

Cleveland State University  
**EngagedScholarship@CSU**



---

ETD Archive

---

2011

# Charles Chesnutt Racial Relation Progression Throughout Career

Lindy R. Birney  
*Cleveland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

## Recommended Citation

Birney, Lindy R., "Charles Chesnutt Racial Relation Progression Throughout Career" (2011). *ETD Archive*. 525.  
<https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/525>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Archive by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

CHARLES CHESNUTT RACIAL RELATION PROGRESSION THROUGHOUT  
CAREER

LINDY R. BIRNEY

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature

Queens College

May, 2000

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2011

This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of ENGLISH  
and the College of Graduate Studies by

---

Thesis Chairperson, Dr. Jeff Karem

---

Department and Date

---

Committee Member, Dr. Adrienne Gosselin

---

Department and Date

---

Committee Member, Dr. Adam Sonstegard

---

Department and Date

# CHARLES CHESNUTT RACIAL RELATION PROGRESSION THROUGHOUT CAREER

LINDY R. BIRNEY

## ABSTRACT

Charles Chesnutt began his career with an ideology that race should not be a category in which to judge others. He felt that through literature he could help influence society and help create a less racial centric civilization. His career began with positive reviews from short story publications in multiple magazines. However, most critics and readers at the time did not know of Chesnutt's racial background. It was not until his second collection of short stories that Chesnutt revealed the truth about his heritage. After his success with *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth* (both published in 1899), Chesnutt began to assert his political agenda more aggressively into his writing. His second novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) received very poor reviews; critics were repulsed by Chesnutt's revolutionary philosophies concerning the racial caste system. The poor reception of Chesnutt's three novels forced him to retire from a literary career. Years later, during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of prolific African American writers, Chesnutt was disappointed in the baseness of black characters in literature. He scolded Harlem Renaissance writers for their lack of strong black characters, but Chesnutt's short stories that were published in *The Crisis* also lacked the racial uplift that he so desperately sought. Chesnutt's intensity of racial relation literature had dwindled over time and he left it to the next generation of writers to fulfill the social agenda that his literature was never able to achieve.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. Chesnutt's Acclaim for Dialect Fiction.....	8
III. Societal Influences During the Time of <i>The Marrow of Tradition's</i> Publication.....	13
IV. Chesnutt's Revolutionary Characters and Plot.....	18
V. <i>The Marrow of Tradition's</i> Reception in the Wake of a Racial Caste System.....	29
VI. Change of Perceptions During the Harlem Renaissance.....	37
VII. Chesnutt's Writings During the Harlem Renaissance Contrasted with His Earlier Literature Goals.....	44
VIII. Chesnutt's New Goals for Literature.....	48
WORKS CITED.....	52

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Charles Chesnutt's novel *The Marrow of Tradition* is based on the 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina race riot. Chesnutt recreates the events leading to the riot through his fictional characters. Although the characters are fictional, the main plot and many of the sociological issues confronted in the town are based on facts. This is the first of Chesnutt's fictional writings to deal with a historical event. In relaying an actual event through fiction and promoting African American rights, Chesnutt ostracized himself from his readers. He took an actual event and fictionalized it making the white man problematic and the black man the hero. In 1901, when *The Marrow of Tradition* was written, society was not ready to be critiqued for its white supremacist tendencies. Chesnutt sought to blur the lines of the racial caste system and influence society through his writings. However, throughout his entire career, as both writer and critic, his position on how racial relations should be portrayed in literature changes drastically. He began as an author who wanted to eradicate race boundaries and describe his utopia of a raceless

society, but through the poor reception of *The Marrow of Tradition*, he came to realize that he what he truly desired was the ideal representation of African Americans and became a defender of his race during the Harlem Renaissance.

Charles Chesnutt was a mixed-race man who could easily pass as a white man but chose to classify himself as a black man. Geordie Hamilton maintains that “Chesnutt self-identified as seven-eighths white, may have felt ‘intellectually and racially’ estranged from both blacks and whites, and once claimed never to have written ‘as a Negro.’ Photographs prove that one could probably not distinguish Chesnutt as having African-American ancestry without being told so” (Hamilton 50). Since Chesnutt was mixed raced, he experienced both the best and the worst of both worlds. He was able to receive an education, but he chose to dedicate much of his writing career to the promotion of African Americans. Since his appearance did not bear the burden of the black community, Chesnutt, more than likely, did not experience all the belittling strategies prevalent in the white dominated society. In fact, when first publishing, his ambiguous race helped him get his foot in the door because the publishers were unaware of his background.

Chesnutt was educated in law, but he had a desire to write as well. Given that Chesnutt was engaged in law, he was very concerned with the racial tension that dominated during the turn of the century. William Andrews in his book *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* states “by passing the Ohio state bar, building a successful legal stenography business, and settling his family in a well-to-do Cleveland residential area, Chesnutt advanced himself and triumphed over color barriers during his

first fifteen years in the North” (Andrews 75). He was able to defy many racial boundaries therefore most of his writings deal with the intermingling of races. Chesnutt found it difficult to fit into a world that was bent on strict boundaries separating the races. He could pass, if he chose, as a white man, but then he would be denying a part of himself.

Since Chesnutt’s desire was to make a difference through his writing it was important for him to reach his target audience. Chesnutt was the first black author to have his book published by what Richard H. Brodhead claims was a “high cultural literary publisher” (Brodhead 178 ). Chesnutt was praised for his literary style of writing and wished to not only be an author, but a high quality, literary novelist. Chesnutt wanted to use his writing skills to help elevate the black race and transform society’s opinion toward the separation of the races. In order to help proceed with his literary goal, Chesnutt writes in an elevated language that would appeal to a more educated and literary audience. Barbara Baker claims “...Chesnutt moves freely between what his readers perceive at the time as two different and separate communities – between a so-called black community represented by speakers of black English vernacular and a so-called white community represented by speakers of standard English” (Baker 45). Baker states it is not only language that Chesnutt is able to switch fluently between, but also the mentalities as well (Baker 45). At the same time he appears to move freely between African-American and European-American ways of understanding the world (Baker 45). Chesnutt intended his writing to represent both racial worlds and the ability to drift between the two worlds with ease symbolizing what he felt should exist in reality. He



felt it was absurd to judge a character solely on race. This would also help expand his target audience by not limiting himself to one standard.

