the colored people, we are merely intensifying the
class spirit which is fast robbing them of every shadow of right. (Pioneer 194)

Despite this rather passionate proclamation, Chesnutt states later in the letter, "I think that the Southern white people are, as a class, an ignorant narrow and childish people—as inferior to the white people of the North as the Southern Negroes are to the whites of that section . . ." (195). According to Chesnutt, Negroes are "inferior" to their white Southern counterparts. He does not qualify in what way they are inferior.

In his view of the average black person, Chesnutt is ambivalent. Friedrich Schlegel's theory of irony helps to elucidate the nature of this ambivalence. Friedrich Schlegel differentiates various levels of irony, identifying rhetorical irony as one of the highest forms. Rhetorical irony has its basis in philosophy where irony serves not as a technical device but rather as a cognitive tool through which the artist understands the universe (Furst 25-6). Underlying this understanding is contradiction and paradox. Lillian Furst explains:

Schlegel envisages the artist as both involved in and detached from his creation, aware of the contradictions of his endeavour, but able to transcend them. He is simultaneously committed to his work and to himself as creator. This dual
loyalty determines his position and his creative procedures, and also has its precipitate in certain features of his created work. (26-27)

In this sense, the artist can simultaneously accept the ideology of his or her fiction and maintain any opposing ideologies. These warring ideologies abound in the author's text, often causing the reader to reflect upon any apparent paradoxes. As Furst explains, "Paradox is the basis and the outcome of irony . . ." (27). Incidentally, this also gives literary critics an open field for varying interpretations.

Furst claims that Schlegel’s notion of irony has a positive aspect for the author: "Irony is an essential tool in the dialectical process of self-transcendence" (27-8). Consequently, Chesnutt can signify upon the prejudices of his middle-class peers and at the same time evince certain prejudices toward the black masses himself. Perhaps through his fiction, Chesnutt is trying to transcend his own biases.

Chesnutt's Textual Revisions

The previous discussion centered upon Chesnutt’s signifying upon his middle-class cohorts through his fiction, allowing his narrative voice to serve as the vehicle for indirect, veiled mockery. Chesnutt also signifies upon himself as a member of this group. Hence, it is not surprising that he would also signify upon his own texts. This manner of signification is referred to by Henry
Louis Gates as "Literary Signification" (xxvii). According to Gates, literary signification is a method of repetition and difference whereby Black authors consciously repeat certain tropes within their various texts. Gates refers to the manner in which a specific trope is repeated differently between two or more texts as "tropological revision." Such revisions, according to Gates, recur "with surprising frequency in the Afro-American literary tradition. The descent underground, the vertical 'ascent' from South to North, myriad figures of the double, and especially double consciousness all come readily to mind" (xxv).

Gates further clarifies that literary signification corresponds to parody and pastiche which "imply intention, ranging from severe critique to acknowledgment and placement within a literary tradition" (xxvii). He continues by noting that "Black writers Signify on each other's texts for all of these reasons, and the relations of Signification that obtain between and among black texts serve as a basis for a theory of formal revision in the Afro-American tradition" (xxvii).

In Chesnutt's case, one can detect revisions within the corpus of his own writing. For example, "The March of Progress" (1901) may be analyzed as a revision of "The Wife of His Youth" (1898). Additionally, "The Web of Circumstance" (1899) appears to be a revision of "Dave's
Neckliss" (1889). These revisions help to shed light upon Chesnutt's views of racial progress for Blacks.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, two views of racial progress for Blacks dominated our society. These two theories were popularized by Booker T. Washington, who advocated an accommodationist approach and an industrial-arts education for the masses, and W.E.B. DuBois, who emphasized a classical education for the "talented tenth." Again Chesnutt appears ambivalent—ambivalently critical of both schools of thought.

In both "The March of Progress" and "The Wife of His Youth" characters must choose between a person representing the plantation South and an individual representative of W.E.B. DuBois' "talented tenth." Specifically, in "The March of Progress" the county commissioners of Patesville establish a committee of Black citizens to oversee the Black schools of the town. Three men comprise this committee—Frank Gillespie, a barber; Bob Cotten, a blacksmith; and Abe Johnson or Uncle Abe, a leader in the church. The first duty of the committee is to choose a teacher for the grammar school. Two candidates apply.

One of the applicants is Miss Henrietta Noble, the former teacher. Miss Noble has been teaching in the Black school for fifteen years. This is somewhat remarkable since she belongs to a prominent, white New England family.
Impelled by the need for money and the death of her mother, Henrietta applies for a teaching job in New England but later decides to teach in the South instead.

At the time of the school committee decision, Henrietta has just returned from New York where she had seen a specialist about her declining health. After using most of her savings to pay the doctor, she is almost penniless. Therefore, she desperately needs the teaching job.

The other applicant is a young man who had been one of Henrietta’s brightest students. After attending college and teaching in various country schools, he had returned to Patesville with hopes of securing a teaching position. The narrator describes the young man as a "mulatto, with straight hair, an intelligent face, and well-set figure" and further reveals that he is "the popular candidate among the progressive element of his people . . ." (217).

Two of the committee members recommend the young man. However, Abe Johnson speaks up for Henrietta. In a dialect reminiscent of Uncle Julius, Abe invites the other committee members to think of all of the sacrifices and acts of kindness that Henrietta has performed for Blacks. By the time he is finished with his speech, the other committee members decide to recommend Henrietta also. Ironically, she dies before assuming her position, and the young man becomes the new teacher of the school.
There are several striking similarities between this story and "The Wife of His Youth." To begin with, the young man in the story is in a similar position to that of Mrs. Dixon of "The Wife of His Youth." Both characters are fair-skinned, educated, refined representations of the upward climb of the Black middle class. One could speculate that these characters symbolize DuBois' talented tenth. Gary Wintz elaborates upon DuBois' theory of racial progress:

He based his approach on the conviction that blacks needed well-educated leadership to direct the uplifting of the race. To accomplish this, black colleges and universities should not focus their efforts exclusively on industrial education but should continue to offer a strong liberal arts program to produce the class of teachers and professionals necessary to carry out this task. DuBois had no objections to practical education in the industrial arts but he warned that it would be dangerous to ignore classical education because ultimately it would be the educated elite, the 'talented tenth,' that would bring culture and progress to the race. (43)

Both Mrs. Dixon, a former teacher, and the young man of "March" are members of this "educated elite."
Next, Mr. Gillespie of "March" and Mr. Ryder of "Wife" echo the common sentiment that "self-preservation is the first law of nature" ("March" 218; "Wife" 7). While the men use the statement in different contexts—Ryder to justify excluding other Blacks and Gillespie to justify hiring the young man—the theme is the same. Progress comes from promoting from within, often at the expense of excluding other groups—namely, whites or poor blacks.

Last, both stories include a dialect-speaking narrator who relates past deeds reflective of the plantation past. In "Wife" Liza Jane recounts her travails as a slave. Ryder is moved by her loyalty and devotion. Abe Johnson, also speaking in dialect, recounts Henrietta's past deeds of loyalty and kindness. The committee is emotionally affected by the tale. Hence, in both instances, individuals make decisions based on sentiment and morality. William Andrews underscores this interpretation as he concludes his analysis of "The March of Progress":

Superficially Chesnutt seems to celebrate another instance of the black man's unprogressive loyalty to his white benefactors at his own expense. However, in deciding that moral responsibility precedes race allegiance and that compassion, not color consciousness, should govern their dealings as free men, the schoolboard attests to a
maturity and wisdom in southern blacks that was unheard of in popular white magazine fiction about Afro-American life. (Literary Career 83)

Certainly, one can make the same remarks about "The Wife of His Youth." Mr. Ryder realizes that "moral responsibility" should precede class allegiance and that "compassion, not color consciousness," should guide middle-class Blacks in their associations with other Blacks.

Yet, can we be so clear of Chesnutt's final word on this issue? At the end of "March," Henrietta dies and the young man gets the job. Andrews sees this conclusion as a "major flaw" (83). However, another way to interpret the ending is that it is indicative of Chesnutt's ambivalence concerning the path of progress for Blacks.

In a letter to the editors of the Atlantic, Chesnutt responds to the suggestion that he publish several of his stories under a common heading:

I am very willing to adopt your suggestion to publish "The Wife of His Youth" and "The March of Progress" under a common heading. But if I had thought of that in advance, I should have sent you a third story, which is equally illustrative of the development of the colored race in this country, and which I take the liberty of enclosing herewith, under the title "A Matter of Principle."
If it should be found available, and the exigencies of magazine space permit, the three might be published under the general head, 'Forward, Back, and Cross Over,' adopting one of the figures in a quadrille—"The March of Progress" coming first, "The Wife of His Youth" next, and "A Matter of Principle" for the crossover. (Pioneer 78)

From the letter, one sees that Chesnutt considered "A March of Progress" to represent forward and "The Wife of His Youth" to represent backward. It is interesting to speculate upon what Chesnutt meant by forward and backward. Is he saying that Ryder's decision to acknowledge his wife is a move backward—racial regression? If that is the case, then the young man's procurement of the teaching position in "The March" is a movement forward for the race—racial progression. Hence, Chesnutt's position appears to be ambivalent. He is obviously concerned about moral behavior as it relates to racial progress.

The question of whether one should sacrifice compassion and moral responsibility for a chance to "better" the race seems to be at the core of Chesnutt's writing. In the "Wife of His Youth" the choice is clear. "The March of Progress" offers a loophole and an escape for Chesnutt. The board members make the correct decision morally by choosing
Henrietta, yet her immediate death offers a viable if unlikely pragmatic solution. Hence, Chesnutt can take a moral stance and at the same time champion the principles underlying DuBois' position.

Chesnutt explores another popular view of racial progress in "Dave's Neckliss" and "A Web of Circumstance." These stories reflect his questioning of an accommodationist approach to racial uplift that found its voice in Booker T. Washington. In brief, Washington believed that thrift, industry, Christian morality, voluntary segregation, and patience were the cornerstones of racial progress for Blacks. Gary Wintz clarifies:

He [Washington] consistently counseled patience in matters of racial injustice; he pronounced protest and racial agitation ineffective tactics and advised instead that living respectable lives and acquiring wealth was a much surer route to equality. In addition, in spite of the steadily deteriorating racial situation and the upsurge in racial violence, he continually expressed faith in the good will of southern whites. (37)

"Dave's Neckliss" and its revision "A Web of Circumstance" underscore the futility of Washington's position.

In "Dave's Neckliss" a slave is falsely accused of stealing a ham. As the story begins, Uncle Julius sheds
tears over Dave's plight. After much prompting from the narrator (John), Julius recounts the sad tale. On the same plantation as Julius, Dave worked hard, never drank or chased women, and read the Bible constantly. In a word, he was the ideal slave. Dave's problems began when he fell in love with Dilsey, a pretty female slave. Dave had a rival for Dilsey's affections in Wiley, another slave. Dilsey chose Dave, much to Wiley's consternation. To get even with Dave, Wiley planted a stolen ham in Dave's sleeping quarters. Although Dave had a reputation for being an honest man, neither Dilsey nor the slave owner believed in his innocence. His master punished him by commanding him to wear the ham as a necklace. After a long period of time, Master Walker ordered Dave to take off the necklace. However, by that time, Dave had become convinced that he was turning into a ham.

Eventually, Wiley confessed his crime, but it was too late for Dave. When the other slaves went to tell him of Wiley's confession, they found that he had hanged himself in the smokehouse. Like the ham that he imagined that he had turned into, he was hanging over a fire.

