January 1977

Charles W. Chestnutt: Victim of the Color Line

Eugene Terry
Hampshire College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol1/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.
At twenty-one years old, having taught school, been principal of the North Carolina Normal School at Fayetteville (later Fayetteville College), and created for himself a curriculum of largely self-taught courses that amounted to a liberal arts education which would eventually lead him to reading law and passing the Ohio Bar, Charles W. Chesnutt determined to become a writer. Even at this time, one can detect, in his journal entries, keys to his aesthetic. From the beginning he saw the value of lives of Afro-Americans as material, for his experience of life looms large as a major aspect of this preparation for writing. Having read Albion W. Tourgee’s *A Fool’s Errand* and more impressed by the $20,000 Tourgee received than the book, he rhetorically asks if Tourgee, with his limited knowledge and experience of black life, could write such books,

Could not a colored man, who had lived among colored people all his life, who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices, their whole moral and social condition, their public and private ambitions, their religious tendencies and habits . . . who was familiar with the political history of the country, and especially with all the phases of the slavery question—why could not such a man, if he possessed the same ability, write as good a book about the South as Judge Tourgee has written? But the man is yet to make his appearance; and if I can’t be the man, I shall be the first to rejoice at his debut, and give God speed to his work.

Four days later, he records his ambition to write a book and lists his qualifications:

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 influ-
ence that I cannot resist calling me to the task. Besides, I do not know but I am as well prepared as some successful writers. A fair knowledge of the classics, 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.

Fifteen years of life in the South, in one of the most eventful eras of its history, among a people whose life is rich in the elements of romance, under conditions calculated to stir one's soul to the very depths—I think there is here a fund of experience, a supply of material, which a skillful pen could work up with tremendous effect.

Further he sets himself a goal for his writing:

Besides, if I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort. The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism—I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. Not a fierce indiscriminate onset, not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect, but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner. The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most Americans cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate, so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it.

This work is of a two-fold character. The Negro's part is to prepare himself for 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; to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling. If I can do anything to further this work, and see any likelihood of obtaining success in it, I would gladly devote my life to it.

We might say that here we have one part of Chesnutt's aesthetic
Charles W. Chesnutt: A Victim of the Color Line

—his writing is to have a moral purpose—a political one if we define this term as attempting to bring about changes in society. Significant, too, is the fact that in a period when the phrase, "elevation of the colored people" was a cliché, Chesnutt's goal was the moral elevation of white people. But equally important with purpose is his consideration of craft, and what he saw coming from the pens of Afro-American writers did not please him.

I have skimmed The Negro in The Rebellion by Dr. Brown and it only strengthens me in my opinion that the Negro is yet to become known who can write a good book. Dr. Brown's books are mere compilations and if they were not written by a colored man, they would not sell for enough to pay for the printing. I read them merely for facts, but I could appreciate the facts better if they were well presented. The book reminds one of a gentleman in a dirty shirt. You are rather apt to doubt his gentility under such circumstances. I am sometimes doubtful of the facts for the same reason—they make but a shabby appearance.

One senses then, that to Chesnutt, the material, the purpose, and the craft are of equal importance.

But he was to discover that an Afro-American who wished to write professionally would have to struggle not only to write honestly and artistically well but also against a formidable white literary establishment. Writing to George Washington Cable in 1890, Chesnutt attacked the current stereotypes of black people that appeared in literature. He included in his attack "Judge Tourgee's cultivated white Negroes . . . bewailing their fate and cursing the drop of black blood which 'taints'—I hate the word, it implies corruption—their otherwise pure race," and expressed his own sense of constraint when writing for American publishers:

The kind of stuff I could write, if I were not all the time oppressed by the fear that this line or this sentiment would offend somebody's prejudice, jar on somebody's American-trained sense of propriety, would I believe, find a ready sale in England.

This is a crucial point to any consideration of Afro-American writers. Chesnutt, no less than others, had to face the reality that what he wrote, no matter how honestly and how well, must always be constrained. White publishers had the upperhand. From
their lofty positions they could “protect” the sensibilities and thus maintain the prejudices of their white readers. Chesnutt in his crusade was in an uneven battle. He met with little success in 1891 when he began pushing Houghton Mifflin & Co., his publishers, to bring out a book of his stories. It was not until 1899 that his first book, *The Conjure Woman* was published. Its success surprised the publishers and encouraged their publishing another volume that same year, *The Wife of His Youth*. After much difficulty with placing *The House Behind The Cedars*, Doubleday and McClure published it in 1900. The publishers appeared less than enthusiastic about publishing the novel and one senses their cooling of interest in Chesnutt thereafter. Chesnutt continued to place stories, but found it increasingly more difficult to support his family from his writings.

Because *The House Behind The Cedars* sold well enough to go through several printings, MacMillan solicited *The Marrow of Tradition*, but Chesnutt stuck with Houghton Mifflin who brought the novel out and strongly pushed its sale. However, it sold badly. It was a different kind of book than *The House Behind The Cedars*, which is basically a romance relying heavily on Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* for its plot structure. *The Marrow of Tradition*’s subject matter was the Wilmington, North Carolina election riot started by the Ante-Bellum white establishment by playing upon the prejudices of those they consider “white trash” and instigating the indiscriminate killing and maiming of the Blacks, thus accomplishing a *coup d’etat* which effectively destroyed the Reconstruction constitution which had granted the vote to Freedmen. The reading public did not wish to buy this book. Chesnutt was disappointed and wrote this astute analysis to his publisher:

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 publisher 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.6

Following the failure of *The Marrow of Tradition* in 1902, Chesnutt once again became a part-time writer publishing only a few stories and a novel, *The Colonel's Dream* in 1905, which did not sell well in the United States. He had begun his career believing that through well-wrought literature he could help eradicate racism but found he had not understood the degree to which the literary world was dedicated to the keeping of the status quo.

It is instructive to see the initial critical response to Chesnutt's books, for it sets the tone for critics even into our time, revealing a literary establishment very little changed from Chesnutt's day to ours. From the beginning, critics seemed more interested in the color—or lack of color—of Chesnutt's skin than in the deftness of his pen. Even the recent awakenings of Afro-American interest in literature from a cultural standpoint has not changed the tendency to bounce Chesnutt along "the color line," for black critics have seemed no more capable of forgiving him for not looking "black" than the white critics could forgive him for looking white while claiming to be black.