Henry Wonham states “Chesnutt wished to expunge race as a category of identity, and he envisioned his fiction as a means to liberate his audience from race consciousness...Chesnutt’s struggle was to escape the reductive binaries out of which language, especially the language of late-nineteenth-century racial identity, is constructed” (Wonham 833-34). Chesnutt wanted to prove to America that race was not a proper way to classify people; the boundaries separating the two, white and black, were not appropriate. He felt the boundaries should be broken down because there was no real difference between the two. His ideal of a raceless society was not a denial of heritage, but the hopes of an environment that would not consider race as a way to discriminate. William Ramsey claims Chesnutt felt that he, a mixed race man, represents what America should be, a mixture of race without visible boundaries (Ramsey 30). If Chesnutt is an intelligent and educated biracial man, then it is possible for someone with African American blood in them to be successful. Chesnutt believed justice has nothing to do with color, but is a higher calling beyond the racial boundaries. “In Chesnutt’s melting pot ideal, ethnicity is a transitory phase on the way to full admission to America, by which point diversity will have blurred” (Ramsey 38). Chesnutt believed all are equal when it comes to such philosophies as justice and truth. Eventually he hoped the stringent boundaries between the races would become more diluted instead of a strict binary system. Matthew Wilson depicts Chesnutt’s ideals in his article “Who Has the Right to Say? Charles W. Chesnutt, Whiteness, and the Public Sphere.” Wilson claims “Chesnutt’s utopian hope was that his ‘race’ would not automatically debar him from the

public arena, while he knew, on another level, that his being African-American more than likely meant that his intervention in public debate would be discounted as illegitimate in the view of most late nineteenth-century white Americans” (Wilson 19). Chesnutt wanted to push through the racial barriers and change the way America viewed blacks even though he knew there would be obstacles.

Since Chesnutt’s intent was to help sway the current beliefs about racial relations through his writing, many of his protagonists were mulattoes, or mixed-race, just like himself. He sought to transform society’s beliefs about race distinctions through characters that were a combination of the two, proving that race was not a reasonable distinction to be used for or against a person’s value. Chesnutt hoped he would be riding in the wake of authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Wilson states “In terms of the concept of the public sphere, then, Stowe, Tourgee, and Chesnutt could be seen as representing the problem of the potential expansion of that utopian space to include political and social concerns of African-Americans, and in particular to speak for themselves” (Wilson 20). He believed the racial topics already presented in literature by authors like Stowe opened the door for him not only to be able to write about similar topics, but to push the boundaries even more.

Barbara Baker in *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity in the Literature of the South* argues that “he [Chesnutt] in no way considered himself part of Southern black culture, but instead considered himself an artist who would shape the raw materials of this culture into marketable matter” (Baker 35-36). What Chesnutt felt he was representing was something much greater than a race, but society during this time

was still restricted to classification through race. “Among the undesirable realities that Chesnutt faced were the severe limitations placed on him because of his African-American heritage, and the fact that in order to succeed as an author, he was expected to conform to representations of African-Americans that he did not accept. Chesnutt was not willing to create stereotypical African-American characters” (Baker 38). Instead of complying with the societal view, he wanted to prove, through his characters, that racial boundaries were limitations placed by society, not inherent differences.

Chesnutt’s main objective was to break down racial boundaries; he chose to write about the races without solely relying upon commonly accepted stereotypes. However the nation had already constructed their views on racial integration, and the answer was a resounding no. Dean McWilliams in *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* illustrates that “he [Chesnutt] sought to create literary art that would reshape America’s discourse on race, and he sought to do this at one of the least propitious moments in American history” (McWilliams 3). Chesnutt did not take into account the depth of society’s feelings toward making distinctions based on race, and from those distinctions allowing for classification of first and second class citizens. He wanted to portray blacks differently than seen in the past; he wanted them viewed in a positive light.

However not all people would agree with Chesnutt’s theories. Chesnutt believed in a culmination of all races, that there was no real difference between white, mixed race and black. By stressing an assimilation policy, Chesnutt chooses to ignore the cultural history of African Americans. Especially today, when there is a surge to embrace African American heritage, assimilation provides less of a unity and more of a loss of

cultural identity. Henry Wonham argues “Chesnutt was certainly one of America’s first great black novelists, and yet his newly available letters, speeches, essays, and commercially untenable novels represent him as a writer suspicious of race consciousness in any form, an artist committed to Alian Locke’s view that ‘culture has no color’” (Wonham 830-31). Chesnutt’s view on racial issues was too modern for the early nineteenth century, but now, while many would praise Chesnutt for his writings, some would not like the idea of promoting assimilation.

## CHAPTER II

### CHESNUTT'S ACCLAIM FOR DIALECT FICTION

Chesnutt was praised for his first novel by critics who mainly focused on his use of dialect writing, however looking at the larger picture of what Chesnutt wanted his literary career to demonstrate, *The Conjure Woman* focuses on black characters, mainly Uncle Julius who reminisces about the days of slavery. There is a slight contrast with Uncle Julius' tales and the present day, but nothing significant to represent the change in times. According to Richard Brodhead, Chesnutt had difficulty convincing the publishers to allow him to include the social progression type of stories that he so desperately wanted to share with his readers. Instead, publishers wanted Chesnutt to focus on his "conjure" tales where there is an affirmation of the caste system (Brodhead 16-18). Society is more willing to accept and take pleasure from writings that are revolutionary in thought but are fiction as opposed to those which critique the accepted norms. However one item Brodhead claims Chesnutt introduced successfully to the literary world was the use of black vernacular (Brodhead 6).

Although the tales reference to slavery times and the degradation of the black race, Brodhead states in Chesnutt's tales "the oppressed are never absolutely oppressed, and their domination is never total...spells that are cast defy their makers' efforts to undo them; spells go only partly right and do more harms they did not intend...conjure makes a master suffer the experience of his own harsh rule, but this experience leads him only to mitigate his demands, not to renounce his mastery" (Brodhead 9). This optimistic theme helped Chesnutt to pursue his political goals through writing without being overtly controversial. In "The Goophered Grapevine" Mars Dugal, a vineyard owner, seeks to prevent his worker slaves from eating the grapes and seeks the help of conjure woman Aunt Peggy. The conjure woman places a spell on the grapes that promise death to anyone who eats the grapes. For a long time this curse prevents the losses that Mars Dugal used to experience. In fact, he begins to make a profit from Henry, a slave who has been under a spell, through constantly selling and reselling Henry. But in the end, Mars Dugal loses his entire vineyard due to trusting a travelling Yankee. Mars Dugal lost his empire due to a white man who misinformed him on how to deal with the grapes instead of through the constant pillaging of his slaves. In this short story, the white master is brought down not by his black slaves, which was his fear, but by a white man. Chesnutt has flipped the script a bit as far as what can be the downfall of a powerful man.