A similar situation occurs in "A Web of Circumstance." The protagonist of that story is Ben Davis, owner of a blacksmith shop as well as other property and a home. He is very proud of his accomplishments. He proclaims, "'We
colored folks hever had no chance ter git nothin’ befo’ de wah, but ef eve’y nigger in dis town had a tuck keer er his money sence de wah, like I has, an’ bought as much lan’ as I has, de niggers might’a’ got half de lan’ by dis time’” (293). Ben also has two children and a very pretty wife.

Unknown to Ben, his mulatto assistant loves his [Ben’s] wife and frames Ben by planting a stolen whip on Ben’s property. Ben is convicted of the crime and sentenced to five years in jail at hard labor. Interestingly, a young white man is convicted of manslaughter and sentenced on the same day as Ben. The judge sentences this young man to six months in jail and a fine of one hundred dollars. Indeed, Ben’s harsh sentence for a lesser crime—which he did not commit—contrasts sharply with the mild punishment of the white criminal.

When Ben is released, he returns to his home to find his wife living with his former assistant, his son lynched for killing a white man, and his daughter drowned in the creek. Overcome with rage and grief, Ben seeks vengeance. He goes to the house of the man whose whip he was accused of stealing and sees the man’s little daughter playing in the yard. He grabs a club, and his first thought is to kill the little girl. However, he changes his mind. As he runs away, the girl’s father shoots him dead. The narrator describes the final scene as follows:
His [Ben's] flight led him toward the little girl, whom he must pass in order to make his escape, and as Colonel Thornton turned the corner of the path he saw a desperate-looking negro, clad in filthy rags and carrying in his hand a murderous bludgeon, running toward the child, who, startled by the sound of footsteps, had turned and was looking toward toward the approaching man with wondering eyes. A sickening fear came over the father's heart, and drawing the ever-ready revolver, which according to the Southern custom he carried always upon his person, he fired with unerring aim. Ben Davis ran a few yards farther, faltered, threw out his hands, and fell dead at the child's feet. (322)

In both stories, the black protagonist exemplifies the model Negro as delineated by Washington. Dave is honest, religious, hard-working, and loyal to his master. Ben is a thrifty business owner who has acquired land. Yet, despite these "admirable" traits, both men suffer at the hands of Southern whites.

Admittedly, both Dave and Ben are framed by a jealous black rival; nonetheless, Chesnutt clearly wants his audience to understand the injustice of their punishments at the hands of whites who too quickly are ready to believe the
worst despite the men’s previous excellent behavior. Certainly, the ham in Dave’s cabin is evidence of his possible guilt. However, Dave’s greatest crime is his desire to read the Bible. The overseer echoes this sentiment, for as Julius says, "Mars Walker say it wuz des ez he 'spected: he didn' b'lieve in dese yer readin' en prayin' niggers; it wuz all 'pocrisy, en sarve' Mars Dugal' right fer 'lowin' Dave ter be readin' books w'en it wuz 'g'in' de law" (136). Hence, Chesnutt reveals that Southern justice is arbitrary and unfair. The Negro will not find an ally in the white man, who is always ready to have his suspicions and stereotypes confirmed.

Chesnutt underscores this point in "The Web of Circumstance." Chesnutt very carefully establishes Ben’s honesty and diligence in acquiring material luxuries. It is illogical to believe that he would steal a whip when he could have easily bought one for himself. Thus, the readiness of the court to convict him illustrates the futility of relying upon the Southern white "gentleman" to behave in a judicious manner. Ben’s unjust sentence in the face of the young white man’s rather lenient sentence for a more severe crime also highlights Chesnutt’s belief that Washington is incorrect in proclaiming the righteousness of the Southern white man. In a letter written to Washington, Chesnutt reiterates, "The good Southern whites are still in
the small minority; even Judge Jones announced that by their verdict in the Turner case, the white people of Alabama had made known to the world that justice between white and black could not be expected in the South" (Pioneer 196). Chesnutt realized that just as blacks were conditioned by their environment—a point he makes clear in both stories as Dave begins to assume the identity of a ham and as Ben behaves in a manner conditioned by prison—whites too were conditioned to believe in the inferiority and licentiousness of blacks. In both stories, justice falls before fear, paranoia, and race prejudice. Like Dave's, Ben's crime is more complex than simple petty theft. Ben is being punished for his audacity in challenging the social norms for Negro behavior. William Andrews explains this phenomenon:

The theft of the whip which leads to Davis' trial, wrongful conviction, and imprisonment appears to be motivated by intra-racial envy, but the "evidence" which convicts him and which governs the judge's unduly harsh sentence arises out of white fear of black upward mobility. For sounding hardly more radical than Booker T. Washington in his counsel to blacks that they support their own enterprises, accumulate capital, and acquire property, Davis is slandered as an anarchist, a
nihilist, a communist, and a revolutionary by the prosecutor in his trial. (98)

Andrews also discusses another key point. Chesnutt's use of the intra-racial rivalry plot does indeed offset the harsh condemnation of his white characters. This interpretation seems plausible, since Ben's rival disappears from the plot early in the story. Specifically, his role ends after Part I. Parts II-IV focusd upon Ben's trial and the effects of his imprisonment. Again, Chesnutt the trickster employs yet another device to mask his true intentions.

Despite this masking, the message in both stories is very clear. In "Web" Chesnutt is even more forceful in that his protagonist does not kill himself but rather contemplates killing another. However, Chesnutt succumbs to audience dictates and punishes the wayward ex-convict. His white audience would sympathize with Colonel Thornton's action to protect his innocent child. Hence, Chesnutt achieves two effects. He portrays Ben Davis as a wronged man--a victim. Yet, he mitigates the horror of his murder by evoking the paternal instinct within his audience.

What is Chesnutt's final stance concerning the progress of the race? That answer remains ambiguous. He undercuts the racial theories espoused by both DuBois and Washington. Some critics maintain that Chesnutt's view of racial progress rests upon the amalgamation of the races.
Chesnutt's View of Miscegenation

Much of Chesnutt's fiction deals with mixed-blood characters—the products of miscegenation. His primarily white nineteenth-century audience found his stories of passing and interracial liaisons shocking and distasteful. Critics pose numerous theories to explain Chesnutt's preoccupation with these characters. First, some proclaim that as a mulatto himself he was drawn to these characters, who in many ways exemplified his own racial ambivalence. Second, scholars see his mixed-blood characters as direct repudiations of the racial theories proclaiming mulattoes as genetically inferior. Third, critics view his mulatto figures as epitomizing his [Chesnutt's] belief in the eventual amalgamation of the races. Fourth, others see his use of the mulatto character as his succumbing to the literary trend that popularized the tragic mulatto.

Chesnutt's emphasis upon the mixed-blood character probably encompasses all of the above theories. However, one possibility not accounted for is Chesnutt's deliberate desire to shock, tease, and confound his audience and critics. Chesnutt as the trickster signifies upon his predominantly white audience's fears of racial amalgamation. In a letter to George Cable, Chesnutt comments upon the unfavorable criticism of his novel House Behind the Cedars. He says, "I anticipated such criticism, and imagine it is a
healthy sign; it ought to help the book in its character as a study of the color line. It is quite likely that people will buy a book they disapprove of..." (129). Clearly, Chesnutt revels in his audience's disapproval. He intentionally plays upon the racial paranoia characterized by a fear and distaste for the mulatto character.

Chesnutt's audience would have been very familiar with the popular "scientific" theories surrounding the mulatto. In his study, *Mulattoes and Race Mixture*, John G. Mencke discusses many of these early views of mulattoes. In general, the mulatto was seen as genetically inferior to both whites and "pure" blacks. As a hybrid they were regarded as incapable of enduring hardships (39). Nevertheless, whites held conflicting views of the mulatto, as Mencke explains:

The sum of all of these perceptions of the mulatto left most whites in a rather confused position. Their understanding of race and racial differences convinced them of the distinctness and inherent inferiority of the Negro. The mulatto, however, was clearly unlike the black man in many ways. He was obviously more intelligent than the Negro, but perhaps not as physically robust. Because he was more intelligent (thanks to his white blood), he commanded the most prestigious positions within
the race. Yet the mulatto’s white heritage did have detrimental effects, too. Most whites believed that the mulatto’s admixture of white blood left him with many of the natural aspirations of the white man—aspirations which were often stifled by the strictures of American race relations. His consequent discontent drove him into the role of an agitator, dangerously fomenting unrest among the mass of blacks who otherwise instinctively recognized the superiority of the white race and submitted to its dominance.

Whites often sympathized with the mulatto while being repulsed by the thought of miscegenation. This ambivalence made the mulatto a popular character in fiction by white authors.

The "mulatto character," as designated by Judith Berzon, has figured significantly in American fiction (53). James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) is the first American novel featuring a mulatto character in a prominent role (53). William Wells Brown’s *Clotelle: or the President’s Daughter* (1853), sharing the stage with Frederick Douglass’ *The Heroic Slave* as one of the first American novels written by an African-American, centers around a mulatto character (Andrews 14; Berzon 15).
American literature, the inclusion of the mulatto figure often serves propagandistic motives. In some novels the mulatto character functions as a tool for abolitionist theories. For example, in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe utilizes her "mixed-blood" characters to highlight the inhumanity of enslaving individuals who are as intelligent, refined, and virtuous as many members of white society (Berzon 55-57). On the other hand, some authors use the mulatto character to promote the theories of hybrid-degeneration and atavism. According to Berzon, hybrid-degeneration is the belief "that the offspring of race mixture inherit none of the good qualities of either of the parental stocks and thus are likely to die off in several generations" (24). Atavism focuses upon the notion that mixed-bloods, no matter how refined or cultured, will always revert to an inherently base primitivism (31). For instance, The Call of the South (1908) by Robert Lee Durham relates the tale of a Harvard-educated mulatto who forces himself upon his white wife. Similarly, Thomas Nelson Page, in his novel Red Rock: A Chronicle of Reconstruction (1898), compares the mulatto Moses to a "hyena," a "reptile," and a "wild beast" (Berzon 32,59), and Thomas Dixon's The Clansman (1905) emphasizes the animalistic allure of the mulatto female. Dixon's concern is with the way the mulatto
woman imperiled the morals and wisdom of white men" (Mencke 211).

In contrast to Dixon, Page, and Durham were authors such as Rebecca Harding Davis, George Washington Cable, and Albion Tourgee—who portrayed the mulatto character more sympathetically. Nevertheless, these sympathetic portraits propagated the tragic mulatto stereotype. The tragic mulatto figure in literature is an "almost white character whose beauty, intelligence, and purity are forever in conflict with 'savage primitivism' inherited from his or her Negro ancestors . . ." (Berzon 99). Often frustrated tragic mulattoes will indulge in racial passing as a means of resolving their conflict.

It was within this context that Chesnutt created his mulatto characters. However, an examination of his use of the mulatto character in "The Sheriff's Children," "Her Virginia Mammy," and The House Behind the Cedars reveals that Chesnutt transcends his contemporaries by making his mixed-blood characters double-sided, ambiguous figures who subtly mock and ridicule the racial pretensions of nineteenth-century white America.

On the surface, the mulatto character of "The Sheriff's Children" appears to personify, on the one hand, the tragic mulatto and, on the other hand, the atavistic villain. The story begins with the murder of Old Captain Walker. A young
mulatto is seen running from the crime scene, and eventually the young man is captured. In an instant of bravado, the town decides to break into the jail and lynch the young man, and a messenger runs to tell Sheriff Campbell.