By far the most influential of the early Chesnutt criticism was a substantial review by William Dean Howells appearing in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1900 entitled "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories." In it Howells discusses the three Chesnutt books then in print; the Beacon Series *Biography of Frederick Douglass*, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth*. Of the *Biography of Frederick Douglass*, he says it is "a simple, solid, straight piece of work, not remarkable above many other biographical studies by people entirely white, and yet important as the work of a man not entirely white treating of a great man of his inalienable race." He finds the stories in *Conjure Woman* and *Wife of His Youth* "remarkable above many, above most short stories by people entirely white," and that they would be "worthy of unusual notice if they were not the work of a man not entirely white." Thus he sets the bias with which Chesnutt is to be read.

Howells' interest in *The Wife of His Youth* is two-fold—as works of art and as revelations of what he terms that "middle world of color." With ill-concealed white chauvinism, he explains:
We had known the nethermost world of the grotesque and comical negro and the terrible and tragic negro through the white observer on the outside, and black character in its lyrical moods we had known from such an inside witness as Mr. Paul Dunbar; but it has remained for Mr. Chesnutt to acquaint us with those regions where the paler shades dwell. . . .

He praises the art of the stories generally—referring to no single work's specific merit except to mention the admirable rendering of "The Web of Circumstance," "The Bouquet," and "Uncle Wellington's Wives." Likewise he condemns without specifics, finding that "comedy degenerates into satire, with a look in the reader's direction," that the author sometimes resorts to the dictation of "journalistic reportage" and that, in places, Chesnutt becomes "severely impartial and studiously aloof" in his "pompous" attitude. He finds these faults exceptional lapses in work he classes with that of Maupassant, Tourguenief, James and Jewett. Despite his positive observations, however, one senses that Howells' chief concern is with Charles Chesnutt's color, which he mentions a total of seven times, even going so far as to wonder that a man so fair should elect to be Black. He finally concludes that Chesnutt's choice of race "is his personal affair" but then he explains why Chesnutt may be willing to call himself a Negro. He closes the entire review by offering Chesnutt encouragement and admonishment:

... if he has it in him to go forward on the way which he has traced for himself, to be true to life as he has known it, to deny himself the glories of the cheap success which awaits the charlatan in fiction, one of the places at the top is open to him. 8

Howells can speak so encouragingly to Chesnutt of a future in the literary world because he is convinced that in literature "there is happily, no color line." The next time Howells reviews a Chesnutt work, however, he appears to have forgotten the phrase "to be true to life as he has know it." This was on the occasion of the publication of The Marrow of Tradition.

Reviewing The Marrow of Tradition in "A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction" in the North American Review, Howells finds occasion, again, to instruct "the not entirely white man" how he should deport himself in fiction:
Mr. Chesnutt, it seems to me, has lost literary quality in acquiring literary quantity, and though his book, "The Marrow of Tradition," is of the same strong material of his earlier books, it is less simple throughout, and therefore less excellent in manner. At his worst, he is no worse than the higher average of the ordinary novelists, but he ought always to be very much better, for he began better, and he is of that race which has, first of all, to get rid of the cakewalk, if it will not suffer from a smile far more blighting than any frown. . . .

While Howells admits that The Marrow of Tradition is a better than average book, in which the author fights admirably for his people, he accuses Chesnutt of hate and bitterness and though not inartistic in his presentation, guilty of what Howells vaguely terms a "judgement that is made up":

The book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason 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 stepbrother Americans may well be proud of; but while he recognizes pretty well all the facts in the case, he is too clearly of a judgment that is made up.

Quite rightly Howells says that if Chesnutt "in the very end gives the moral victory to the blacks, it cannot be said that either his aesthetic or ethics is false. . . ." But Howells cannot come to terms with the novel. What he sees as its bitterness, its subject matter (The Wilmington riot) and its moral judgments seem too much for him to accept. He therefore condemns the book even as he recognizes its artistic merit. The importance of this review lies in what it shows us about Howells—his conflicting attempts to be loyal to his whiteness and at the same time ethically and aesthetically right—and its influence which even now is found in evaluations of Chesnutt's work.

With the exception of those reviews which were openly hostile, the contemporary reviews by white critics though less lengthy are in a like vein. Black writers in the Topeka Plaindealer applaud Chesnutt with certain reservations. John Langston Harrison, a black critic sees that

Back of the entertaining features of his stories is the powerful
though well-concealed appeal for a fairer and more just treatment of the colored race; this appeal is negative and indirect, necessarily, and calls upon that inner latent-sense which, when once aroused, puts in play the strong moral force.\textsuperscript{11}

But in the same issue Will Harris, also Black, conceded Chesnutt's characters are realistic "dark facts, not midday dreams" but takes a swipe at the title story of \textit{The Wife of His Youth}. In this story a mulatto man who is successfully set and in a position to select a wife from among the class of mulattoes around him, openly admits that he has been married during slavery to an older, black-skinned woman. Although not legally bound to acknowledge this woman now that slavery is over, he feels morally bound to, as she has held sacred her marriage to him and has spent her life since emancipation searching for him. Thus he introduces to the shocked group of his mulatto peers, the wife of his youth. Will Harris says of this story that

\begin{quote}
In a book it is alright, perhaps, but we contend that no mulatto in real life would have introduced a black slave-wife to an intelligent multitude under the same circumstances; it would have been discovered that he had grown corns on his conscience.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Clearly, Harris does not accept that the caste system will fall victim to morality in his vision of real life. He dismisses the story as not being probable. He makes no mention of Chesnutt's art. An unsigned editorial in the same issue of the \textit{Plaindealer} praises Chesnutt, but expresses some uneasy displeasure from another perspective:

\begin{quote}
It is an exceedingly difficult and delicate task to discuss, in a critical way, the habits, and especially the shortcomings of the people. Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt seems to have an especial knack of lampooning the foibles of the race in a manner calculated to render them unpopular. . . . He has always been a careful student of human nature, and his travels in foreign countries have given added opportunities of studying those characteristics of all races which lay them bare to ridicule or aversion.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Clearly this black writer identifies himself so closely to the characters Chesnutt lampoons (that is, the mulattoes for their mindless
aping of white society), that he feels the blows; he wants nothing more than that the author should pick on some other race for the subject of his satires. The *Plaindealer*, then, represents a wide span of views among Afro-American readers. With Harrison's review one can see that Chesnutt was not always chided or praised for his race. But Will Harris puts us back on familiar territory, dealing Chesnutt a display of color prejudice. The final piece demonstrates that fear of white people's reaction to the race if a black writer holds foibles held by its members up to ridicule.