In another story from *The Conjure Woman* entitled "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" Chesnutt's focal character, Uncle Julius, spins a tale about a man who was turned into a mule by the spell of a conjure man. Through this tale, Julius is able to convince his boss to buy a horse instead of a mule. Unknowingly, the boss buys the horse which turns out to be a poor choice because the horse is old and sickly. Julius, however, benefits from

the sale of the horse as can be seen in his new suit, a purchase which cannot be supported through regular wages. In this tale, Chesnutt depicts a poor, black worker who outwits his wealthy, white boss. This is a subtle, yet comical, technique Chesnutt uses to empower his black characters.

*The Boston Evening Transcript* maintains “Mr. Chesnutt is a witness for the colored race, whose blood he shares in slight degree, from the standpoint of a man whose education, tastes, business associations, and close personal friendships associate him with the white race; moreover, he seems endowed with judgment of a poise that he may be trusted to be fair to both” (McElrath 30). In this review Chesnutt is praised for his ability to appeal to white society. The review acknowledges he should be able to fairly portray both races; however the quote claims he is more linked with white society than black. Since Chesnutt’s goal is to write for a white audience, this type of praise is agreeable, but soon after this review of 1899, Chesnutt decided to begin writing with a social agenda in mind. Andrews states “steering a difficult course between becoming co-opted by his white literary supporters and becoming alienated from them and their access to the publishing medium, Chesnutt became the first Afro-American writer to use the white-controlled mass media in the service of serious social fiction on behalf of the black community” (Andrews 274).

Andrews states that Chesnutt is attributed with being the first African American to publish a novel, and more importantly to be praised for a work of fiction. He argues this feat has helped to remove some of the stereotypes ascribed to African Americans and it “brought the larger sociopolitical injustices that Chesnutt wrote about to the attention of

many white opinion makers who shaped the values as well as the sensibilities of genteel white America” (Andrews 273). Unfortunately, Chesnutt was not able to break down the racial barriers enough for the historical *The Marrow of Tradition* to prosper. Chesnutt’s ability to write well, as cited by critics when referring to *The Conjure Woman*, had not diminished, so the fault of the novels failure would lie solely on the subject matter.

His later writings, including *The Marrow of Tradition*, sought to lift up the black race in society; this was an endeavor which met with bitter results for he no longer linked himself to the white race and his current audience. He betrayed his audience and lost his positive reviews to his social ambitions. Another review from Florence A. H. Morgan states “so clever a master of literary skill, so keen a student from human nature is Mr. Chesnutt, that he never allows himself to drift into too great gloom, but plays with an artistic touch on our emotions and our sense of humor in an equal degree” (McElrath 40). Again this review was written before Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition* and his decision to begin to write not within the present times of race relations, but more into the future of what he hoped would come to be. *The Conjure Woman* and many of his short stories received first-class reviews, praising Chesnutt for his literary skill; however in these writings, he was viewed as a “white” author intent on portraying his link to the educated white society. In 1900 William Dean Howells described Chesnutt as “of negro blood, - diluted, indeed, in such a measure that if he did not admit to this descent few would imagine it, but still quite of that middle world which lies next, though wholly outside, our own” (McElrath 52). As long as Chesnutt kept his blackness repressed, he would be praised for his writings, but the moment he tried to switch tactics and use his writings as a social platform, he would be diminished as a great writer. However,



William Andrews states that Chesnutt continually had “faith in the gradual but steady spiritual improvement of man and his institutions was the cornerstone of his whole philosophy of race relations in America” (Andrews 189). His writing was his way of expressing his ideas, especially since his ideas contrasted with modern society, but writing gave him his voice.

One of the literary aspects for which Chesnutt was renowned was the use of the vernacular. Richard Brodhead claims *The Conjure Woman*, published in 1899 before *The Marrow of Tradition*, “helped pioneer a literary use of black vernacular culture important to many writers” (Brodhead 1). Brodhead continues to explain that once Chesnutt secured his position as a literary artist, he began to change his venue and begin to move toward a different motive (13). Brodhead states “what Chesnutt attempted to do, after his initial success with his first conjure tales, was to turn to a noncomic, nondialect-based form of literary writing that would address the social problems of people of mixed race” (14).

CHAPTER III

SOCIETAL INFLUENCES DURING THE TIME OF *THE MARROW OF*  
*TRADITION'S* PUBLICATION

Charles Chesnutt went to Wilmington to research the facts of the 1898 riot. “Outraged by the biased portrayal of the Wilmington ‘revolution’ in the national press and by the shocking stories he heard from friends and relatives who lived through the chaos, Chesnutt decided to set the record straight. He began writing *The Marrow of Tradition*, a work he conceived as ‘both a novel and a political and sociological tract’” (Wagner 311). Chesnutt was appalled at the media coverage of the riot and the impression that form of writing would leave on its audience. To add fuel to the already hot coals, journalism provided by both black and white journalists created more tension in reference to racial relations in Wilmington. Samina Najmi claims the riot began due to an editorial written by Alexander Manly, a black journalist, in response to a speech by Rebecca Felton that condoned lynching (Najmi 9).

But it was not just in Wilmington that the press was extremely influential to people's perception of racial relations. Jean Lutes describes how it was common in the time period to read articles about lynching that not only openly justified the action, but laid sole blame on the black "offender." Lutes writes "reporters were trained to construct half-truths and to suppress whole truths, a practice that inevitably warped the sensibilities of future novelists...if lynching was one of those experiences reporters were not allowed to represent fully, naturally it fell to writers of fiction, not just journalists, to do it justice" (Lutes 457). Lutes continues to explain that in 1892 there were double the amount of black lynching than there were legal executions in the United States (Lutes 457). The reports pertaining to lynching were surprisingly void of all emotion, and if any emotion were included, the outrage was directed toward the supposed black offender, not the actions of a lynching mob (Lutes 459). This type of reporting tends to curve societies perceptions of truth and facts. "Reporters played a unique role in reproducing racial violence – by witnessing it, by striving to render it intelligible to their readers, and often by sanctioning it" (Lutes 461). If the newspaper, a source in which a reader is supposed to get all the facts, details events in a way that skews the truth, readers are lead to believe the information as truth. Society in general is lead to believe what is read in newspapers and base opinions on the "facts" portrayed without questioning a bias perspective.