The sheriff rushes to the jail and talks the murderous crowd into dispersing. After the citizens leave, the sheriff finds that the prisoner has a gun pointed at him. The prisoner demands his freedom but not before letting the sheriff know that he (the mulatto) is his (the sheriff’s) son. As a member of the local aristocracy, the sheriff once owned slaves. The mulatto’s mother was one of those slaves. The sheriff had quarrelled with the mother and, in a fit of anger and greed, had sold the mother and her child.

Eventually, the sheriff’s daughter by his white wife interrupts the reunion. She silently approaches the mulatto from the rear and shoots him. After bandaging the wound, the sheriff and his daughter return to their home. That night the sheriff resolves to make amends for his neglect of his son by vowing to help him prove his innocence. Ironically, the next morning when the sheriff enters the jail--eager to tell the mulatto of his decision--he finds that the prisoner had removed the bandage and died a few hours earlier.

The sheriff’s young mulatto son is unquestionably a tragic figure. At one point he rails against his futile
condition, saying to his father, "You gave me a white man's spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out" (86). He appears to represent the frustrated mulatto whose sensibilities are at odds with his fate as a Negro. His death at the end of the story signals to many of Chesnutt's readers that they have again been entertained by yet another tale of the "tragic mulatto."

Additionally, the mulatto appears to embody the atavistic mulatto villain who, despite his veneer of education, will always revert to a primitive state. The prisoner says as much himself:

'I have been to school, and dreamed when I went that it would work some marvelous change in my condition. But what did I learn? I learned to feel that no degree of learning or wisdom will change the color of my skin and that I shall always wear what in my own country is a badge of degradation. When I think about it seriously I do not care particularly for such a life. It is the animal in me, not the man, that flees the gallows.' (87)

Yet, Chesnutt's purpose is not to profile the plight of the mulatto. The prisoner represents instead a liminal figure caught between two worlds and two races. Neither alive nor dead, he lives in a constant state of limbo where he often
wishes for death but never achieves it because of his "animalistic" desire for life. He is also neither black nor white. In the end, he finds some solace in death, thus ending his liminality. However, the sheriff does not find any type of reconciliation. His son has disrupted his life and caused him to question the foundations upon which he has lived. Because he returns too late to the jail to reveal his intentions to his son, the sheriff will be in a constant state of turmoil and guilt. Hence, Chesnutt’s ultimate goal is to unmask the hypocrisy of the slaveholding Southern aristocracy represented by Campbell.

Like Faulkner, Chesnutt denigrates those Southern "gentlemen" who slept with their black mistresses and neglected the progeny of these unions. Just as the characters in Faulkner’s tales, Chesnutt’s sheriff suffers for his past sins, which are passed on to his children. In this instance, his daughter Polly unknowingly shoots her own brother. Also, Chesnutt’s criticism, like Faulkner’s, is ambiguously meshed in his rather sophisticated narrative style—though not reaching the level achieved by Faulkner in such works as *Absalom, Absalom* and *The Sound and the Fury*.

In introducing Campbell, the narrator stresses his conscientiousness in performing his duties as sheriff. The narrator says of Campbell, "He had sworn to do his duty faithfully, and he knew what his duty was, as sheriff,
perhaps more clearly than he had apprehended it in other passages of his life" (72-3). Yet, the narrator also hints at Campbell’s possible neglect of an earlier duty. Earlier in the text, the reader may also discern that Campbell has a character flaw. The narrator reveals that at one point Campbell was an ardent supporter of the Union; however, "yielding at last to the force of circumstances, he had entered the Confederate service rather late in the war..." (72). This passage suggests that the sheriff is not very strong in his convictions and may yield to peer or social pressures.

Nevertheless, the sheriff appears very stubborn and strongminded as he defies the crowd of would-be lynchers, stating, "I know my duty, and I mean to do it" (75). Unfortunately he was not so strong of character when he sold his slave mistress and their son. The narrator reveals that "he had yielded to the combination of anger and pecuniary stress" (85). Hence, once again the sheriff has "yielded" to circumstances.

By the end of the story the sheriff realizes that he not only has a duty to his badge, but he also has a duty to his son. The narrator states, "He saw that he had owed some duty to this son of his--that neither law nor custom could destroy a responsibility inherent in the nature of mankind" (91). Sadly, after reaching the resolution to help his son,
the sheriff "yields" to sleep and awakens "late the next morning." When he reaches the cell, his son is dead.

Not only does the story focus upon a father's neglect of his son, but it also stands as a metaphor for the relationship between Southern whites and blacks. Like the sheriff, whites must act quickly to secure justice for blacks; for if they hesitate, they may--like the sheriff--have to face the consequences of their hesitation.

While Chesnutt's readers may have found "The Sheriff's Children" shocking--because of its theme of miscegenation--they were accustomed to hearing stories about Southern gentlemen who had fathered children by slave mistresses. As long as the union was not legitimized, many could pretend ignorance of the immoral conduct of these men. However, his audience found the prospect of "legitimized" miscegenation totally intolerable. Both "Her Virginia Mammy" and The House Behind the Cedars center upon mulatto heroines who are engaged to white men. Indeed, in a December 12, 1899, letter to Houghton publishers, Chesnutt describes the reaction of one critic who was appalled by Chesnutt's discussion of race amalgamation:

One critic has already stamped me an an advocate of miscegenation, or at least desiring a relaxation of the rigid attitude of the white race in this particular, says that the theme is
unsavory, that I do not understand the 'subtle relations' existing between the two races in the South, and that I have some resentful feeling left over from the carpetbag era! (129)

By appearing to advocate the prospect of blacks and whites entering into legitimate unions, Chesnutt places himself in the middle of the amalgamation controversy which resurged in the 1890's.

John Mencke describes the sense of racial paranoia felt by the white race at the thought of racial mixing:

By the mid-1890s, however, this sentiment had begun to change. The issue of racial mixing became one of paramount concern. A number of factors had gradually undermined Southern whites' sense of security and control over race relation. Among the most important of these was a feeling that Negroes were retrogressing to a savage state. This fact was particularly evident in the statistics which seemed to demonstrate a precipitous rise in Negro criminality, most importantly in the rape of white women and girls. White fears and paranoia about this trend, and particularly about its sexual implications, found a powerful outlet in the subject of amalgamation of the races. Indeed, concern over this issue
took on new and frenzied dimensions as whites came to insist upon the maintenance of racial purity while simultaneously perceiving the rate of miscegenation as rising all about them. (107) Interestingly, not only did Chesnutt focus upon this theme in his fiction, but he also talked at length upon the issue of racial amalgamation in a series of published essays.

In August 1900, Charles Chesnutt published a series of three articles, entitled "The Future American," for the Boston Evening Transcript in which he openly discussed the issue of racial amalgamation. In the first article, Chesnutt attempts to refute the common belief that if there is to be a "future race," in the United States it will consist of "a harmonious fusion of the various European elements which now make up our heterogeneous population" ("Future" 96). Chesnutt proposes that any future American race will be an amalgamation of the white, black, and Native American populations.

In the second article, Chesnutt attempts to demonstrate that this type of racial amalgamation has already been taking place. Chesnutt cites numerous well-known personalities who had Negro ancestors—Alexander Pushkin, Robert Browning, the Dumas brothers, a famous Shakesperean actor, and two Roman Catholic bishops.
In the third and final article, Chesnutt discusses the existing conditions "which retard the development of the future American race type" ("Future" 103). Chesnutt maintains that the Native American race will not have a serious problem amalgamating into the white race. He stresses that because of "intense racial prejudice against color," blacks will not assimilate as easily ("Future" 104). He refers to laws forbidding intermarriage and the increasing trend for separate schools and separate railroad and street cars as major hindrances to racial amalgamation. However, Chesnutt asserts that the primary obstacle to racial amalgamation is the "low industrial and social efficiency of the colored race," which he attributes to environment (105). He then counters that the black race has made strides and will continue to do so if legislation does not hinder its progress.

Sally Ann H. Ferguson raises two important issues in her article "Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans." First, she asserts that Chesnutt's essays unmask his own racial biases against "genuine" blacks. She further maintains that these essays provide a unique vantage point from which to analyze Chesnutt's fiction:

More significantly, the "Future American" articles indicate that Chesnutt's ultimate solution to the race problem is a wholesale racial assimilation
achieved by the genetic dilution of the black race. Because this mechanistic plan callously discounts the element of human dignity—most especially in its treatment of 'genuine Negroes,' the Transcript series starkly reveals Chesnutt's racial myopia and its impact on his art. In the final analysis, it provides an indispensable tool for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of his fiction and of his literary and social imagination. (111)

Ferguson suggests that Chesnutt's novel The House Behind the Cedars makes the "same racial argument in fictional form" as that made in his "Future American" articles ("Future" 95).

Indeed, in her article "Rena Walden: Chesnutt's Failed 'Future American,'" Ferguson maintains that Rena, the heroine of House Behind the Cedars, does not successfully assimilate into the white race because of her ignorance and naivete. However, before examining the character of Rena Walden, it is prudent to analyze Clara in "Her Virginia Mammy."

"Her Virginia Mammy" opens in a dance studio. Clara, the head dancing mistress, is engaged in a conversation with her fiancee, John. John is again begging Clara to marry him, but she refuses. While she loves John, she will not marry him until she knows the circumstances of her birth.
Clara has been reared by the Hohlfelder's, a kindly German couple, who had adopted her twenty-three years earlier. As chapter two begins, the reader learns that Clara's pupils are a refined group of colored people who for the most part are "nearly all a little less than white" (35). One of her pupils, Mrs. Harper, asks Clara about her background. After hearing Clara's story, Mrs. Harper makes a startling revelation.

Mrs. Harper confesses that she knew Clara's real parents. According to Mrs. Harper, Clara is the daughter of a Southern gentleman who belonged to one of the first families of Virginia. She further reveals that Clara's parents were on the Pride of St. Louis with a colored nurse. Clara immediately concludes that Mrs. Harper was that nurse. Mrs. Harper responds, "'Yes, child, I was--your mammy. Upon my bosom you have rested; my breasts once gave you nourishment; my hands once ministered to you; my arms sheltered you, and my heart loved you and mourned you like a mother loves and mourns her firstborn" (55). Clara is delighted. According to Mrs. Harper, the steamboat exploded and many of the passengers died. She was spared but was sold into slavery when rescuers refused to believe she had been freed by her master. Clara was of course adopted by the German couple. Clara immediately tells John the story
and introduces him to her mammy. She then eagerly agrees to marry him as soon as possible.

While the story is sentimental, it also highlights a very controversial theme. Although the narrator never directly tells the reader that Clara’s mother is actually Mrs. Harper, clues and hints suggest this relationship. Additionally, the text suggests that John is very aware of Clara’s heritage but decides to ignore it.