When Howells praised Chesnutt for having "acquainted us with those regions where the paler shades dwell," he hit upon a subject that would continue, with slightly different emphasis, to the present day. Howells by his insistence that the world of mixed blood characters was one more easily appreciated by white people because of a certain "kinship" helped to construe Chesnutt as a man separated from the masses of his black brothers. Recent critics, black and white alike, echo Howells' thinking when they define Chesnutt.

Darwin Turner, an Afro-American, sees in Chesnutt's stories "a style structure and characterization . . . of sufficiently high quality to confirm . . . Howells' judgment. . . ." He credits Chesnutt with giving "artistic form to Negro folk tales" and creating a "narrator more realistic than Uncle Remus." Further Turner sees as the major achievement that

He was the first Afro-American fiction writer to earn a reputation for examining in depth and reporting honestly on matters which many Americans wished to ignore—the inter-racial and intraracial problems of Afro-Americans.14

But Turner turns then to the concept of Chesnutt's isolation from black Afro-Americans:

Despite his protest to Cable against literary assumptions that African ancestry breeds inferiority recognized by Afro-Americans, Chesnutt's dispassionate tone occasionally has provoked criticism that he worshipped whiteness and pleaded only for Afro-Americans of mixed blood.15

And he justifies the concept: "Of mixed blood himself, Chesnutt understandably was interested in and familiar with psychological problems troubling such people."16 He continues in his explana-
tion of Chesnutt's purported preoccupation with the mixed blood middle class:

Chesnutt's suggestions that mulattoes are more cultured than dark-skinned Negroes merely remind readers of the historical circumstances which, before the Civil War permitted mulattoes to acquire the formal education and cultural exposure generally denied to darker slaves and freemen.

If there is a fault in Chesnutt's logic, it is one shared by other Afro-American writers of his time—Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and James Weldon Johnson. Rather than reminding readers that the mere fact of birth entitled white Americans to the rights of citizenship, each writer in his own way endorsed the idea that privileges should be granted first to those Afro-Americans who deserved them because of culture, morality, and industry.\(^\text{17}\)

Besides being a much too simple reading of all these writers, Turner's statements undercut his earlier observation that Chesnutt examined "in depth" and reported "honestly" on the "interracial and intraracial problems of Afro-Americans." His presenting Chesnutt as having a bias toward the mixed blood characters does little to engender objectivity in a Chesnutt student. Rather it plants the seeds of factionalism among Afro-Americans—a thing to which Chesnutt was emphatically opposed. The tales in *The Conjure Woman* deny Turner's allegation. Moreover, some stories in *The Wife of His Youth* treat the mulattoes, yes, but in this significant way: it holds them up to ridicule for wanting to be "white." Outside of his fiction, too, Chesnutt insisted that political and civil rights were rights belonging to all. In a letter to Booker T. Washington in 1903, he makes this point eloquently:

Nor do I think it the part and policy to be always dwelling upon the weakness of the Negro race. It is altogether contrary to the spirit of our institutions and to the Constitution to pick out any one class of people, differentiated from the rest by color or origin or anything else, make some average deduction concerning their capacity, and then proceed to measure their rights by this standard. Every individual Negro, weak or strong, is entitled to the same rights before the law as every 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
Charles W. Chesnutt: A Victim of the Color Line

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.\textsuperscript{18}

With Turner, one sees that the modern criticism of Chesnutt has not moved far beyond that of Chesnutt’s day—using his color to achieve an understanding of his art. Howells’ image of the mixed blood gentleman, isolated in the “middle world” seems alive and well in at least one black modern critic.

Robert M. Farnsworth, a white critic, while as far as he goes, rightly suggests the complexity of point of view in *The Conjure Woman*, accounts for Chesnutt’s work by appealing to what he understands as the psychology of color in “Testing the Color Line: Dunbar and Chesnutt.” Because “Dunbar was pure black,” Farnsworth suggests he “felt little compulsion to speak for black Americans. . . . He often must have assumed in a way . . . that Charles Chesnutt, who could easily have passed for white, would not that there was no need for him deliberately to represent his identity with the black community.” Expounding on this thesis, Farnsworth continues:

Paradoxically, Charles Chesnutt, perhaps because he was so close to white in his skin color and because of his close association with whites in his achieved professional and social status, examined the problems of the black man living in a white dominated world with much greater complexity and intricacy. In a sense, Charles Chesnutt was to Paul Lawrence Dunbar what W. E. B. DuBois was to Booker T. Washington. While Dunbar demonstrated a shrewd ability to exploit the prejudices of his largely white audience and while he served an extra-ordinarily useful function by simply being black and achieving national literary prominence, yet his work does not look forward. He was not as alive to the currents of literary and social change as was Chesnutt. Dunbar could not discipline himself as well as did Chesnutt to careful realistic documentation. Dunbar seemed wistfully to believe in the near possibility of a truly colorless world. Chesnutt was more pragmatic, believing perhaps in the same ultimate vision, but recognizing more prominently the immediate problems of Southern disfranchisement, Jim Crow legislations, and racial intermarriage.\textsuperscript{19}

A few comments should be made here to point out several flaws
in Farnsworth's reasoning. He begins his summary of the differences between Chesnutt and Dunbar by saying "some generalizations can be made from this brief review." This is his first mistake; for too often, when the subject is Afro-Americans, critics have resorted to generalizations to explain what was and continues to be very complex material. Apparently insensitive to this fact, Farnsworth proceeds to make a series of rather careless errors.

First, his skin notwithstanding, Paul Lawrence Dunbar certainly did feel compulsion to speak for black Americans. He spoke so eloquently for them on one occasion that his "speech" has become universally known and quoted by Blacks:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.
Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.  