Wagner states that many of the racial problems seen in the Wilmington race riot were due to the rising black middle class (Wagner 312). Southern whites had not considered this phenomenon a possibility. Wagner states in 1898, the black community was rising and becoming more significant. There were black-owned businesses surrounding Campbell square; these buildings included churches and a school.

“Although these buildings were a source of pride for the black community, the leaders of the white supremacy campaign were strangely silent about them, given their willingness to protest at the slightest evidence of ‘Negro Domination’” (Wagner 317). Wagner claims the “silence” surrounding these buildings was perhaps a way of trying to ignore the radical changes that were occurring. Eventually, however, the “silence” was broken by white townsmen burning the predominant black buildings.

Another reason the black population was experiencing a rise in the middle class was due to the rise in professionalism within the black community. Susan Danielson discusses the effects of the black professionalism and how it is represented in Chesnut’s writing in her article “Charles Chesnut’s Dilemma: Professional Ethics, Social Justice, and Domestic Feminism in *The Marrow of Tradition*.” Danielson continues stating that Progressivism created opportunity for blacks to receive education at black facilities and earn a decent living. Black medical professionals, lawyers, educators and even governmental employees became more predominate. “At its inception, professionalism, like its political equivalent Progressivism, promised in part to sweep away petty bias and present a neutral, scientific ground from which to begin in the process of social amelioration, based not on traditional prejudices but on reasonable community needs for service” (Danielson 77). Since the need for professionals was great and black professionals became a possibility, this lessened the gap of difference between blacks and whites.

Wagner suggests that in this time period, with the racial conflicts that were present, those in the South were especially leery of the black middle class. Middle class

blacks not only threatened the accepted way of life, but they also challenged white identity (Wagner 312). The whites in Chesnut's novel try to uphold the standard of superiority; however, in order to maintain this accepted social structure, many of the whites will refer to violence in order to accomplish their desired goal. Chesnut's portrayal of whites as the aggressors and blacks as reactionary poses a threat to the socially accepted way of life.

Samina Najmi's position is that the white male community feared not only the rise of black members, but also of women. As a way to hinder the elevation of either group, white males used white women against black men. "History bears painful testimony to the fact that this two-pronged strategy on the part of white men for sexual and racial domination has met with success precisely because it has pitted its two groups of victims against each other" (Najmi 5). There was a focus on interracial relationships between black men and white women. White males focused on ways to undermine the power of both with one tactic. "It is a grim historical reality that in the post-Reconstruction South white men used white women as a pretext to lynch black men" (Najmi 2). Through claiming unwanted sexual encounters between white women and black men, white males justified themselves in killing the black culprit. This stereotypes the black male as a "burly black sexual aggressor" and white women as "fragile" (Najmi 3). Both labels insinuates each possesses qualities that make them lesser. Najmi states "that the lynching of black men for the alleged sexual offenses against white women should draw national attention at the same time that the predominately white women's movement was insisting on making its voice heard is surely more than a coincidence" (Najmi 3). This creates a "climate of mutual fear and mistrust" between the two groups,

each then relying upon the white male to set things right again (Najmi 3). The reliance upon white males as authority figures adds to a white supremacy climate.

## CHAPTER IV

### CHESNUTT'S REVOLUTIONARY CHARACTERS AND PLOT

Unlike *The Conjure Woman*, *The Marrow of Tradition* was Chesnutt's first novel based on historical events. Previously he had written solely letters, journals and fictional stories. One of the reasons *The Marrow of Tradition* may have been poorly received at the time of its publication is that it was based on history. The view a writer creates may contradict what society has felt to be the truth. In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt clearly depicts the white journalist at fault for causing the spark of anger which set the black community over the edge. Chesnutt makes it clear the sympathy lies with the black community. This version of the truth was not received well by society. The controlling members of society were white, and they were not ready to take the blame for creating such an event. It is the white society who deems themselves better than the black society and continually create laws to prevent the progression of the black society. The connection of these attitudes representing fault is too bold of an idea for society in general to accept.

Chesnutt describes his motivation for his novel in the article “Charles W. Chesnutt’s Own View of His New Story, *The Marrow of Tradition*.” Chesnutt clearly states “the primary object of this story, as it should be of every work of fiction, is to entertain; and yet it belongs in the category of purpose novels, inasmuch as it seeks to throw light upon the vexed moral and sociological problems which grow out of the presence, in our Southern states, of two diverse races, in nearly equal numbers” (Chesnutt 872). Chesnutt continues to detail the two contrasting purposes of the novel, both to entertain and to promote a social agenda. He cites that he wishes for the novel to showcase the introduction of a “new era” in which there is a distinct movement from a generation of servitude to a generation of social mobility and changed atmosphere (872). He also focuses on the title and the meaning of tradition, and what tradition entails for both white and black races (872). It is curious a novel that seeks to change society’s perception is entitled *The Marrow of Tradition* since the purpose of the novel is not to explain about the past, but to bring the reader in to the future. Chesnutt argues “the book is not a study in pessimism, for it is the writer’s belief that the forces of progress will in the end prevail, and that in time a remedy may be found for every social ill” (873).

Jean Marie Lutes describes the difference in Chesnutt’s style of portraying historical events. “Chesnutt did not even try to disguise the novel’s relation to real events. He was not rewarded for his explicit attempt to address racial violence. Although *Marrow* is now celebrated as Chesnutt’s masterpiece, it did not sell well and received disappointing reviews” (Lutes 465). Due to Chesnutt’s portrayal of events in a manner that laid blame in the hands of the white journalists and their refusal to accept the



rise of the city's black community, the novel paints a picture of white behavior that many readers and critics were unwilling to justify.