The narrator’s first clue that Mrs. Harper may be Clara’s mother is found in the description of the two women. They bear a striking resemblance:

As they stood for a moment, the mirror reflecting and framing their image, more than one point of resemblance between them was emphasized. There was something of the same oval face, and in Clara’s hair a faint suggestion of the wave in the older woman’s; and though Clara was fairer of complexion, and her eyes were gray and the other’s black, there was visible, under the influence of the momentary excitement, one of those indefinable likenesses which are at times encountered,—sometimes marking blood relationship, sometimes the impress of a common training; in one case perhaps a mere earmark of temperament, and in another the index of a type. Except for the difference in
color, one might imagine that if the younger woman were twenty years older the resemblance would be still more apparent. (49-50)

Next, Chesnutt's use of dashes also hints that Mrs. Harper is not telling the complete truth. For instance, whenever she mentions Clara's mother, there is a pause designated by a dash:

'I was on the Pride of St. Louis, and I knew your father--and your mother.' (51)

'Your mother--also belonged to one of the first families of Virginia, and in her veins flowed some of the best blood of the Old Dominion.' (53)

'Yes, child, I was--your mammy.' (55)

The reader also understands that John realizes the truth:

He listened attentively and sympathetically, at certain points taking his eyes from Clara's face and glancing keenly at Mrs. Harper, who was listening intently. As he looked from one to the other he noticed the resemblance between them, and something in his expression caused Mrs. Harper's eyes to fall, and then glance up appealingly. (58)

Despite John's realization, he marries Clara. Certainly Chesnutt's story may have seemed indelicate to many of his
Southern readers. For he dares to portray a prominent white gentleman who willingly accepts his wife's mixed heritage.

Can we come to any clear conclusions concerning Chesnutt's view of miscegenation? This story appears to champion his theory of the naturalness of racial amalgamation. However, his most sustained discussion of this subject, *The House Behind the Cedars*, seems to suggest otherwise.

For ten years Chesnutt attempted to publish a short story entitled "Rena Walden," the tale of a young mulatta's ill-fated attempt to pass for white. Eventually Chesnutt would publish the story in novel form. It became *The House Behind the Cedars*.

The story begins with the arrival of a stranger in Patesville, North Carolina. Yet, the reader soon discerns that the stranger is very familiar with the town and its inhabitants. One day he follows a beautiful young woman to a small house behind a grove of cedars. That night, under the cover of darkness, he visits the inhabitants of the house. It is at this point that the reader learns that John Walden is the son of the mistress of the house and the brother of the beautiful young woman. From the family discussion, the reader apprehends that the family has a secret—a secret that has prompted John to move to another state and assume another identity. Eventually, he persuades
his mother to allow him to take his sister away also. She will live with him and help to care for his young son.

The next section of the novel focuses upon Rena’s interactions with her brother’s friends and neighbors. She is very popular and wins the affections of George Tyron. Tyron eventually proposes marriage to Rena. She accepts but wishes to tell him of her family secret. After her brother persuade her that revealing their secret would be a futile act, Rena decides to keep quiet. Later, she has several dreams in which her mother is sick, so she decides to go home and finds that her mother is indeed very sick. Ironically, Tyron arrives in Patesville on business at the same time that Rena is in town nursing her mother. Of course, Tyron learns Rena’s secret: she is of mixed-blood.

Interestingly, it is only at this point in the narration that the story openly discusses Rena’s black heritage. The audience has been fooled in the same manner as Tyron. One can only speculate at Chesnutt’s purposes for this. Perhaps he wanted to demonstrate to his audience that many blacks were as refined, educated, and moral as whites of the same class. Or perhaps he wanted to disconcert an audience that staunchly maintained that blacks—no matter how fair-skinned—could not pass for a long period of time as a white person. John Walden, or Warwick, proves the latter to be false. He has married into a prominent white
family, established a successful law practice, and is a pillar of society. Even after Tyron rejects Rena, Tyron will not give John away because as he says, "I shall never be able to think of you as other than a white man . . ." (103).

Consequently, after learning of Rena's heritage, Tyron ends the engagement, although he cannot easily forget Rena. Rena decides to take a position as a teacher in a "colored school" in a neighboring county. The principal, Jeff Wain, is attracted to her. In the meantime, Tyron has decided that he will offer Rena another type of relationship that is not sanctioned by marriage. He requests a meeting with her; she refuses.

The story ends sadly for Rena. One day after school, Rena and a student decide to take a shortcut through the swamps. They become separated. Left alone, Rena spies Jeff Wain coming toward her with the intention of molesting her. She runs away. Unfortunately, she becomes lost and sick. Eventually, she is found by her loyal and faithful friend Frank, a brown-skinned Negro. Before she dies, Frank confesses his love for her. The story ends with Tyron's realization that Rena is dead.

Is the tale of Rena another example of the tragic mulatto? Is Chesnutt saying that Rena should have passed? Is he advocating passing for those blacks who are fair
enough to do so? Why can he not allow her to marry Frank? Critics have often pondered the answers to these questions. Arlene Elder sees the novel as Chesnutt’s vehicle for showing the futility of attempting to cross racial boundaries:

Chesnutt, however, shows a more realistic sense than most of his contemporaries of the hazards, if not the futility, of such attempts—despite his book’s obvious link to the tragic mulatto genre—and it’s drawn closer than before to determinism and naturalism, the magnet for most experimental turn-of-the-century writers. (174)

William Andrews praises Chesnutt for breaking barriers in creating a black male who successfully passes into white society:

Through Walden’s achievements in the white world Chesnutt sought to refute the socially debilitating stereotype of the mulatto as an inescapably doomed social misfit. Walden’s aggressive success orientation, buttressed by his moral pragmatism and unabashed self-interest, fits him for the role of the young man on the make, the familiar but rather ambiguously heroic American archetype. (Literary Career 165)
Andrews also maintains that through his novel Chesnutt wanted to make his white audience cognizant of the tragic consequences of racial prejudice:

Chesnutt did not write *The House Behind the Cedars* to advocate miscegenation; he depicted in conventional fashion the tragic consequences of his heroine's attempt to pass for white. He did want to create in his white readers an awareness of and responsiveness to the social, economic, and psychological rationale for mulatto assimilation into mainstream American life. (44)

Donald Gibson, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, states that Chesnutt defies a definitive interpretation and that one cannot clearly discern Chesnutt's ideological stance:

Chesnutt joins other novelists of the nineteenth century in his inability, finally, to take an ideologue's stance, to know anything beyond what new, scientific definitions of knowing allowed him. He follows Melville, who leaves indefinite a sense of what has happened at the end of *Moby Dick* because there are no means of knowing the answers to the questions he raises. He follows Hawthorne, who knows that he cannot resolve the questions raised by *The Scarlet Letter* because what seemed
certainly to be metaphysical questions turn out finally to be psychological instead, and therefore the basis for dealing with such questions is no longer clear. (xxii)

Certainly, in many ways "The Sheriff's Children," "Her Virginia Mammy," and The House Behind the Cedars raise more questions than they provide answers. Both "Virginia" and House raise gender issues. Clara doesn't know her mother; Rena does. One could speculate that had Rena been an orphan, she too might have passed successfully. Also, Chesnutt contrasts the two Southern white men--John and Tyron. John makes the conscious decision to accept Clara's heritage; Tyron waits too late. Like the sheriff in "The Sheriff's Children," Tyron hesitates and must suffer from the loss of his true love Rena. Finally, like Ryder in "The Wife of His Youth" and the board in "The March of Progress," Rena must make a choice between her sentimental detachment to her mother and her desire to improve her physical and social condition. Clara is denied this choice; her mother chooses for her.
NOTES


24Gary Richard Thompson has already made a connection between Schlegel's view of irony and the authors of the nineteenth century in his analysis of the arabesque as it relates to both Poe and Hawthorne.

25While many people see Washington as the originator of the school of thought espousing self-help and the need for industrial education, as Gary Wintz says, "The concepts usually associated with his name, self-help and industrial education, had become dominant ideologies in the black community some time before he rose to prominence." Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance, p.36.
CHAPTER IV

THE TRICKSTER UNVEILED

An Ambitious Novel

After eight months of composing, Charles Chesnutt published his most ambitious novel, *The Marrow of Tradition*, released by Houghton and Miflin in October of 1901. In his novel, Chesnutt mingles numerous themes and concerns. The major plot centers upon the events and machinations that eventually result in a bloody race riot. An actual riot that took place in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898, serves as the basis for Chesnutt’s novel. Subplots focus upon a love triangle, a murder, and a family secret involving miscegenation. While Chesnutt’s novel is a work of fiction, the sociological ramifications of the text are enormous. For *The Marrow of Tradition* centers upon the complex relationships between blacks and whites in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. In many ways, the text is a refutation of Radicalism—the prevailing school of thought concerning blacks at the time of the publication of the novel.

In his study, *A Rage for Order*, Joel Williamson identifies three schools of thought concerning the Negro during Chesnutt’s lifetime—liberal, conservative, and
radical (70). Williamson asserts that Liberalism reached its zenith in the 1880s. Basically, Liberalism encompassed the ideas that the Negro had not reached his full potential. Liberals hailed the advances that were made by blacks during Reconstruction and lamented that since that time whites had ignored blacks and left them to their own "inferior" devices. Liberals believed that whites should take responsibility in uplifting their black brothers:

Liberalism in the 1880s, then, was optimistic about the capacities of the Negro, and it called upon the best Southern whites to pick up again the cross of labor among their darker brothers. Appropriately, Liberalism was open-ended in its view of the Negro's future place in Southern society. It could contemplate with relative equanimity, if not outright pleasure, an eventual parity of Negroes with whites in the enjoyment of many—but never all--white cultural ideals. Liberalism was also marked by adventurousness. Liberals were willing to gamble that improved circumstances and broader exposures would better the Negro, and they exhibited a disposition to be flexible and experimental in the pursuit of that end. (Williamson 76)
Williamson further maintains that Liberalism had its basis in Conservatism, the dominant trend since the 1830s (72). Conservatives felt that the Negro was inherently inferior and relatively harmless as long as he maintained his proper place in society:

Conservatism by its very nature tended to regard any peace as a good peace. It much preferred to let well enough alone. It was not aggressively anti-Megro, unless the Negro deserted his assigned place, and that place was always assumed to be somewhere safely below the place of white people. Conservatism was securely the mass mode of thought about race in the South in the 1880s, and it tolerated a wide range of varieties, the variety depending essentially upon various views of the innate character of Negroes. (72)

By far the most malignant views of the Negro belonged to the Radicals. Radicalism reached its high point during the 1890s. Radicals saw blacks as dangerous to society. According to this school of thought, blacks would inevitably revert to a "natural" bestial state. Without the restraints of slavery, whites were endangered by the potential savagery of blacks. Radicals were especially fearful of young black males.
These savage, animalistic young men, according to Radical paranoia, longed to rape white women (Williamson 78-9). This Radical paranoia directly resulted in the increased lynchings of black men. Williamson gives horrifying statistics that chronicle the lynching frenzy that seized the United States at the turn of the century:

As Radicalism seized the leaders, so, too, did it seize the masses. In the 1890s in fourteen Southern states, an average of 138 persons was lynched each year and roughly 75 percent of the victims were black. From 1900 to 1909, the number of lynchings declined by half, but Negroes were 90 percent of those lynched and the lower South remained its special scene. Between 1885 and 1907 there were more persons lynched in the United States than were legally executed, and in the year 1892 twice as many. (122)

Another consequence of Radicalism was the increased incidence of rioting.