What Farnsworth should have understood from his reading is that Dunbar, after displaying his talents as a writer of dialect and "the lowly life," wanted, as an artist, to write about other things. Unfortunately, the white world had determined, too, what his role as a writer should be. When Dunbar sent Majors and Minors, his second collection of poetry to Howells in 1895, the Dean of American Letters reviewed it sympathetically. In fact, Dunbar felt that it was Howells' attention that helped him establish his career. But even in that review, Howells made no attempt to disguise his feeling that Dunbar should be content to write dialect. Dunbar resisted this placing of himself and his art in such a narrow straits, but this should not be read as a lack of interest in expressing the moods of lowly black people. He wanted only to be able
to feel himself free to make artistic choices. That he was not allowed to so feel was what gave him inspiration for his much quoted line from "Preparation": "I know why the caged bird sings." Farnsworth's suggestion that Dunbar possessed a "shrewd ability to exploit the prejudices of his largely white audience" and his statement that Dunbar "could not discipline himself as well as did Chesnutt to careful realistic documentation" is blaming the victim for being victimized. Dunbar did not exploit the prejudices of his largely white audiences with his dialect, they simply refused to accept his writing any other way. He never got the opportunity, he felt, to demonstrate his ability to "discipline" himself to "careful realistic documentation."

Farnsworth is on safer ground in his treatment of *The Conjure Woman* than when he speculates on what makes Chesnutt a better writer than Dunbar. He does not, however, agree with Howells' position that "artistic reticence" is a good thing in *The Wife of His Youth*, and he rightly views two stories in this group, "The Sheriff's Children" and "The Web of Circumstance," as "strong protest." All of Chesnutt's novels he views as failures. *The House Behind The Cedars* fails because it is dated; *The Marrow of Tradition* fails because ambition caused Chesnutt to reach beyond his skill. And, because its major characters are white, he senses in *The Colonel's Dream* a lack of courage on Chesnutt's part. To Farnsworth this book "signals . . . that its author has no more stomach to confront his predominantly white audience with a racial challenge." In short, he sees Chesnutt's departure from the republic of literature as resulting from his lack of skill and guts.

While Edward Margolies dismisses Chesnutt as an artist and credits him only with being a junior folklorist, and Robert Bone views him as having a secure position as a Negro author only as a writer of short stories because the novels are propagandistic, Russell Ames, also white, finds that "Chesnutt's books have received just appraisal only from Negro scholars like Hugh Glos­ter . . . or the editors of *The Negro Caravan*. But even such critics have accepted the current preferences for 'art.' "

Ames fairly heatedly defends Chesnutt against what he sees as the white critics' inability to accept any suggestion of racism in America. Beginning with Howells' rejection of *The Marrow of Tradition*, Ames sees the pattern as a continuing one in which the
critics develop a sense of "fair play" only when white people are "maltreated" by Chesnutt but do not protest his showing Negroes in an unfavorable light. They cover up their subjective definitions of *Art* by citing the so-called "objective Art" theory "that pleads a case for Griffith's 'masterpiece' although [it is] admittedly propaganda for slavery and the Ku Klux Klan." This covering of racism by appeals to art, Ames feels, is the purpose of such eliminating terms as "crude propaganda," "racial hypersensitivity" and "race-conscious idealization of Negroes." Noting that most Negro writers condemn "propaganda" and favor "objectivity" and "universality," he suggests that they have fallen for a white racist trick and are accepting terms that must, by their nature, restrict the black writer's honestly presenting his materials.

While one can accept the truth that all too often white critics have covered their prejudices by denying artistic merit to any work that exposes that prejudice and denies the validity of the *status quo*, one must take issue with Ames when he interprets black writers' rejection of "propaganda" in favor of "universality" to be a sign of unwittingly condemning themselves to dealing dishonestly with black oppression by whites if they are to be *good* artists. The difference is one of definition and perspective. I have no sense that black writers and biased white critics mean the same thing by the term, *propaganda*. And there is certainly no evidence in the works of the best black writers that by "universality" they mean anything less than the interpreting of their material in such a way that it reveals something about mankind. To suggest that they not seek to do this is to ask that they not see themselves as human. Because he insisted on the humanity of the slaves, Chesnutt could create the brilliant stories of *The Conjure Woman* which reveals much about humanity. Because he could not see the humanity of the slaves, Joel Chandler Harris could create only the apology for their enslavement in *Uncle Remus*. Though he makes judgments of Chesnutt's works, Ames, by his own remarks disqualifies himself as a critic to be trusted. His feeling seems to be that whatever protests oppression of blacks is artistically good.

Addison Gayle better illustrates the unjust response to Afro-American writing:

> When Black literature is the subject, the verbiage reaches the height of the ridiculous. The good "Negro Novel" we are
told by Robert Bone and Herbert Hill, is that novel in which the subject matter moves beyond the limitations of narrow parochialism. Form is the most important criterion of a work of art when Black Literature is evaluated, whereas form, almost non-existent in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and totally chaotic in Kafka's *The Trial*, must take second place to the supremacy of thought and message.  

The reason for this is that with most critics, Afro-American literature has seldom been examined for its art. Chesnutt's works have fared no differently than that of other black writers. Sterling A. Brown, one of the editors of *The Negro Caravan* Ames praises, has consistently insisted upon high standards of art while at the same time repudiating the special definitions implied by the white critics as well as those of some of the proponents of a black aesthetic. Brown realizes correctly that such definitions circumscribe the Afro-American writer.

Universality is still a useful term despite the limitations implied in its past uses. When Howells, for instance, insists that fiction must reflect life as *we* know it, he means life as a fiction-reading class at the turn of the century knew it, and he had in mind a white middle class. Thus, for him, the life reflected in good fiction could not possibly include the life presented in *The Marrow of Tradition*. Further, one suspects, that his race and class consciousness so dulled his sensibilities to the actual richness of the human experience as to cause incomplete or misconstrued readings of the Chesnutt books he praised so highly. For him, optimism was the order of the day. If life was bitter, it was not real, smacked of naturalism which was but another form of what Howells believed was romanticism.

Chesnutt on the other hand, was not only concerned with realism as it applied to this white middle class and had been developed artistically, but with a realism that genuinely included the whole of humanity. Writing with this inclusive view in mind, his results are some of the most complex characters imaginable in stories of great variety fraught with subtly painful ironies. It is not, therefore, to the critics that we can go for a fair appraisal of Chesnutt's works but to the works themselves bringing our own sensibilities to bear upon them, reappraising them without prejudice, and in that task, bringing to bear upon them (in Ralph Ellison's phrase), the whole armament at the disposal of the
literary critic, for without understanding of Chesnutt's art we cannot understand properly his meaning.