Chesnutt wanted to make sure he included the influence of the press in his writing. Since the historical riot began due to a newspaper article, in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Major Carteret uses the power of the press to influence and anger the townspeople. Carteret realizes that he has helped to create a tragedy when the riot begins and mass acts of violence occur. Carteret declares to the white mob "this is murder, it is madness; it is a disgrace to our city, to our state, to our civilization" (Chesnutt 305). In this portrayal of Carteret, Chesnutt allows his readers to recognize the ignorance that helps to serve the promotion of violence. Carteret willfully belittled the black community, both in person and through his newspaper, but he does not understand how the promotion of those beliefs can cause enough anger to ensure a riot.

Chesnutt in *The Marrow of Tradition* describes the reaction to the rising black community through his character Captain McBane. McBane complains to Major Carteret what he feels is an outrage. "Things are in an awful condition! A Negro justice of the peace has opened an office on Market Street, and only yesterday summoned a white man to appear before him... We cannot stand that sort of thing, Carteret, - it is the last straw! Something must be done, and quickly" (Chesnutt 3). He can not fathom the idea of a black man summoning a white man in a legal or any other capacity; this is a prime example of how many whites feared the rising black middle class. McBane is one of the characters that entice the riot, but unlike Carteret, he believes violence is an appropriate way to deal with the situation. Since Chesnutt chooses to write about the riot as a

preconceived, planned operation, he is also implying blame. It is precisely this aspect of the novel that would have angered white readers in the early 1900's. Previously any violence which had occurred as a result of racial tension has been modified in a way to blame the black community instead of the white.

In *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt represents the historical facts of the one-drop rule with the distinction between what is considered appropriate in one state and not in another. While Dr. Miller, the biracial protagonist, is riding in a train, he is asked by the conductor to move once they cross the state border into Virginia. Even though Miller claims he paid full price for a sleeping-car in which the segregation laws do not apply, he is still forced to move. The conductor, though, acts as though Miller's presence in the white train car would have been permitted had he been the servant of the doctor whom he was having a conversation. Since Dr. Burns claims Miller as a friend instead of a servant, Miller is asked to move, no matter how much Dr. Burns insists on his being allowed to stay (Chesnutt 53-54). Dr. Miller, as he is riding on the train makes the observation that "as the traditional negro, - the servant, - he is welcomed; as an equal, he is repudiated" (Chesnutt 59) when referring to his non admittance in the white car after crossing the state line. The passage allows the reader to understand the white community is much more comfortable with the black man of the past; for this type, allowances may be made. But if a black man is trying to improve himself, he is immediately met with refusal and a line is drawn portraying the proper placement of the races.

Chesnutt uses the gender and racial dynamic portrayed in society through his character of Polly Ochiltree and Sandy Campbell. Sandy, a black servant, is framed for

the murder and suspected molestation of Polly. The community's response, promoted by white male leaders, is to lynch Sandy. Ironically, Chesnutt refuses to allow his black characters to be stereotyped as thus and permits the reader to know the true murderer is in fact a white male, Tom Delmere. This technique not only exonerates a black servant, but it also implies it is the white man who is at fault for misguided abuse of blacks. Wilson Jeremiah Moses in *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism* states that it was common of turn of the century writers to "contrast Afro-Americans with Anglo-Saxons, seeing in each group certain inherent vices and virtues" (Moses 186). Chesnutt has flipped the traditional white virtue and black vice in order to make his message of race equating a person's character as absurd.

Chesnutt furthers his argument through the legal marriage of a predominant white man and his black servant, a marriage that has resulted in a mixed-race child. This contradicts the societal view that whenever there is sexual contact between the two races, the black man is at fault. Dean McWilliams maintains biracial individuals are proof of intimate relationships between black and white and the commonality that exists between the two (McWilliams 101). These biracial people were proof that there were similarities between the two races, a similarity the white population was eager to deny. Baker states "Chesnutt's work implies that African-American blood, not just African-American experience, is diffused throughout the so-called white American identity. Working at a point in Southern history when African-Americans actively exerted a self-defining force, Chesnutt constructed an image of whiteness designed to include a diffusion of blackness" (Baker 43). He sought to show how blacks and whites were similar by combining the two.

Chesnutt incorporates the slowly rising black profession in *The Marrow of Tradition* through his protagonist Dr. Miller. Dr. Miller has been trained in Europe and returns to the South to practice medicine. Chesnutt reveals Miller's thoughts claiming "he knew very well the measure of his powers, - a liberal education had given him opportunity to compare himself with other men, - and was secretly conscious that in point of skill and knowledge he did not suffer by comparison with any other physician in town" (Chesnutt 65). He believes he is as educated as, if not better than, his white peers and due to this fact, believes he will be accepted as a professional, no matter the color of his skin. "The son of free black parents, Miller studied not in segregated medical schools of the South, but in Paris and Vienna; such an educational background connects him to the latest scientific medical training, which would not have been available to white or black physicians educated in the United States in the 1890's" (Danielson 78). This elevated position intimidates the whites in the community, both in the novel and in history. Whites feared they were losing power and so they sought ways to rebel against the improvements of blacks. It is, however, interesting that Chesnutt chose to have his hero educated outside of the United States where the racial barriers would be less intense, and then to have him return to practice in North Carolina. This represents Chesnutt's transition from the South to the North where racial tension is still a problem, but without the intensity that is prevalent in the South.

Chesnutt ends the novel with Major Carteret appealing to Dr. Miller's professionalism. When the only doctor available is the black Dr. Miller, Carteret appeases his demand by claiming Miller's professionalism will not allow him to decline. "That the doctor would refuse his call, he did not imagine: it would be too great an honor

for a negro to decline...Nevertheless, he [Miller] could hardly refuse a professional call, - professional ethics would require him to respond” (Chesnutt 317-18). Even though Carteret has treated Miller with little respect in the past by not allowing him to care for his son, Carteret believes that professionalism will outweigh all previous instances in which Carteret belittled Miller. It is ironic that Carteret appeals to Miller’s professional ethics when Carteret’s racial ethics have superseded everything in the past. Carteret feels he has the right to change ethical standards when it pleases him, but demands Miller retain professional ethnics throughout. Chesnutt’s voice can clearly be viewed within the character of Dr. Miller as he states “his people had needed him, and he had wished to help them, and had sought by means of this institution to contribute to their uplifting” (Chesnutt 51). Dr. Miller’s platform to help uplift his people is the medical school; Chesnutt’s is his writing.