Between 1898 and 1906 numerous race riots erupted in major cities throughout the South. Most of these riots followed long periods in which whites were agitated to violent behavior by radical rhetoric and propaganda. During the height of the frenzy, white marauders would punish blacks indiscriminately and viciously. Blacks were
outnumbered and lacked the necessary arms to adequately defend themselves. Williamson further explains the causes for such violent outbursts:

Essentially, riots and near-riots, which were much more numerous, were simply symptoms of the prevalence of the Radical disease. However, several of the early outbreaks and threatened outbreaks were triggered by the elevation of Negroes to relatively important political offices. Particularly, many of these were associated with the appointment in the South in and after 1897 by the Republican administration of Negroes to certain federal offices, especially to positions as postmasters, particularly in the black belts. The confluence of these events—the rise of Radicalism and the development by the Republican party of a new Southern strategy dependent in part upon the appointment of blacks to important federal offices—opened a gaping wound in the social body of the South. (127)

One of the most notorious riots occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina. Large numbers of blacks were killed; hundreds of blacks were hurt and displaced from their homes (Williamson 131). As Chesnutt relates in his novel, the primary cause of that riot was political. Radicals sought
to dismantle the powerful coalition of Republicans and Populists—a coalition resulting in the election of blacks to key political positions in the city (Williamson 132).

Interestingly, this Radical dogma is best exemplified in works of fiction by white writers, such as Thomas Dixon. Dixon’s The Leopard’s Spots (1902) is "the work nearest to a codification of the Radical dogma . . ." (Williamson 98). John Mencke, in Mulattoes and Race Mixture, reiterates, "The book was the first volume of a trilogy which justified Southern resistance to Radical Reconstruction and told of the glorious role played by the Ku Klux Klan in saving Southern civilization from destruction at the hands of blacks and Northern reformers" (qtd. in Mencke 209).

Dixon also addresses the danger of the black male in the role of George Harris. George Harris is a young mulatto befriended by Everett Lowell, the white congressman from Boston. George wishes to marry Lowell’s daughter. Of course, Lowell refuses. Dixon’s message is quite clear. If one treats a Negro equally, he will inevitably want to marry into the race. This racial amalgamation will result in the degeneration of the white race. A passage from Dixon’s novel reinforces this sentiment:

Amalgamation simply meant Africanisation. The big nostrils, flat nose, massive jaw, protruding lip and kinky hair will register their animal marks
over the proudest intellect and rarest beauty of any other race. The rule that had no exception was that one drop of Negro blood makes a Negro. (Qtd. in Mencke 211).

Dixon's book was a success, so much so that Chesnutt sent copies of his novel The Marrow of Tradition to President Theodore Roosevelt and several Congressmen, "hoping that it would serve as a countervailing influence to Dixon's poisonous racism" (Farnsworth xiv). In a May 9, 1902, letter to Representative F.D. Crumpacker, Chesnutt remarks upon the insidiousness of Dixon's novel:

I have read Mr. Dixon's book. It doubtless represents the view of an extreme and I trust a very small proportion of Southern people. He is a North Carolinian, and for the past two or three years race feeling has been very acute in that State. . . . There has always been a great deal of Southern claptrap about the disastrous results that would follow the intermingling of blood. Such intermingling as there has been, and there has been a great deal, has been done with the entire consent and cheerful cooperation of the white race, and I am unable to see any disastrous results that have followed so far. (Pioneer 181)
After the publication of his novel, Chesnutt found that he had underestimated the number of Southerners who shared Dixon's distaste for blacks and miscegenation. For Chesnutt's novel attempts to overturn many of the pernicious views underscoring the Radical dogma.

Indeed, *The Marrow of Tradition* is a direct repudiation of Dixon's Radicalism. Through Major Carteret, Captain McBane, and General Belmont—the triumvirate that initiates the Wellington [the fictional counterpart of Wilmington] riot—Chesnutt demonstrates the hypocrisy, greed, and unfounded racial paranoia characterizing the Radical ideology. Captain McBane also represents lower-class whites who achieve wealth after Reconstruction. He is unrefined, unethical, and vulgar. He has no qualms about killing in cold blood. While leading a local band of the Klu Klux Klan, McBane murders Josh Green's father while his wife watches. From that moment on she is mentally unstable. Thus, Chesnutt demonstrates that the actions of the Klu Klux Klan were anything but noble. Throughout the novel, Josh Green plans his revenge upon McBane. At the conclusion of the riot, he kills McBane and dies with a smile on his face. This is the first time that Chesnutt allows one of his wronged black characters to actually carry out his revenge upon his white enemy.26
Chesnutt also underscores the injustice of lynchings. In the story, Sandy—the faithful servant to Mr. Delamere, an elderly Southern aristocrat—is accused of murdering Mrs. Polly Ochiltree. The whites are eager to lynch Sandy. Some even intimate that he may have raped the elderly widow. He is saved by Mr. Delamere who discovers that his nephew Tom disguised himself as Sandy to commit the crime.

Finally, Chesnutt addresses the taboo of miscegenation. Olivia Carteret has a black sister, Janet Miller. Janet is the wife of Dr. Miller who has established the black hospital. Janet, Dr. Miller, and their young son live in Major Cartaret's old homestead. Hence, there are bad feelings between the Millers and the Cartarets. As the novel progresses, Olivia learns that her father had legally married his slave Juliet, Janet's mother. She also learns that at his death he left a portion of his estate to Janet. Janet did not receive her inheritance due to the meddling of Polly Ochiltree who stole the papers that would have substantiated her claim to legitimacy. Olivia attempts to correct this wrong at the end of the novel when she begs Dr. Miller to save her dying son.

As one can see, Chesnutt's novel is somewhat volatile in nature; at least it would have been considered volatile by his white readers at the turn of the century. As in his previous works, Chesnutt, the literary trickster, employs
numerous narrative techniques to mitigate the incendiary nature of his themes.

To begin with, he borders his text in a frame of domesticity. The tale starts and ends in the Carteret home. Next, he utilizes a narrative device reminiscent of his Uncle Julius stories. Mammy Jane is a former slave who relates the history of the Carteret family. Further, Chesnutt evokes the detached, objective narrator of his Wife tales. As in the short story collection, this narrator’s chief tool is indirection. Finally, Chesnutt uses character doubling to suggest the possible weaknesses and strengths of his characters. He hesitates to make judgments for his audience. His characters are contradictory figures; this contrast fosters a dialectical relationship which allows the reader to come to his or her own conclusions concerning Chesnutt’s final stance.

However, at various points in the narrative Chesnutt abandons these narrative techniques. Perhaps because of his success with his short story collections and his first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt felt more comfortable in directly addressing the injustices heaped upon Blacks in the South. For example, in chapter twenty-eight the narrator becomes intrusive and assumes the tone of a reporter or chronicler. For a time, the reader is induced to leave the fictional world of Wellington and listen to the
narrator’s editorial. There is a tone of veracity and historiocity that is very disturbing to the reader—particularly a white reader in 1901. Chesnutt becomes a very identifiable author—identifiable in the sense that the members of the audience perceive that he is talking directly to them. Chesnutt assumes a position of authority and his narration assumes the character of authoritative discourse as identified by Mikhail Bakhtin. As Bakhtin points out in his treatise "Discourse in the Novel," authoritative discourse is not very successful in fiction.

Perhaps these moments when Chesnutt seems to lift his authorial mask, account for much of the criticism of his novel. For Chesnutt’s novel did receive harsh criticism and was not the commercial success that he and his publishers hoped it would be.

The Trickster Removes His Mask

Esu, do not undo me,
Do not falsify the words of my mouth,
Do not misguide the movements of my feet,
You who translates yesterday’s words
Into novel utterances,
Do not undo me,
I bear you sacrifice.

Traditional Oriki Esu27
As reiterated in the excerpt above, the West African trickster figure Legba (Esu is another name for Legba in Yoruba mythology) rules the realm of language. He has the ability to undo, falsify, misguide, and translate language. In a sense these are the objectives of Chesnutt in his novel. He wishes to undo the rhetoric of Radicalism, falsify his motives so not to alienate his audience, misguide his reader, and translate the words and ideas underlying racial prejudice in order to foster a new and novel—the pun seems appropriate—portrait of blacks. In order to accomplish these goals, Chesnutt relies upon various narrative techniques.

Chesnutt, very much aware of the possible hostility that his audience may have for his thematic concerns, practices numerous structural and narrative devices in *The Marrow of Tradition* that serve to mask and misdirect his true intentions. John Wideman concurs in his study "Charles W. Chesnutt: The Marrow of Tradition." He notes the vast range of Chesnutt’s creative techniques:

The reader must look at all the elements of that art, from Chesnutt’s comprehension of national and international politics, which provides the organizing theme of the novel, to stylistic details such as the sustained leitmotiv of disguise and masquerade warning the reader never
to accept appearance for reality in Wellington. Further, the reader should take into account the variety of narrative tones, which range from intrusive essay-commentary to dramatic presentation. The book is further enriched with dialect, folk maxims and parodies of newspaper verbiage, all providing a fascinating cross section of language styles written and spoken at the turn of the century. (132)

Nevertheless, Wideman does not account for other aspects of Chesnutt's craft: his clever framing of his novel; his narrative within a narrative as related by his dialect speaker, Mammy Jane; his love of narrative indirection as evinced by his often ambivalent narrator and his use of indirect discourse; and his implementation of character doubling.

The Marrow of Tradition begins and ends in the Carteret household. Chapter one begins with the birth of Dodie, Carteret's son. The language fosters a tone of foreboding:

The heavy acent of magnolias, overpowering even the smell of drugs in the sickroom, suggested death and funeral wreaths, sorrow and tears, the long home, the last sleep. The major shivered with apprehension as the slender hand which he held in his own contracted nervously and in a
spasm of pain clutched his fingers with a viselike grip. (1)

Dodie and his mother Olivia survive. Ironically, the novel ends with Dodie’s possible death. The last two chapters of the novel vacillate between the Miller and Carteret households. Dodie has the croup; the only doctor that can save him is Dr. Miller, the husband of Olivia’s black half-sister, Janet. The novel closes with Miller entering Carteret’s house to save the baby. The last line of the novel reads, "There’s time enough, but none to spare" (329).

Chesnutt’s frame provides a border for his various plots. The frame of domesticity sentimentalizes and personalizes the events of the tale. The ending remains open. While we hope that Miller will be able to save Dodie, Chesnutt leaves us with the nagging possibility that the baby dies. Likewise, the end remains unknown for race relations between Blacks and whites in the South. The relatively indeterminate ending allows for the freeplay of ideas. The lack of a center in the text also enhances the freeplay of ideas.

In his essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Jacques Derrida explains the concept of freeplay as it relates to the field of language:
This field is in fact that of freeplay, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble. This field permits these infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it; a center which arrests and bounds the freeplay of substitutions. (Derrida 967)

In terms of Chesnutt's novel, the domestic frame functions as the field for the linguistic event—the actions in the novel. The various plots form the basis for the infinite substitutions—referring to the vast number of meanings and interpretations one can gleam from the tale.

The interaction and intertwining of the various plots in the novel prohibit centering. P. Jay Delmar identifies three main plots in his article "Character and Structure in Charles W. Chesnutt's The Marrow of Tradition (1901)"—the love plot, the murder mystery, and the racial conflict. While I separate the plots involving miscegenation and the racial conflict resulting in the riot, Delmar places these two plots in the same category. Delmar further contends that the novel is flawed in that the plots are not
sufficiently tied together and that Dr. Miller does not have a major role in the love plot:

It is with the integration of the three plots that Chesnutt’s novel demonstrates its greatest technical weakness, and in that regard The Marrow of Tradition deserves much of the criticism which it has received. The flaw may be stated quite simply. While Major Carteret is involved in all three plots, his counterpart Dr. Miller is involved in only two and in only one of them with any real significance. . . . Moreover, while the mystery and racial plots are themselves related, both dealing with the results of racial tension, the love plot seems to stand by itself. Its only connection to the rest of the novel comes by way of its actors, thematic relations with the other two plots being quite loose. The novel, then, is overplotted in a sense, not because of the number of plots but because one of them is not fitted smoothly into the rest and because one of the key figures in the work has too little to do. (288)

Delmar posits a theory to explain these defects. He speculates that Chesnutt may have wanted to please his audience by including the love plot. He does not have an answer to explain Miller’s small role in the other plots.
Perhaps one answer is that Chesnutt deliberately resisted centering his novel.