It remains now to demonstrate a reading of Chesnutt's fiction. Time will not allow an entire book although they should be read as books for much meaning may be found even in such a simple device as the ordering of a group of stories. Certainly this is true of *The Conjure Woman*. In pursuit of his "high, holy purpose," Chesnutt could not but record something of our enslavement. The seven stories, connected by a framework and the motif of conjure constitute a foray against the forces of the sentimental plantation or magnolia tradition as represented by such writers as Thomas Nelson Page, Harry Stillwell Edwards, and Joel Chandler Harris.

From their publication in book form, readers have drawn comparisons between Chesnutt's Uncle Julius McAdoo and Harris's Uncle Remus and were encouraged to do so by Chesnutt's publishers. The comparison, in fact, is an invidious one which implies that Chesnutt merely imitated Harris. Such comparison cannot go beyond the fact that both draw on folk materials and made use of dialect and a framework, none of which is original with Harris. Chesnutt's framework is far more complex and represents life with less sentimentality and more honesty. His tales are not intended for children or adults who seek comfort in nostalgia by reading a charming beastiary.

Consider Julius McAdoo as he sits smacking his lips over sweet grapes telling a white Northern liberal and his sickly wife about slaves who used to live on their plantation. In one of these tales, the old man tells of a young slave woman who at her husband's insistence backslides from her newly found Christianity to change him by conjure into a tree to avoid their being separated by their master. Before she can turn him back, the tree is cut down and sent to the sawmill. The woman goes mad as, chained to a post, she watches the mill workers saw the tree she knows to be her "Sandy" into boards. When she eventually freezes to death her owner's only reaction was "dey ain't much room in dis worl' fer crazy w'ite folks, let 'lone a crazy nigger."

One who has read this story and others in *The Conjure Woman* can find little patience for those critics who contrive to compare this book with those of Joel Chandler Harris. Chesnutt's Julius McAdoo is a grinning, toothless, homeless ex-slave whose only worthwhile possession is his history and who must use guile to get
food for his belly and clothes for his back, a place to worship or a job for a relative. Uncle Julius is himself a testimony that slavery was hell for those enslaved. Harris' Uncle Remus is well fed, most beloved by his white masters and so secure in his enslavement (both before and after the war) that he has all the time in the world to hold a little white boy on his knee and tell him tales about B'rer Rabbit's antics with B'rer Fox. He has everything except a history of his own without which he lacks reality.

In Harris' telling of these tales, Uncle Remus is innocent of any humanity behind the animal masks. Chesnutt in Julius McAdoo's tales renders black characters as human with noble and ignoble motives, scarred sometimes almost but never quite to the point of losing their humanity, causing pain to and comforting one another, caught in a system calculated to permanently conjure them from men and women into animals and things. Whether masked as grapevines, trees, wolves or mules, the characters in Julius' tales hold our attention as humans suffering pain and death, for Chesnutt's subject is human nature under the most dire circumstances, a universal theme. Rendering such complex matter and attempting an even more difficult task, combatting racism, Chesnutt employs a deceptively simple structure building upon it complexities deserving of better than unwarranted comparisons and overly simplified descriptions of its structure and characters, which tend only to justify relegating him to a position of little importance.

Unlike The Conjure Woman which cannot be approached piece-meal, The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line is more collage-like, and invites reading of individual stories or various combinations. But one should always recognize that Chesnutt's order has its own integrity. The collage effect is achieved by the juxtaposing of various styles and structures requiring an understanding of them to get past the "artistic reticence" of which Howells speaks—that is the absence of author's moralizing or telling the reader directly what meaning to assign to action. To avoid the errors similar to those of Darwin Turner's thinking that Chesnutt was partial to light-skinned Negroes one must understand his use of satire. It is gentle, Horatian, in the title story of this volume but Juvenalian, that is, vicious and punitive, in "A Matter of Principle." One must sense the stark realism in the style of "Her Virginia Mammy" in order not to read it as simply an imitation of George W. Cable's romantic "Madame
Delphine," to understand that Chesnutt refuses to sympathize with a "white Negro" bemoaning "tainted blood." His Aristotelian tragic structure must be examined to determine which character is protagonist and which antagonist to avoid the misjudgment that Chesnutt merely employed the tragic mulatto stereotype in "The Sheriff's Children." "Cicely's Dream" remains a conundrum if one reads it as failed realism about a young black woman who loses her lover when he regains his memory and they discover he is a white man. One does not find this to be a coherent story until he discovers that Chesnutt is constructing a romance of two American worlds—the black and the white—employing the archetypal patterns of the female trinity described by Sir James Frazier in *The Golden Bough.* "The Passing of Grandison" is a hilarious parody of the pro-slavery school in which Grandison wears the mask of the ignorant, dependent, contented slave so well that he convinces his master that he would never run away. When he is kidnapped and freed in Canada against his will, he travels all the way back to his master's plantation. His master considers Grandison a model slave, and so, too, might the reader. But any laurels that the master might be willing to give this loyal slave must wait; for we discover that Grandison only came back "home" to get his whole family and run right back to Canada again. "The Web of Circumstance," on one level is Chesnutt's opposition to Booker T. Washington's views on the stance Afro-Americans should take on their disfranchisement. It is also a strong protest against the infamous convict lease system. But further it represents one of Chesnutt's uses of the Edenic myth, his "Paradise Lost" if you will, adding another dimension to the story.

Perhaps the most complex story in the collection is the "Bouquet" which I should like now to analyze in some detail.

From the days of slavery the overwhelming desire of American blacks for learning has been well documented. The exceptional qualities of Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, and William Wells Brown were not their literacy. By stealth, by trickery, by outright defiance, many a slave taught himself to read even where laws and masters forbade it. Awed by this reverence for literacy in the Sea Island blacks, Willie L. Rose writes:

> It is difficult to understand how a people systematically kept in densest ignorance for generations could have had
such a keen and almost unanimous understanding of the power of the written word. The answer probably lies in the fact that, in spite of the South Carolina laws, it had been impossible to exclude the slaves completely from the world of letters. 28

And W. E. B. DuBois, speaking of the entire newly freed black population, makes this observation:

The eagerness to learn among American Negroes was exceptional in the case of a poor and recently emancipated folk. Usually, with a protective psychology, such degraded masses regard ignorance as natural and necessary, or even exalt their own traditional wisdom and discipline over "book learning"; or they assume that knowledge is for higher beings and not for the "likes of us."