One aspect of Chesnutt’s novel *The Marrow of Tradition* that has been criticized was his use of stock characters. Mammy Jane, the Carteret’s nanny, is a traditional wet nurse from the days of servitude. She takes charge of the household, cares for the children, and allows her entire life to revolve around the white family which she serves. She truly loves the children she helps to rear. Prompted by her love, she even performs voodoo-like spells in order to help protect the new addition to the Carteret family (Chesnutt 11). This is contrasted with the young nurse, the nanny who replaces Mammy Jane when she is unable to care for the household. Mammy Jane states plainly that she loves the Carteret family, whereas the new nurse claims “it was purely a matter of business...there was no question of love between them” (Chesnutt 42). She states the love that people such as Mammy Jane feel toward their employers dates back to slavery

days when they were owned and expected to demonstrate the same level of loyalty exhibited by a faithful dog. This coincides with Major Carteret who previously in the novel makes the comment “the negro is capable of a certain doglike fidelity” (Chesnutt 24). This statement combined with the attitude of the new, educated nurse gives the reader the impression that both white dominants and new-age, educated blacks would have the same opinion of those, such as Mammy Jane, who feel their place lies in servitude and are unwilling to make efforts to change the status of blacks in society. Later, Major Carteret makes the comment “education is spoiling them...they are not content with their station in life” (Chesnutt 43). His reference is to the concept of education not only being a privilege, but a device that encourages progress, a power in his perspective which the black community should not seek. Chesnutt uses Mammy Jane as a representative of the past and the new nurse as what can be expected of future generations of African Americans. Chesnutt is directing his readers to understand that the past will not be the future; society needs to adapt to the new breed of African Americans as they make their presence and independence more pronounced. Through his writing he is trying to shape societies beliefs about what is acceptable and what should be accepted.

The novel describes the constant struggles between black and white society. There are references to segregated sections of train cars, what is acceptable for each race to do and exemptions that occur on rare occasions. Such exemptions include Mammy Jane being allowed to sit with the reserved white seating during Dodie’s christening “to her own intense satisfaction, and the secret envy of a small colored attendance in the gallery” (Chesnutt 12). The envy that a black may have for a white person is reiterated in

Jerry's comment "Well, I s'pose it all comes f'm bein' w'ite. I wush ter Gawd I wuz w'ite!" (Chesnutt 36). This jealousy is a perspective that Mammy Jane and her nephew Jerry might hold, but it is unlikely that this perspective is shared by the new nurse or Dr. Miller, both educated and progressive. Another example comes from Mr. Ellis shaking the hand of Jerry, the black porter. However this situation is explained away as Mr. Ellis not being of "quality," or not coming from money and a respectable family. Such exemptions were few and far between in the time period. Captain McBane, an extreme racist, is appalled at seeing a white convict chained to a black convict and escorted by a black officer (Chesnutt 33). Such an occurrence is unthinkable to McBane; that a white should ever be controlled by a black, even a white criminal, is a crime against humanity according to McBane. In his view even the lowest of all white society should never be under the thumb of a black man.

Major Carteret's opinion on the races is noted not only through his actions and his joined forces with Captain McBane, but also in his acknowledgement of blacks' desire to elevate their social standing.

Taking for his theme the unfitness of the negro to participate in government, – an unfitness due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and more especially his hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race...the white and black races could never attain social and political harmony by commingling their blood; he had proved by several historical parallels that no two unassailable races could ever live together except in the relation of superior and inferior (Chesnutt 31).

Major Carteret believes blacks to be inherently and genetically inferior, a common belief in this time period. He also chastises the mixing of the races, a contrast to Dr. Miller and Chesnutt himself.

While a great deal of his novel focuses on progression toward future views concerning racial issues, Chesnutt himself writes a very fascinating line. Chesnutt sets the stage with a conversation between the uneducated, colored Mammy Jane, a character from the past, and Dr. Price, an educated white man. Dr. Price marvels at the devotion of Mammy Jane, noting the difference between her demeanor and that of the younger generation of African Americans. Dr. Price states “such relations, the doctor knew very well, had been all too common in the old days, and not a few of them had been projected into the new era...the habits and customs of a people were not to be changed in a day, nor by the stroke of a pen” (Chesnutt 7). It is ironic that Chesnutt diminishes the power of “a pen” since he is using his own writing to elevate his people. His goal is to help reshape society to view African Americans in a brighter light through his writings. Chesnutt, as demonstrated by his literary career, knows the power and significance of the “pen” and uses it to his advantage, although at times unsuccessfully. The riot in *The Marrow of Tradition* is also fueled by the newspaper, clearly demonstrating the true influence of the written word.

Chesnutt seeks to flip the norm through his emotional appeals linked to the characters. Empathy lies with Dr. Miller and his family, while blame for the violent riot lies with both the white supremacist McBane and the militant black man Josh Green. However, in the case of Tom Delamere versus Sandy, the typical stereotypes of good and



evil that are linked to skin color are reversed. It is Tom, the white man, who has impersonated another and become a criminal. Earnestine Williams Pickens states “both the white and black characters in these situations behave just the opposite of what is expected of them by society. Chesnutt uses irony, then, to show that blacks, generally, are morally superior to whites in Wellington. At least in his fiction, Chesnutt dispels the popular notion that blacks are inherently criminal and white are inherently good” (Pickens 82). Sandy is the innocent bystander, who is framed by the cruelty and greed of Tom. It is, however, not the educated mulatto that receives sympathy in this scenario. Instead it is the devoted servant, a character Chesnutt has used to contrast with his new attitude blacks. Bentley and Gunning depict Chesnutt’s novel as challenging “that array of images and stories by insisting that readers look at ‘pleasing’ customs with profound skepticism” (Bentley and Gunning 21). The false accusation of Sandy and his eminent demise due to his “crime” force readers to associate this fictional destruction of an innocent man with the real lynching of innocent blacks throughout the country, and especially in the South. The accusation of penalizing an innocent was not a truth that readers were willing to face without massive cajoling, the like of which a novel may not be enough.