To have eliminated the love plot and to have given Miller a prominent role in all of the plots of the story would have grounded the novel. The audience would have been unable to resist identifying Dr. Miller with the author. Despite the common characteristics shared by both Miller and Chesnutt, one should not readily designate the doctor as the author’s mouthpiece (Wideman 131-32). Also, the elaborate plotting provides layering that effectively decents the reader. This field, bordered by the domestic frame, allows for the freeplay of meaning.

Chesnutt also employs another narrative technique that he perfected in his Uncle Julius tales. In Marrow Mammy Jane recounts the origin of the strife between Olivia and Janet. Dr. Price initiates Jane’s narrative. Earlier in the evening, Olivia has a shock that serves to induce premature labor. Dr. Price seeks answers from Jane. To explain Olivia’s collapse, Jane relates a tale of miscegenation.

Like Julius, Jane speaks in a Negro dialect, a relic of her slavery days. She describes how she was mammy to both Olivia’s mother and Olivia. She tells how after Elizabeth Merkell’s death, Polly Ochiltree desires to marry Samuel and be a foster mother to Olivia. Samuel rejects Polly and
appears to enter into an illicit relationship with Janet. Jane remarks that everyone is surprised that after his death Samuel does not provide for Julia's security:

Julia had a easy time; she had a black gal ter wait on her, a buggy to ride in, an' eve'rything she wanted. Eve'rybody s'posed Mars Sam would give her a house an' lot, er leave her somethin' in his will. But he died suddenly, and did n' leave no will, an' Mis' Polly got herse'f' pinted gyardeen ter young Mis' 'Livy, an'driv Julia an' her young un out er de house, an' lived here in dis house wid Mis' 'Livy till Mis' 'Livy ma'ied Majah Carteret. (7)

Later in the narrative the reader learns that to discourage Polly, Samuel marries his black housekeeper, Julia. The couple has a daughter, Janet. After Samuel's death, Polly hides the will and throws Julia out into the streets.

However, Jane does not realize all of this. She is a limited narrator, for she is unaware of Julia's marriage to Samuel. Hence, unlike Julius, Jane is an unreliable narrator. While Julius' motives are questionable and his stories are fantastic, the glimpses into the customs and tendencies of slave masters ring true. He has access to family secrets. Jane does not. Therefore, we are not to view her in the same light as Julius.
Thus, Jane is not meant to function in the same capacity as Julius. Jane represents a bygone era. A young black nurse hired by the Carterets helps to underscore how the Mammy Janes of Southern society have outlived their usefulness to the black race. This young woman ponders upon the differences between the generations:

These old-time negroes, she said to herself, made her sick with their slavering over white folks, who, she supposed, favored them and made much of them because they had once belonged to them,—much the same reason why they fondled their cats and dogs. For her own part, they gave her nothing but her wages, and small wages at that, and she owed them nothing more than equivalent service. (42)

While one must be careful before attributing a sentiment expressed by a character to the author, Jane's limited knowledge of the truth certainly suggests that Chesnutt does not want his audience to see the old nurse as an admirable figure. This view of Mammy Jane is further reinforced by her response to Olivia's belief that "The young negroes are too self-assertive. Education is spoiling them . . ." (43). Jane responds, "I's fetch' my gran'son Jerry up ter be 'umble, an' keep in 'is place. An' I tells dese other niggers dat ef dey'd do de same, an' not crowd de w'ite folks, dey'd git ernuff ter eat, an' live out deir days in
peace an' comfo't" (44). Jane and Jerry are relics of the past. William Andrews concurs and states that both Jane Letlow and her son Jerry Letlow are stereotypical figures representing the "aunty figure of the old school" and the "modern stepinfetchit" (Literary Career 202).

Another interesting aspect of the young nurse’s estimation of Jane’s character is that is an example of the type of indirect discourse found in The Wife of His Youth. The sentence that initiates the passage," These old-time negroes, she said to herself. . . ," signals a kind of interior monologue or indirect discourse. The passage definitely has a speakerly tone. The phrases, this old woman and these old time negroes, are far too colorful to belong to the narrator. They fit the profile of the young nurse. Also the passage has a tone of impatience that is indicative of the "chip-on-the-shoulder" attitude attributed to her by the narrator (42). Creatively, such devices allow Chesnutt to perhaps vent some of his own frustration and yet maintain his mask of objectivity.

In his analysis of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Henry Louis Gates defines the "represented discourse" or "mediating term between narrative commentary and direct discourse" of Zora Neal Hurston’s novel as indirect discourse (191-192). I use his definition of indirect discourse in labelling such passages as the one above.
take issue with his assertion that Hurston is the first author to introduce "free indirect discourse into Afro-American narration" (191). Chesnutt appears to have been experimenting with a form of indirect discourse as early as 1899 with the publication of *The Wife of His Youth*.

Another instance of indirect discourse occurs when a train conductor forces Dr. Miller to sit in the "colored" section of the train. Miller does not feel comfortable in the presence of the negro masses. The narrator comments, "... these people were just as offensive to him as to the whites in the other end of the train" (61). Miller desires a more agreeable solution to the present train segregation rules: "Surely, if a classification of passengers on trains was at all desirable, it might be made upon some more logical and considerate basis than a mere arbitrary, tactless, and, by the very nature of things, brutal drawing of a color line" (61). The intensifier *surely* hints of an urgency in tone that would be more befitting for Miller than the narrator. The passage assumes a speakerly quality.

Another narrative technique that mimics Chesnutt's approach in *Wife* is that of the seemingly detached and objective narrator. For instance in chapter five, the narrator introduces the audience to both Dr. Miller and his white colleague, Dr. Burns. The narrator's description of these men highlights the similarities between the races:
Having disposed of this difference, and having observed that the white man was perhaps fifty years of age and the other not more than thirty, it may be said that they were both tall and sturdy, both well dressed, the white man with perhaps a little more distinction; both seemed from their faces and their manners to be men of culture and accustomed to the society of cultivated people. They were both handsome men, the elder representing a fine type of Anglo-Saxon, as the term is used in speaking of our composite white population; while the mulatto's erect form, broad shoulders, clear eyes, fine teeth, and pleasingly moulded features showed nowhere any sign of that degeneration which the pessimist so sadly maintains is the inevitable heritage of mixed races. (49)

Chesnutt's use of the conditional—as signaled by the words perhaps, may be, and seemed—heralds a narrator who wishes to appear objective. The reader must come to his or her own conclusions. The narrative stance helps to ease the discomfort of Chesnutt's primarily white nineteenth-century reader who adheres to the atavistic theory—that miscegenation leads to a racially degenerative hybrid. Chesnutt directly or rather indirectly refutes Radicalism.
A final technique that serves to mask Chesnutt's growing antipathy toward Southern whites who oppose the social and political "uplifting" of blacks is that of character doubling. Delmar asserts that Chesnutt's plots rely upon "double or even triple characterization to unify them . . ." (285). This is true. For instance, Olivia and Janet are doubles. At the end of the novel, Miller is struck by Olivia's resemblance to his wife:

> A lady stood there, so near the image of his own wife, whom he had just left, that for a moment he was well-nigh startled. A little older, perhaps, a little fairer of complexion, but with the same form, the same features, marked by the same wild grief. (323)

Yet, each sister represents conflicting ideologies. Janet has always wanted to embrace her sister. Olivia, on the other hand, is repulsed by her half-sister even after she discovers that Janet is her father's legal child. Olivia only agrees to recognize their relationship after her son is critically ill and in need of Miller's services. Clearly, Janet evinces moral superiority by denouncing the inheritance that Olivia offers and by prompting her husband to help Dodie even though Carteret is responsible for the events which result in her son's death.
The love plot also evolves around character doubling. Lee Ellis and Tom Delamare are rivals for the affections of Carteret’s younger sister. They are very different men. Delmar explains, "Lee Ellis is a hard-working, amiable, compassionate transplanted Northerner. . . . Tom Delamere, on the other hand, in probably the most stereotypic characterization of the entire novel, is a representative of the degeneration of Southern aristocracy . . ." (285). Chesnutt complicates his technique of doubling by having Delamere disguise himself as Sandy Campbell, his grandfather’s black servant.

Delamere assumes this persona whenever he wishes to entertain himself. For example, one night he participates in a cakewalk dressed in Sandy’s clothes. He is very proud of his ability to mimic Sandy. Interestingly, Delamere’s exploits are narrated from Ellis’s point of view. The narrator never directly explains that Tom is impersonating Sandy. The reader goes through the discovery process along with Ellis. At one point in the story Ellis sees two men who bear a striking likeness for one another:

When Sandy had stopped beneath the lamp-post, the man who was following him had dodged behind a tree-trunk. When Sandy moved on, Ellis, who had stopped in turn, saw the man in hiding come out and follow Sandy. When this second man came in
range of the light, Ellis wondered that there should be two men so much alike. Ellis had recognized the peculiar, old-fashioned coat that Sandy had worn upon the two occasions when he had noticed him. Barring this difference, and the somewhat unsteady gait of the second man, the two were as much alike as twin brothers. (173)

Tom Delamere is following Sandy. He has just left Polly Ochiltree's house where he has murdered her in cold blood. Later, the sheriff arrests Sandy for the crime. Ellis eventually realizes that Tom committed the murders disguised as Sandy. He tells Tom's grandfather who is responsible for Sandy's release from prison. Chesnutt's use of doubling in this instance reflects his epistemological concerns. His technique challenges his reader's sense of knowing. Appearances are deceptive. Chesnutt wants to make his white reader cognizant of the possibility that blacks have been misunderstood and misrepresented.

Perhaps the most intriguing doubling is with the characters of Josh Green and Dr. Miller. Both are young black men; however, they represent contrasting ideologies. Josh is uneducated and bent on avenging the death of his father. He would rather die than live in subservience to whites. He becomes the leader of the black faction that retaliates against the white rioters. Dr. Miller is a
symbol for DuBois' talented tenth. He urges Green and the others to thing reasonably and not act hastily. He knows that their actions will result in death for all of them.

Critics have speculated upon which character Chesnutt sympathizes with most. I agree with William Andrews who believes that both men represent Chesnutt's ambivalence. Andrews asserts, "Chesnutt's advice to blacks throughout he novel is clouded somewhat by his divided sympathies between William Miller and Josh Green, two prime examples of Afro-American social and spiritual evolution in the South" (197). Andrews maintains that ultimately Chesnutt falls on the side of Miller. Certainly Miller survives the riot to inact a moral victory over Carteret. Yet, Chesnutt's character doubling creates a dialectical relationship between the two men that fosters a never-ending dialogue.

Despite these devices designed to prohibit his reader from drawing definitive conclusions concerning his personal and political beliefs, Chesnutt appears to drop his veil of imperturbability. The trickster, in effect, drops his mask.