American Negroes never acted thus. The very feeling of inferiority which slavery forced upon them fathered an intense desire to rise out of their condition by means of education. 29

From the beginning, the teacher occupied a special place among the slaves and the freedmen. During the war, black soldiers and refugees were taught at camps and places of refuge "at their own pressing request." 30 Teachers from the North, white and black, were greeted as "angels of mercy" by the freedmen. These teachers were not so highly thought of by the whites who feared that social equality was the sole lesson that they would teach. 31 Those who came found willing students of all ages, eager to learn.

Such was the impact made by the meeting of Northern teachers and Southern freedmen that the schools founded during and immediately after the war provided "nearly all the college education and most of the high school training for Southern Negroes until well into the twentieth century." 32 The financial support for nearly all of these ventures came from the freedmen's aid societies of Northern Protestant churches, chief among them being the American Missionary Association. When the Freedman's Bureau was established it was natural that the Association would function as its educational arm. From 1865 through 1870 the two groups operated several hundred elementary schools. 33 DuBois called this movement "the finest thing in American history, and one of the few things untainted by sordid greed and cheap vainglory." 34
Yet the enterprise was fraught with white paternalism. James McPherson defines the basis for the tense relations between blacks and whites regarding the schools they had collectively started:

Despite their professed and, in most cases, sincere belief in racial equality, white missionaries yielded only gradually and sometimes reluctantly to the black demands for greater control of schools. There were both subjective and objective reasons for this gradualism. Subjectively, some missionaries shared (perhaps subconsciously) the widespread convictions that black people were deficient in organizational and executive skills. They were especially hesitant to entrust Negroes with outright control of funds contributed by Northern philanthropy. Moreover, many teachers were slow to believe that the “grown-up children” for whom the schools were founded had matured to the point of readiness for adult responsibilities. Objectively, the first and even second generations of freedmen would not produce enough able teachers to staff the schools with personnel equal in average ability and training to Northern teachers, who came from middle-class, New England-oriented backgrounds that stressed education and achievement. 35

Along with their desire for financial and policy control, some of the freedmen, so recently students themselves, recognized the danger that white teachers, for all their good will, reinforced feelings of black inferiority inculcated by the slave system. E. K. Love in 1896 told a black National Baptist Convention:

We can better marshall our forces and develop our people in enterprises manned by us. We can more thoroughly fill our people with race pride . . . by presenting to them for their support enterprises that are wholly ours. . . . The world recognizes men for the power they have to effect it. . . . Negro brain should shape and control Negro thought. 36

Not all black people were of this opinion, nor were all white teachers opposed to it. An easy resolution was not forthcoming; but the Freedman’s Aid Society was under increasing pressure to grant more power to Blacks.

When during Reconstruction, the states took over public education, the argument resurfaced, while it continued in the schools that the Freedman’s Bureau had set up. 37 Agitation for black con-
control of the education of black youth was, in fact, to continue well up into the twentieth century with reverberations even in our own day. Quite separate from the debate as to whether Blacks should pursue industrial or college training, this push for black control, beginning from the establishment of the earliest schools, has been heard long after Washington and DuBois were silent. At every level of education since the Emancipation, this position, with no less fervor than in the beginning, Blacks have maintained as C. E. Becker so eloquently wrote in 1882:

We are willing to return thanks to the many friends who have assisted us in educating ourselves thus far, but we have now reached the point where we desire to endeavor to educate ourselves, to build school houses, churches, colleges, and universities, by our own efforts... ere we sacrifice our manhood.

Education and Disfranchisement greatly concerned Charles Chesnutt. The last two stories of *The Wife of His Youth* present his views on each—"The Bouquet" on the education of Blacks.

"The Bouquet" is one of the stories most admired by the reviewers of *The Wife of His Youth*. Ironically enough, the indications are that they have misread this story they so admire. Benjamin Brawley, for instance, writes that "The Bouquet" tells of the devotion of "a little Negro girl to her white teacher and shows how the force of Southern prejudice might forbid the expression of simple love not only in a home but even in a church and at a cemetery." Critics praise the story for its simplicity. Of course, reduced to its plot it is deceptively simple: a little black girl is frustrated by racist social custom as she attempts to carry a tribute of flowers to her dead white teacher, the teacher's dog comes to her aid and delivers the flowers. Thus described, the story seems too vulgar to engage one's attention. As such its only merit would be that it is another of the many stories which illustrate the fidelity and devotion of the Negro—a theme belonging more to Thomas Nelson Page than Charles W. Chesnutt. Actually, the story is neither sentimental nor simple. It is, in fact, a psychological horror story of a black child whose ego is stunted and destroyed by her white teacher. Its meaning is embedded in Chesnutt's ironic and metaphorical use of character.

In a letter to Cable of June 5, 1890, Chesnutt uses the simile that informs this story:
I notice that all of the many Negroes (excepting your own) whose virtues have been given to the world in the magazine press recently, have been blacks, full blooded, and their chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity to their old masters, for whom they have been willing to sacrifice almost life itself. 40

In this same letter, Chesnutt says, “But I can’t write about those people, or rather I won’t write about them.” 41

That the story has been consistently misread is an indication of the problem that continues to face the Afro-American writer. If he does not clobber the reader with his meaning, he may be misread; if he does, he runs the risk of being called a propagandist rather than an artist. This inability to understand the meaning has been a problem with many readers of Chesnutt’s stories, who, generally not attending to his art closely enough, have, slothfully seen what they have wanted. This has meant a loss, not only for Chesnutt, but for his readers.

Mary Myrover, one “of those who has constituted the aristocracy of the old regime,” 42 has surprised her friends by teaching in a colored public school. Their surprise is not that a Southern white woman teaches in these schools—these positions are indeed held by white women, but not usually by members of Mary’s class. Schooling of the children has been taken over by the state; the Freedman’s Bureau and Presbyterian missionary schools have closed. Chesnutt clearly reveals the attitude of the black citizenry regarding the teaching of their children:

The colored people of the town had been for some time agitating their right to teach their own schools, but as yet the claim had not been conceded. (269)

Obviously, two things are at work here. First, the fact that Mary Myrover is teaching suggests that the social order of the town is changing, for she represents the plantation aristocracy. Second, the fact that Blacks are “agitating” for their rights indicates that ex-slave and ex-slave owner are relating to each other in a way possible only in the Reconstruction period.

Mary Myrover is facing a situation that is entirely new to her. Chesnutt establishes that her aristocratic pedigree goes back to “people of distinction in Virginia” (270) and that she had been rich before the war. Her father, a Confederate hero, fell at Vicksburg;
her brother, too, perished, his body never recovered. The family money, invested in Confederate bonds, is gone. Mary and her mother have managed "to hold up their heads without embarrassment for some years after the close of the war" (272). Now, however, they are "in danger of dropping behind, unless in some way they can add to their meagre income."