CHAPTER V

*THE MARROW OF TRADITION'S* RECEPTION IN THE WAKE OF A  
RACIAL CASTE SYSTEM

The reception of *The Marrow of Tradition* in 1901 was less than remarkable. Chesnut's interpretation of both black and white characters was too revolutionary for the public to endorse. *The Marrow of Tradition* was different from Chesnut's other works because it was not a strictly fictional novel; he based his novel on the occurrences of just a few years prior. Since the story, in essence, was not a fictional story, but based in fact, the liberties Chesnut took when writing his novel were less forgivable. Ramsey states one of the reasons for a poor reception of the novel is the claim that Chesnut had been removed from the South for so long that he lacked the background to be able to appeal to Southern audiences (Ramsey 40). Although Chesnut was born in Cleveland, he lived approximately ten years of his childhood in the South; however, he remained in the North for the majority of his life. At the point of his writing career, no doubt, Chesnut was well affiliated with the racial situation as it was perceived in the North, but he had not

lived in the South for such a long time that he did not realize the extent of the deep roots creating the racial barrier. Michaels writes “*The Marrow of Tradition* was written in 1901, at a time when public figures were competing with each other to announce their racism. The Populist Watson ran successfully for office on a rabidly Negrophobic platform, and Rebecca Felton, who when she was appointed in 1922...had first made herself famous some 25 years before by opposing ‘the negro vote’...” (Michaels 295). If politicians are openly admitting racism during elections and winning an official office, it is clear how the majority of voters feel about racial issues.

Part of the lack of success with *The Marrow of Tradition* emanated from the type of story. This story, although fictional, is historical fiction, based in real life events. Fiction is an escape from the real world, a way to envision a world in which one would like to participate. But historical fiction is based in this world, based in factual evidence, and reporting on what has truly happened. *The Marrow of Traditions*’ basis comes from the 1898 Wilmington race riot. The views and perception of the historical event were still present in society. Frances Richardson Keller states Chesnutt “laid open a recent event too discomfoting to contemplate. Or it may be that timing was crucial. The novel appeared just when the white man, having disfranchised the black man, or having by silence consented to it, could only reject a novel exposing the means used to do the thing and exposing as well the sufferings of victims” (Keller 193). The Wilmington race riot was still too fresh in the minds of society. Audiences were not ready to be criticized for any wrongdoings or to be made to feel guilty for those who were, at that time, justifiably oppressed. Bentley and Gunning claim “at the time of its publication, however, it was precisely *The Marrow of Tradition*’s innovative wedding of literary protest with the

sophisticated ironies and self-reflection that prompted resistance...*The Marrow of Tradition* earned tepid sales and largely disappointing reviews, and Chesnutt essentially abandoned his career as a full-time fiction writer” (Bentley and Gunning 25-26). Audiences were not willing to reflect upon themselves and society as a whole even though the plot of the novel may have been interesting and the literary language supreme. The ways of society were still too formidable for such a topic to be considered. It was not until a few decades later that such topics could be relished.

According to Andrews “even sympathetic reviewers prescribed *The Marrow of Tradition* like a medicine, as something beneficial to the moral constitution, but unpleasant to the taste” (Andrews 204). Although some agreed with Chesnutt’s philosophy on social progression of blacks, the blatant guilt evoked through the novel was not a pill audiences were willing to swallow. “*The Marrow of Tradition* abounds in ‘unwelcome truths’ which even an appreciable improvement in craftsmanship probably could not have ingratiated to an American turn-of-the-century audience” (Andrews 205). The time period was Chesnutt’s main obstacle. Included in it was an unyielding audience bent on upholding a superior and inferior dynamic.

Novels of purpose were chancy ventures for even the most accomplished writers; social-problem novels about particularly controversial topics like race and politics were even more risky...that reviewers were for the most part satisfied with the literary quality of the novel suggests that *The Marrow of Tradition* could have been viewed as another modest literary success for Chesnutt as a developing

author, irrespective of the popularity of the social message of the novel (Andrews 207).

The turn of the century may not have been the most receptive time for a socially progressive novel, but the Harlem Renaissance would have been a more liberal audience and more accepting of Chesnut's message.

Although Chesnut is fighting for equality, he is utilizing the minority within the minority. Brodhead claims "Chesnut 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. At the same time, he is not admitted into the company of the equally educated and cultivated whites of Fayetteville, who exclude him on racial grounds" (Brodhead 25). Although Chesnut may believe that education should elevate a person's social standing, his race is still a factor in which he is unable to overcome. The same is true of his equal in the novel, Dr. Miller. If Chesnut's message is to direct the black community to aspire to higher levels of education, his message would still not be receptive for a society that will chastise a person solely on the color of their skin. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning in *A Bedford Cultural Edition: The Marrow of Tradition* state it was not only the black population that needed to refocus, but the white population also defined themselves according to the understood roles of ethnicity and gender (Bentley and Gunning 17). *The Marrow of Tradition's* progressive thought was "in between traditions of the nineteenth-century reform fiction and twentieth-century modernism" (25). The novel was too progressive to be praised at the turn of the century.

Prior to the publication of *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt received honorable reviews which relished his rhetoric, use of language, and ability to adhere to colloquial dialogue. Bentley and Gunning state “both black and white authors in this period used dialect speech to signify local authenticity,” (19) however the use of such language in the case of black characters only confirmed the belief that blacks were uneducated and somehow lesser. In *The Marrow of Tradition* the difference in dialogue between characters such as Mammy Jane and Major Carteret or Dr. Miller is significant. A reader must almost sound out the dialectal language that Mammy Jane’s character uses, but the language of the white characters or the educated Dr. Miller is straightforward and proves no difficult task.

In *The Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt includes characters such as Mammy Jane that reflect his comical, dialectal characters of his previous writings, but he contrasts her with a new, improved, and educated character. Once he had a foot hold into the literary readers of his time, he tried to change the step by relying upon his popular name and forcing his readers to conform to his social agenda. However, instead of conforming, his readers simply ostracized his writing and forced him to end his literary career. According to Brodhead, Chesnutt’s readers did not want the new social reform writings, but instead were stuck on his former writings, which were more comfortable for his readers to accept (16). In fact, even when publishing his *Conjure* tales, the editor refused to publish certain stories because they empowered blacks. The publisher was only interested in those stories that kept with the status quo (18). The focus of Chesnutt’s well received works is not on the upraise of the black community setting it at odds with his literary purpose.