In chapter twenty-eight, after describing the aftermath of Sandy's narrow escape from a lynching, Chesnutt departs from the fictionalized world of Wellington to comment upon the racial views indicative of the country as a whole:

The nation was rushing forward with giant strides toward colossal wealth and world-dominion, before
the exigencies of which mere abstract ethical theories must not be permitted to stand. The same argument that justified the conquest of an inferior nation could not be denied to those who sought the suppression of an inferior race. In the South, an obscure jealousy of the negro's progress, an obscure fear of the very equality so contemptuously denied, furnished a rich soil for successful agitation. Statistics of crime, ingeniously manipulated, were made to present a fearful showing against the negro. . . . Constant lynchings emphasized his impotence, and bred everywhere a growing contempt for his rights. (238)

The tone of the passage heralds the convictions of its author. Chesnutt seems to be using his novel as a forum to editorialize about the injustices heaped upon blacks. Wideman comments upon Chesnutt's narrative style:

Two transitional chapters, 'The Vagaries of the Higher Law,' and 'In Season and Out,' summarize the events that have transpired in Wellington. The essay style of these chapters should not suggest lack of artistry. Their documentary tone adds to the realism cultivated by Chesnutt throughout the Wellington section and supplies
the global perspective that reminds us that Wellington's crime did not occur accidentally or in vacuum. (129)

For Chesnutt's turn of the century white reader this "realism" and "global perspective" was very disturbing. Such passages evince Bakhtin's authoritative discourse.

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin defines authoritative discourse:

Authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. . . . It is indissolubly fused with its authority—with political power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority. (Richter 784)

Hence, such passages in the novel are laden with authority—authority associated with Chesnutt. It is not surprising that his white readers would be resistant to Chesnutt as a symbol of authority. This helps to explain the relatively low sales of the novel. Helen Chesnutt explains the unenthusiastic reception to Chesnutt's work:

Although The Marrow of Tradition was an acknowledged literary success—it had been accepted by the Booklovers Library, and was
classed by the Outlook among the twenty-five books of literature of the year—as a financial venture it did not come up to the expectations of Chesnutt and his publishers. Houghton, Mifflin and Company had been so sure of its reception by the public that they had spent a great deal of money in advertising it. Both they and Chesnutt had expected it to secure a rapid and distinct financial success and they were all terribly disappointed. (178)

Sadly, despite the acclaim from the Booklovers Library and the Outlook, many members of the literary and intellectual communities had negative responses to Marrow.

The Literary Color Line

After reading The Marrow of Tradition, Charles Deneen, Chicago’s state’s attorney, wrote to Chesnutt, "The subject of your excellent work is not one that will commend it to the general public. The truths you portray are unwelcome ones" (qtd. in Literary Career 205). Deneen’s estimation of the book’s responses was indeed correct.

While many Northern papers "expressed unqualified praise" for the novel, Southerners bitterly criticized the work (Pioneer 176). One paper stated that the novel was "ridiculous, silly rot" while another suggested that the book might stir "bitter resentments in politics and personal
relations" (qtd. in Pioneer 177). C. Alphonso Smith, an influential member of the New South literati, proclaimed that the novel was "an insidious book" that heralded miscegenation as the "author’s panacea" to the race problem (qtd. in Literary Career 206).

Nevertheless, there were also some surprisingly negative responses to the novel in traditionally "liberal" camps. A review in the Philadelphia Record announced that the book was "likely to do more harm to the cause it advocates than good" (qtd. in Literary Career 207). Chesnutt received a particularly harsh review from the Independent. George Miflin corresponded with Clarence Winthrop Bowen, the publisher and owner of the Independent, to gain a retraction. However, the periodical did not retract its review. Paul Elmer More, the literary editor, supported the previous review saying, "Chesnutt had done what he could to humiliate the whites" and further described the final chapter as "utterly revolting" (qtd. in Pioneer 179).

The most damaging review came from William Dean Howells. After the publication of The Wife of His Youth, Howells had praised Chesnutt’s literary effort. His reception to Marrow was a little less encouraging to Chesnutt. In an article entitled "A Psychological Counter-
Current in Recent Fiction," Howells commented upon Chesnutt's novel. The bulk of his review is as follows:

The Marrow of Tradition, like every thing else he has written, has to do with the relations of the blacks and whites, and in that republic of letters where all men are free and equal he stands up for his own people with a courage which has more justice than mercy in it. The book is, in fact bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter. I am not saying that he is so inartistic as to play the advocate; whatever his minor foibles may be, he is an artist whom his step-brother Americans may well be proud of. . . . (Qtd. in Pioneer 177)

In December 28, 1901, Chesnutt wrote a letter to his publishers commenting upon the disappointed responses to his novel:

I am beginning to suspect that the public as a rule does not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or written with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted with the white race. . . . If a novel which is generally acknowledged to be interesting,
dramatic, well constructed, well written—which qualities have been pretty generally ascribed to The Marrow of Tradition, of which in addition, both the author and publishers have good hopes--cannot sell 5,000 copies within two months after its publication, there must be something radically wrong somewhere, and I do not know where it is unless it be in the subject. My friend, Mr. Howells, who has said many nice things about my writings--although his review of The Marrow of Tradition in the North American Review for December was not a favorable one as I look at it--has remarked several times that there is no color line in literature. On that point I take issue with him. I am pretty fairly convinced that the color line runs everywhere so far as the United States is concerned. (Pioneer 178)

Chesnutt’s assessment of the problem illustrates his understanding that his subject matter is too patently pro-black. It also underscores the precarious position that a black author occupied who wrote for a primarily white audience. For despite Howell’s protestations of literary objectivity, Chesnutt correctly understands that color lines exist even in the literary world.
In his article entitled "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington," William Andrews asserts that not only was the literary color line real but that Howells himself fell victim to his own racial prejudices in assessing Chesnutt's novel. According to Andrews, Howells was a "meliorist" and an "accommodationist" in his views concerning race relations (333). He championed the assimilationist rhetoric of Booker T. Washington (333). Howells hailed the Negro's "positive outlook," "patience," "conservative temperament," "unfailing sense of humor," and lack of "bitterness" ("William" 335). Consequently, his disapproval of Chesnutt's "bitterness" is not surprising. Andrews explains that The Marrow of Tradition deviates from Howells' racial expectations, as indicated by his "lackluster" review:

What Howells is characterizing here is not a book, but an author, a black author whose 'power' and determination for 'equality' distinguish him markedly from Booker T. Washington. . . The 'patience,' 'calm,' and 'unfailing sense of humor' which found Howells found in Washington (and Chesnutt the short-story writer) is not mentioned in the discussion of The Marrow of Tradition. Instead the book is said to display
its author's 'courage,' 'power,' 'justice,' clear-sightedness, and ultimately, his bitterness, over racial injustice. (336)

Certainly those moments when Chesnutt removes his veil—as evidenced by his authoritative lapses into editorial realism--point to his impatience with racial injustices--an impatience that his white audience found disturbing.
NOTES

26 Chesnutt publishes a later version of this subplot in his 1912 short story, "The Doll." In that story a black barber now living in the North encounters the white man who ruthlessly murdered his father. The barber has the opportunity to avenge his father by simply cutting the murderer's throat while he shaves him. The barber decides to let the man live when he notices his daughter's doll.

27 This passage is quoted from Henry Louis Gates' text The Signifying Monkey, p. 3.

28 Critics have noted that many African-American authors of Chesnutt's period and the period directly following included in their novels the "obligatory" train scene where a middle-class black is forced to sit in a dirty train car among the Negro masses. For example, Nella Larsen, in her 1928 novel Quicksand, places her heroine Helga Crane in a similar situation. Indeed it such scenes as this that have lead some critics to see Chesnutt as an elitist who found disfavor with the "common" members of his race.
CHAPTER V

AN AUTHOR'S DILEMMA

Chesnutt Masks His Authorial Voice

Analyzing Charles Chesnutt’s fiction from the vantage point of the trickster tradition underscores the dilemma of the black author at the turn of the century. Chesnutt’s audience consisted primarily of white readers—white readers who were accustomed to fiction that glorified the Southern plantation culture as portrayed in the works of Thomas Nelson Page. Hence, Chesnutt and other black authors were keenly aware of the precariousness of their situation. In order to be commercial successes, they had to write to the literary preferences of their audience. In many ways artists such as Chesnutt are liminal figures in the literary world.

Darwin Turner defines the liminal state as a period of being "in limbo" where the individual is "no longer the incumbent of a culturally defined social position or status but has not yet become the incumbent of another" (576). In brief, the individual in the liminal state is a cultural misfit. He or she stands outside any defined social or cultural group.
Chesnutt is a liminal figure in terms of his authorship. His race alienates him from the accepted literary group—as defined by the prominent white authors of the period. In addition, he did not associate himself with the existing black literary tradition of the period. For instance, in his essay "Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem," Chesnutt claimed to be the first black author to make his mark in the white literary arena:

At the time when I first broke into print seriously, no American colored writer had ever secured critical recognition except Paul Laurence Dunbar, who had won his laurels as a poet. Phillis Wheatley, a Colonial poet, had gained recognition largely because she was a slave and born in Africa, but the short story, or the novel of like and manners, had not been attempted by any one of that group. (193)

Chesnutt obviously does not feel a literary kinship with such writers as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, and Martin Delaney.

As indicated in his journal, Chesnutt's purpose in writing was "not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites . . ." (139). To capture this white audience, Chesnutt had to become a literary
trickster; this is appropriate, since the trickster figure is the "symbol of the liminal state" (Pelton 35).

Turner further clarifies that the individual in the liminal state is an "antinomian, multiform, and ambiguous" figure who assumes a different shape, breaks cultural and societal taboos, and creates disharmony. Further, the liminal figure is potent, possessing creative powers (577). Pelton explains how the trickster Ananse of the Ashanti culture exemplifies these qualities:

Thus Ananse is free to modify his own bodily parts and those of others and to shift them around according to whim or need. He can break or invert social rules. . . . He can disregard truth, or better still, the social requirement that words and deeds be in some sort of rough harmony, just as he can overlook the requirements of biology, economics, family loyalty, and even metaphysical possibility. He can show disrespect for sacred powers, sacred beings, and the center of sacredness itself, the High God, not so much in defiance as in a new ordering of their limits. (35)

Chesnutt’s creation of his Uncle Julius tales illustrates his kinship with the trickster Ananse.
Chestnutt assumes a double disguise to hide his true identity—his racial identity. At the time of publication of *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt’s racial identity was unknown by the majority of his readers. The publishers were hesitant to reveal his blackness because they feared that the book would be rejected and thus be a commercial failure ("Post-Bellum" 194). Chesnutt further disguises himself or reshapes himself by allowing a white narrator to frame his stories.

Chesnutt the authorial trickster also creates a trickster narrator in Julius. His stories break boundaries by allowing a former slave to have an authentic voice that does not recall the old plantation days in a nostalgic manner. In his role as diviner and cultural interpreter for John, Julius reconfigurates the slave past. His tales recall the tragedies of Henry, Sandy, and Ben—tragedies that serve to contradict the rhetoric that praised a benevolent plantation system. Additionally, Julius’ knowledge of the landscape fosters John’s economic successes. This relationship previews the changed dynamics of the New South, where blacks and whites must rely upon each other in the labor market. Sadly, the majority of blacks are laborers while whites remain empowered land owners.
Chesnutt also created a female trickster in Viney. Viney's tale is a tragic story of physical abuse at the hands of her white master—a man the narrative suggests is also her relative. However, Viney's tale ends in triumph. She takes her revenge by remaining silent. Her silence is a deliberate linguistic act that proves to be both potent and empowering.