Caste plays a large part in Mary's looking for a job. With the planter class gone, an industrial class has arisen. Other white women, not of her class, are finding a respectability in working. Mary elects to teach, as that profession will not mean a loss of her class position as a Southern white lady. When there are no vacancies in the white schools, she turns to the black.

"I don't like it Mary," said her mother. "It's a long step from owning such people to teaching them. What do they need with education? It will only make them unfit for work."

"They're free now, mother, and perhaps they'll work better if they're taught something. Besides, it's only a business arrangement, and doesn't involve any closer contact than we have with our servants."

"Well, I should say not!" sniffed the old lady. "Not one of them will ever dare to presume on your position to take any liberties with us. I'll see to that." (273)

Mary's first day at the black school is a difficult one:

There had always been negro servants in the house, and though on the streets colored people were more numerous than those of her own race, and though she was so familiar with their dialect that she might almost be said to speak it, barring certain characteristic grammatical inaccuracies, she had never been brought in personal contact with so many of them at once as when she confronted the fifty or sixty faces—of colors ranging from a white almost as clear as her own to the darkest livery of the sun. . . . (273)

But in a day fraught with "mutual antagonism" she can "perceive that the children are not altogether responsive."

Mary's favorite child is Sophy Tucker, whose painful story is this:

Just the ground for the teacher's liking for Sophy might not at first be apparent. The girl was far from the whitest of Miss Myrover's pupils; in fact, she was one of the darker ones. She
Eugene Terry

was not the brightest in intellect, though she always tried to learn her lessons. She was not the best dressed, for her mother was a poor widow, who went out washing and scrubbing for a living. Perhaps the real tie between them was Sophy's intense devotion to the teacher. (275)

This devotion, Chesnutt depicts as so pervaded by simplicity and innocence that the reader wants to snatch the child away from the impending danger history has taught us is there.

There is nothing of envy, nothing of regret, nothing but worship for the beautiful white lady—she was not especially handsome, but to Sophy her beauty was almost divine—who had come to teach her. If Miss Myrover dropped a book, Sophy was the first to spring and pick it up; if she wished a chair moved, Sophy seemed to anticipate her wish; and so of all the numberless little services that can be rendered in a schoolroom. (275-276)

Miss Myrover cultivates in Sophy this servile worship. The girl brings flowers to the teacher; the teacher tells the girl about the flowers she wants on her grave when she dies. She gives Sophy a yellow ribbon for her hair; Sophy cherishes it. Chesnutt analyzes her attitude toward the child:

Miss Myrover was at first amused at Sophy's devotion; but when she grew more accustomed to it, she found it rather to her liking. It had a sort of flavor of the old regime, and she felt, when she bestowed her kindly notice upon her little black attendant, some of the feudal condescension of the mistress toward the slave. (276-277)

Sophy's one rival "in her attachment to the teacher" is Miss Myrover's white spaniel Prince, "a dog of high degree" who "would have little to do with the children of the school; he made an exception, however, in the case of Sophy. . ." (277). The rivalry, however, is one-sided, for

At school Sophy and Prince vied with each other in their attention to Miss Myrover. But when school was over, Prince went away with her, and Sophy stayed behind; for Miss Myrover was white and Sophy was black, which they both understood perfectly well. Miss Myrover taught the colored children, but she could not be seen with them in public. If they occasionally met her on the street, they did not expect her
Miss Myrover is not an evil woman. Bound by tradition, she knows not the evil that she does; but she should not be entrusted with the lives of these children. Chesnutt, granting her “sentiment,” “susceptibility,” and the capacity for love, makes her more blameless than her training. Human nature is shaped by its environment, i.e., “acquired habits,” as he will say in “The Web of Circumstance.” Mary’s world of planters made her, shaped her vision and, in many ways, proscribed her humanity. The story is all the more horrible when one realizes that she is unaware of her actions.

As if to remind the reader of Mary’s connection with the aristocratic class and thereby exonerate her of individual guilt, Chesnutt turns the reader’s attention to Mrs. Myrover. Agreeing to let Sophy carry her parcel of books, Mary and the child approach the Myrover home, Sophy following “the teacher at a respectful distance.” Mrs. Myrover says in Sophy’s hearing “and perhaps with the intention that she should hear”:

“Mary, I wish you wouldn’t let those little darkeys follow you to the house. I don’t want them in the yard. I should think you’d have enough of them all day.”

“Very well, mother,” replied her daughter. “I won’t bring any more of them. The child was only doing me a favor.”

(279)

Mary is Mrs. Myrover’s daughter. The mother, promising early in the story that none of the black children “will ever dare to presume on your position,” has done a better job than perhaps she knows. Not only has she trained Mary’s sensibilities—or insensibilities, as the case may be—so that Sophy cannot act naturally as
a loving pupil, but so well that Mary cannot recognize the affection or return it. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Myrover was an invalid, and opposition or irritation of any kind brought on nervous paroxysms that made her miserable, and made life a burden to the rest of the household, so that Mary seldom crossed her whims. She did not bring Sophy to the house again, nor did Sophy again offer her services as porter. (279-280)

But at school, Miss Myrover continues to encourage Sophy in her adulation by accepting the child’s gifts and services. Her classes are very successful. Conscientious, hard working, her children made rapid progress under her tuition, and learned to love her well; for they saw and appreciated, as well as children could, her fidelity to a trust she might have slighted, as some others did, without much fear of criticism. (280)

The choices for the children seem few in their white teachers; competency and something short of humanity or irresponsibility. Mary Myrover had done as good a job of educating the children as she can. That she cannot see them as human beings is the fault of her tradition. For the children’s part, they appreciated—“as well as children could.”

Mary Myrover dies “toward the end of her second year.” Mrs. Myrover “was too old, and had suffered too deeply from the war, in body and mind and estate, ever to reconcile herself to the changed order of things” (281), blames the black children for her death. Chesnutt attacks her logic by simply stating that she never explained “How the color of the pupils had produced the fatal effect. . . .” Mrs. Myrover has “always feared that something would happen to Mary. It seemed unnatural for her to be wearing herself out teaching little negroes who ought to have been working for her” (281). When her friends suggest that Negroes be allowed to come to Mary’s funeral, Mrs. Myrover is relentlessly opposed. She withstands even their argument that “sincere respect from the humble would be a worthy tribute to the proudest” (281):

“They had my daughter when she was alive,” she said, “and they’ve killed her. But she’s mine now, and I won’t have them come near her. I don’t want one of them at the funeral or anywhere around.” (282)
That Mrs. Myrover not only hates the black children, but is also jealous of them, Chesnutt suggests in this speech. The loss of her husband, son, wealth, and position has made her very possessive of Mary. Mrs. Myrover has always felt that Mary abandoned her for the black children.

Little Sophy, remembering Miss Myrover's wish for flowers on her coffin, picks a bouquet which she brings to the Myrover home. A sympathetic black cook tries to lead her to the coffin, but Mrs. Myrover frustrates the attempt. Asked to leave, the child "feeling as though she had been caught in some disgraceful act, hurried down the walk and out of the gate, with her bouquet in her hand" (284). The image is that of a scolded puppy.

The funeral is held at the Episcopal Church. When the black people of the community arrive they are met by an usher:

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I have had orders to admit no one until the friends of the family have all been seated. If you wish to wait until the white people have all gone in, and there's any room left, you may be able to get into the back part of the gallery. Of course I can't tell you yet whether there'll be any room or not."

Chesnutt's comments: "Now the statement of the usher was a very reasonable one; but, strange to say, none of the colored people chose to remain except Sophy" (285). Sophy waits in the church yard. Seeing there is no way to get in, she goes to a window—decorated with a picture of Jesus blessing the children—that has a hole in it. Climbing up on the window sill, she watches the service through the hole. She can see Prince under her teacher's coffin—the dog had "slipped in unnoticed among the mourners, taken his place, from which no one had the heart to remove him" (286). Again, we are aware of the metaphor: Sophy has waited in the yard and climbed up on the window sill to peer into the church.

From her position under the feet of Jesus, Sophy hears Mary Myrover praised by the rector who describes her love and her self-sacrifice for others, referred to her labors as a teacher of the poor ignorant negroes who had been placed in their midst by an all-wise Providence, and whom it was their duty to guide and direct in the station in which God has put them. (287)
Ironically, Sophy listening at the window, does not understand that the rector has described an enemy. But beyond this Chesnutt follows irony with irony. Unlike the rector’s words suggest, Mary Myrover took the job of teaching the black children (“it’s only a business arrangement”) for the money which would allow her to maintain her caste. We are also made to recall Mary’s feeling that “perhaps they’ll work better if they’re taught something.” Finally, we remember the agitation of the blacks for education and what they hoped that education would make of their children. We sense their urgency as we watch Sophy who

sprang down from her perch, and taking her flowers, followed the procession. She did not walk with the rest, but at a proper and respectful distance from the last mourner. No one noticed the little black girl with the bunch of yellow flowers, or thought of her as interested in the funeral. (287)

Thus, we are made conscious again of her puppy-like action. At the cemetery Sophy is confronted by a sign:

“Notice. This cemetery is for white people only. Others keep out.”

In order that we get some sense of Sophy as a person, Chesnutt tells us that she “was a child who loved beauty in a blind, groping sort of way” and has longed to walk in this cemetery with its “green mounds and shaded walks and blooming flowers” but that she knows that though the “keep out” sign is courteously worded, it means what it says. She remembers that “a colored man, who wandered into the cemetery . . . and fallen asleep . . . had been arrested as a vagrant and fined five dollars, which he worked out on the streets, with a ball and chain attachment at twenty-five cents a day” (288). We cannot enjoy Sophy’s urge toward beauty, however, because we remember that here it compels her to a cemetery—toward death—and that earlier in the story her urge had been toward her “beautiful” teacher. And, reminded of the black urge to education, we can see that, given the wrong teachers, the end might well be death, or, at least, “ball and chain attachment.”

When the mourners leave the cemetery, Sophy, in desperate desire to place the flowers on her teacher’s grave, has an idea: She calls Prince who is guarding his mistress’ grave. Prince,
understanding her request, takes the bouquet to the grave. Chesnutt closes the story with one final ironic analogy:

> When Prince had performed his mission he turned his eyes toward Sophy inquiringly, and when she gave him a nod of approval lay down and resumed his watch by the graveside. Sophy looked at him a moment with a feeling very much like envy, and then turned and moved slowly away. (290)

The child's "envy" closes the story. The sensitive will understand Chesnutt's point: Miss Myrover's white world has not only taught black Sophy that she is less than a dog—Sophy tragically believes it. She will not be educated to fulfill her potential; she will not be guided to the beauty toward which she blindly gropes, as long as the Miss Myrovers control her education. Rather, her education will consist of a process rather like the domestication of an animal that will faithfully serve the white folks. Not pathos but horror is what a reader of "The Bouquet" is called upon to feel.

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, our customs, beliefs, and rituals, and further by our definitions. Only when the instrument is properly tuned can justice be done to the score. Let us hear Chesnutt as he would have us hear him; then we can declare whether or not he told it well.

2 Ibid., p. 21.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 28.
5 Ibid., p. 58.
6 Ibid., p. 178.
7 Vol. 85 (May, 1900), p. 700.
8 Ibid., p. 701.
9 CLXXIII (July, 1901), 882.
10 Ibid.
Eugene Terry

11 "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt Has Done a Good Work for Those Races Allied by What Is Called an 'Affinity,'" Topeka Plaindealer, January 19, 1900 (Clipping, Cravath Library).

12 Review of "The Wife of His Youth," Ibid.


15 Ibid., p. xix.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., xix-xx.

18 Helen Chesnutt, p. 194.


20 Ibid., p. 117.

21 "We Wear the Mask," quoted in Benjamin Brawley, Paul Lawrence Dunbar: Poet of His People (Chapel Hill, 1936), p. 46.

22 Brawley, p. 64.

23 Ibid.


30 Ibid., p. 642.

31 Bullock, p. 42.


33 Ibid., p. 1360.


35 McPherson, p. 1360.


37 McPherson, p. 1369.

38 Becker to Henry L. Morehouse, November 17, 1882, ABHMS Archives, cited in McPherson, p. 1369.


40 Helen Chesnutt, p. 57.

41 Ibid., p. 58.

42 Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Bouquet," The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of The Color Line (Ann Arbor, 1968), p. 176. All further references to this story will be cited in the text.