Chesnutt's Search for His Authorial Identity

Although Chesnutt remains a liminal figure, his authorship of *The Wife of His Youth* reveals his growing self-awareness. He no longer has to hide behind the guise of a white narrator. In a sense, the publication of his second short-story collection is another step in his authorial coming of age. In his article "Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth*: The Unveiling of the Black Storyteller," Lorne Fienberg maintains that Chesnutt's various veiling maneuvers are "self-negating rather than self-affirming" (219). He further asserts that Chesnutt unveils his authorial voice in *The Wife of His Youth*:

Uncle Julius's various strategies of veiling were an essential first step for Chesnutt in entering into creative negotiations with his own audience. But although veiling secures for Uncle Julius certain powers and material advantages, it is
essentially a self-negating rather than a self-affirming move, the muffling rather than the amplification of an authorial and authoritative voice. . . . By September 1899, the publishers were sufficiently encouraged by the reception of Chesnutt’s first collection that they were hastily preparing a second volume of stories for the Christmas season. In this volume, Chesnutt would directly confront issues of racial identity and the unveiling of his own authorial voice. (219)

However, Fienberg does not account for Chesnutt’s narrative strategies that hinge upon indirection, innuendo, and implication.

Hence, The Wife of His Youth illustrates that Chesnutt is still the consummate authorial trickster. He signifies upon his peers, his audience, and himself. In both "The Wife of His Youth" and "A Matter of Principle," Chesnutt mildly and subtly mocks the pretensions of many members of the black bourgeoisie. However, his ridicule is never overt or harsh. He masks his censure by creating a narrative voice that attempts to remain objective and humorously detached.

In "The Wife of His Youth," the narrator implies that Ryder and the Blue Veins are superficial, intraracial bigots. In "A Matter of Principle," the narrator is more
openly critical of Clayton Cicero’s rejection of the young congressman because of the politician’s presumed dark skin color.

Furthermore, Chesnutt does not completely abandon the technique whereby he creates an individual who functions in the trickster role. He leaves each text open to the possibility that both Ryder and Clayton have been taken in by a trickster. Liza Jane’s tale may be a calculated maneuver to evoke Ryder’s guilt. Jack may have deliberately misled Clayton by reporting that the congressman is a dark-skinned man.

Nonetheless, Fienberg is correct in maintaining that The Wife of His Youth illustrates Chesnutt’s attempts to gain voice. The collection is somewhat self-reflexive. One may surmise that Chesnutt is trying to come to terms with his marginality as a member of the black middle class. Like many of his peers, he did not find acceptance in white society and felt alienated from the black masses. Additionally, while he realized the insidiousness of intraracial prejudice, he exhibited a distaste for the average black. Hence, Chesnutt—like the West African trickster—is multifaceted and ambivalent.

The Wife of His Youth also underscores the dilemma that Chesnutt felt in regard to racial uplift. Again he is ambivalent. This ambivalence is clear when one examines his
method of signifying upon his own texts. As explained earlier, this type of signifying is called Literary Signification, whereby an author inculcates and revises tropes, themes, or literary devices from another author's text. In Chesnutt's case, one can detect revisions within the corpus of his own writing. For example, "The March of Progress" may be analyzed as a revision of "The Wife of His Youth." "The Web of Circumstance" appears to be a revision of "Dave's Neckliss."

In both "The March of Progress" and "The Wife of His Youth," characters must choose between a person representing the plantation South and an individual representing W.E.B. DuBois' "talented tenth." In both stories, the main character or characters make a choice based on sentimentality and human compassion. Yet, Chesnutt's stance regarding the following question remains ambivalent. The question is: should one sacrifice compassion and moral responsibility for a chance to "better" the race?

Chesnutt also explores another popular view of racial progress in "Cave's Neckliss" and "A Web of Circumstance." These stories reflect his questioning of an accommodationist approach to racial uplift that found its voice in Booker T. Washington. Nevertheless, while Chesnutt's collection appears to function as a forum to discuss the major issues and concerns confronting him as a middle-class black, the
stories also address racial concerns between whites and blacks.

Liza Jane’s narrative reveals the cruel tendency of slave owners to separate families. Her tale also highlights the burdens placed upon the female slave. "Dave’s Neckliss" and "A Web of Circumstance" illustrate the inequity of the judicial system as regards whites and blacks. Both Dave and Ben are falsely accused of crimes by black rivals. On the surface, these tales appear to be sentimental stories about the fall of a hero at the hands of a jealous villain. However, Chesnutt’s major focus seems to be upon the unjust punishments meted out to these men by the white system of justice. In "The Sheriff’s Children" Chesnutt subtly condemns those white former slaveholders who bore children by their slave mistresses only to ignore these children--often resulting in tragic consequences.

"The Sheriff’s Children" also focuses upon another concern prevalent throughout Chesnutt’s fiction--that of miscegenation. As the trickster, Chesnutt signifies upon his predominantly white audience’s fears of racial amalgamation. An examination of his use of the mulatto character in "The Sheriff’s Children," "Her Virginia Mammy," and The House Behind the Cedars reveals that Chesnutt creates double-sided, ambiguous figures who subtly mock and
ridicule the racial pretensions of nineteenth-century white America.

The Price of Asserting One's Voice

One can speculate that in The Marrow of Tradition Chesnutt has completed his authorial coming of age. After his success with his two short story collections and the positive reception of The House Behind the Cedars, Chesnutt abandoned his stenography business to devote himself full-time to his writing. His goal was to write a novel that would awaken the public to the inconsistencies and injustices of racial prejudice in the "New South." The Marrow of Tradition attempts to undermine societal fears concerning miscegenation, the popular trend of Radicalism, and the racial paranoia that often resulted in lynchings and race riots.

Of course, Chesnutt employs many of the masking devices mastered in his earlier works. However, at various points in the narrative, Chesnutt abandons these narrative techniques. For example, in chapter twenty-eight the narrator becomes intrusive and assumes the tone of a reporter or chronicler. The reader is induced to leave the fictional world of Wellington and listen to the narrator's editorializing. There is a tone of veracity and historiociety that is very disturbing to the reader—particularly a white reader in 1901. Chesnutt's readers
perceive that he is talking directly to them. Chesnutt becomes a figure of authority. Unfortunately, Chesnutt’s assertion of his authorial voice resulted in negative reactions from his readers and his critics. Nevertheless, Chesnutt did not give up on his goal to be a successful writer.

With his next novel, *The Colonel’s Dream*, published in 1905, Chesnutt attempted to regain his white readership. The book is told from the point of view of a white liberal. William Andrews explains:

> In this new book, Chesnutt tried to enhance white identification with his protagonist by making him a white man, an enlightened ex-Conferederate officer who has made himself rich as a northern manufacturer without losing his aristocratic sense of *noblesse oblige*. (DLB 47)

Colonel French decides to return to the South because of his son’s poor health. While there, he attempts several progressive measures to improve relations between blacks and whites. He sponsors a school based on the Tuskegee model. He hires blacks to rebuild a textile factory and makes a bitter enemy in Bill Fetters, a racist and a corrupt town leader. After his failed attempts to undermine Fetters’ authority, French decides to return to the North.
The Colonel's Dream was not a successful novel. Andrews says, "Those critics who commented on the book at all felt it was too pessimistic and unpleasant to recommend to their readers. Consequently, in 1905 Chesnutt, like his hero in The Colonel's Dream, took his leave of the New South in literature as he had done twenty years before in life" (DLB 48). After the failure of this novel, which was the last one he published, Chesnutt returned to his stenography business.

Chesnutt's dilemma underscores the arbitrary nature of literary criticism and the concept of what constitutes literature. The responses to Chesnutt's novels illustrate the variable nature of literature. One of Chesnutt's most ingenious stories that reflects the subjective biases and assumptions that often color a literary critic's assessment of a text is "Baxter's Procrustes," published in 1904 in the Atlantic Monthly. The plot focuses upon the members of the Bodleian Club--a society of men devoted to books and book collecting. Occasionally the club publishes a "masterpiece." Such is the case with Baxter's Procrustes. Baxter is a Harvard graduate and thus an esteemed member of the club. The members have heard excerpts from his long poem and cajole him into allowing the society to publish the finished text. Baxter agrees on the condition that he must oversee the printing, binding, and distribution of the work.
One member of the club cleverly suggests that he seal his text, since a sealed copy of a new translation of Campanella's *Sonnets* had sold for three hundred dollars.

All of the men sign to receive copies of the sealed *Procrustes*. Because no one wants to break the seal, the members never actually read the book. They review the book as a work of art based on the fine print, exceptional quality of the paper, and the beautiful cover. At one point, an Englishman arrives and announces that the book does not contain a single word. Of course, the members of the society feel foolish. They confront Baxter. The narrator reveals his motives:

He had always regarded uncut and sealed books as tommy-rot, and that he had merely been curious to see how far the thing would go; and that the result had justified his belief that a book with nothing in it was just as useful to a book collector as one embodying a work of genius.

*(Collected Stories 277).*

The members expell Baxter from the club. Ironically, his "book" eventually sells for two-hundred and fifty dollars; for, as the president of the club reinforces, "Baxter was wiser than we knew, or than he perhaps appreciated. His *Procrustes*, from the collector's point of view, is entirely
logical, and might be considered as the acme of bookmaking" (277).

Certainly, Chesnutt's story is a farce. Baxter is a trickster. Andrews reiterates, "Its protagonist, an enigmatic dilettante and sometime writer named Baxter, is a con artist and trickster like Julius" (DLB 47). Yet, the theme of the story has ramifications for Chesnutt's authorship in the early twentieth century. The story hints that the poor reception of Chesnutt's novels may have rested upon superficial notions that reflect class, race, and societal biases. Chesnutt suggests that literary interpretations are not objective but are influenced by individual prejudices and societal dictates.

In this regard, Chesnutt intimates a view of literature that is very relevant to contemporary notions of literature as proposed by many leading critics. For example, Terry Eagleton explains, "Any belief that the study of literature is the study of a stable, well-definable entity, as entomology is the study of insects, can be abandoned as a chimera" (10-11). He reiterates, "There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. Value is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes"
In reference to Chesnutt's authorship, value judgments were made by a turn-of-the-century audience that was resistant to the "truths" that his novels proclaimed—no matter how cleverly.

Thus, contextualizing Chesnutt's fiction within the frame of the West African trickster tradition fosters further discussion concerning the limitations placed upon black authors before the Harlem Renaissance. It is obvious that Chesnutt was very much aware of these limitations. Chesnutt lived to see a change in the status of the black author. In his 1931 essay "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," he notes the general acceptance of fiction written by black authors:

I have lived to see, after twenty years or more, a marked change in the attitude of publishers and the reading public in regard to the Negro in fiction. The development of Harlem, with its large colored population in all shades, from ivory to ebony, of all degrees of culture, from doctors of philosophy to the lowest grade of illiteracy; its various origins, North American, South American, West Indian and African; its morals ranging from the highest to the most debased; with the vivid life of its cabarets, dance halls, and theatres; with its ambitious business and
professional men, its actors, singers, novelists and poets, its aspirations and demands for equality—without which any people would merit only contempt—presented a new field for literary exploration which of recent years has been cultivated assiduously. (194)

Chesnutt’s perceptive assessment not only applies to the Harlem Renaissance authors but also quite adequately and very appropriately describes—and foreshadows—his own acceptance in the current literary arena, by a reading public that is less racially and culturally biased and that can appreciate his role as an important American author, not simply a black writer.
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