Chesnutt wanted his readers to be influenced by his writing, so most of his writing is directed toward the white community, since it is that community which openly antagonizes the black community. Hardwig states “Chesnutt admitted that he was acutely conscious of his white audience and their reaction to his work. Rather than attacking white racism in a confrontational manner, Chesnutt stated that racism had to be ‘mined’ from underneath” (Hardwig 14). Samina Najmi claims Chesnutt not only targeted a white audience as his readers, but in particular, white females (Najmi 1). In *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt allows the final decision Miller must face, whether to save the life of the son of a white man who has belittled and disgraced him and his family in the past, to be deferred to Miller’s wife. This final decision comes down to not only a racial crisis, but one of family values since it is the Miller’s nephew that is to be saved. Janet Miller has spent a lifetime being shunned by her half sister because Janet is mixed race, and yet Chesnutt has the novel end with the decision being in her hands. Perhaps Chesnutt thought he would gain more ground by appealing to women, who are typically more understanding and prone to accept change. Not only are women more flexible to change, but women are also most likely to teach their children what is right or wrong. If Chesnutt could reach women, specifically mothers, he may be able to influence the next generation to be more accepting of racial differences.

Matthew Wilson depicts the reception of Chesnutt as being given reviews pertaining to the literary aspect of writing that were notable, but that he completely missed the mark when it came to appeasing his readers. Wilson describes how Chesnutt gave up his writing career in 1905 after the poor reception of both *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel’s Dream*, stating that Chesnutt was writing to and from a

“Euro-American intellectual tradition” instead of knowing his own readers and their demands (Wilson 18). Wilson explains “Chesnutt knows by 1905 that his utopian hopes have failed: he can neither find a ‘cure’ nor can he find a way to a mass white readership by writing about an issue that the majority of Americans just want to disappear” (Wilson 31). Chesnutt realized he was not making the impact he had hoped and society was not as accepting as he hoped. Richard H. Brodhead maintains Chesnutt wrote a letter to the publishing company stating “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” (Brodhead 210). It was after the failure of his two novels that Chesnutt chose to retire from a literary career and return to his stenography business.

In order for any piece of literature to sell well, it is imperative that the author know not only the subject of which he writes, but the audience as well. The audience must also be receptive of the subject. Chesnutt was very knowledgeable of his subject; in *The Marrow of Tradition* he specifically did research in order to have a realistic feel to his novel. But Chesnutt underestimated the depth of how many Americans felt about racial relations. He hoped his audience would view his novel as proof that racial barriers should not exist, but he did not take into account the overwhelming national facts that detailed the ways in which society was not ready for such a change. Newspaper articles throughout the nation verified this fact. Chesnutt also chose to write about an actual event that occurred in 1898. Since *The Marrow of Tradition* was published in 1901, he was writing about an event that was still fresh in people’s minds. Chesnutt had not allowed enough time for society to distance themselves from the event. With more time



to digest the event, society may have been more open to view the riot from a different perspective.

Walter Benn Michaels states “*The Marrow of Tradition* was, in its time, not only a brave gesture, but a critical and commercial failure...if no one wanted to read *The Marrow of Tradition* at the time it was written, lots of people read it now; no doubt every university in the country has at least three or four courses a year in which it gets assigned” (Michaels 295-96). It is only rather recently that Chesnut is receiving some of the praise he deserves. New publications of Chesnut’s journals and political writings have been published posthumously. Geordie Hamilton argues that *The Marrow of Tradition* could not be deemed “the twentieth century’s best novelistic representation ‘of the racial politics of the nation in the aftermath of Reconstruction’” (Hamilton 49). Hamilton continues to suggest that it is only now, after the Civil Rights Movement, that society can appreciate Chesnut’s writing and his innovative philosophies about integration and human unity (Hamilton 53).

## CHAPTER VI

### CHANGE OF PERCEPTIONS DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Although the turn of the century was not the prime time to provide an accepting audience for *The Marrow of Tradition*, a few decades later, during the Harlem Renaissance may have been the ideal setting for Chesnutt to launch his novel. Obstacles such as writing for educated audiences, the subject matter, and race were more insignificant during the Harlem Renaissance. There would be an even broader audience including black professionals and the black middle class that were represented in *The Marrow of Tradition*. According to Portia Boulware Ransom the Harlem Renaissance can be characterized as a “revolution that transformed politics, culture, and society – first in Harlem, and then in America, for persons of African descent. It also changed the world’s perceptions of African Americans and, most important, profoundly altered the way that African Americans perceived themselves” (Ransom 13). The Harlem Renaissance was one of the first times in history when blacks became well known for the

arts, including literature. The literature produced during this time period became one of the largest stepping stones for equality.

Through his own admission in his article “Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem” published in *The Colophon* in 1931, Chesnutt realizes the significance of his situation as a writer. Chesnutt writes “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 life and manners, had not been attempted by any one of that group” (Chesnutt 907). Chesnutt knew he was entering the world of literature and hoped he would help to set precedence for other black writers. He details the difficulty he faced when trying to first publish a novel and the success of *The Conjure Woman* in 1899. Chesnutt explains his publishers advised him to leave his race out of the advertisement of the novel (Chesnutt 910). He also continues to relay that he purposefully wrote his subsequent novels for white readers, claiming “it is extremely doubtful whether a novel, however good, could succeed financially on its sales to colored readers alone” (Chesnutt 912). At the turn of the century, his assessment of his readership and the probable success of writing was spot on, but in the Harlem Renaissance, readership was beginning to change.

Looking at the time that has passed since his first novel publication and the new trends during the Harlem Renaissance, Chesnutt states “Negro writers no longer have any difficulty in finding publishers. Their race is no longer a detriment but a good selling point, and publishers are seeking their books, sometimes, I am inclined to think, with less

regard for quality than in the case of white writers” (Chesnutt 912). Chesnutt has witnessed the changes in the societal environment, changes that may have helped him succeed with a longer literary career, but his article focuses solely on his success of *The Conjure Woman*. He neglects to use the same retrospection for his failures and eventual demise as an author. “Post-Bellum – Pre-Harlem” was written in 1931, long after his last published novel and his forced decision to retire from a literary career. It is curious that he would not use this opportunity to explain or shed light on his other novels that did not receive the praise of *The Conjure Woman* for it seems as though he fully understands the obstacles that he faced in the past and the subsequent destruction of those obstacles that time has provided. It is understandable an author may not want to revive their failures, but this would have been an opportunity to resurrect his career and republish his works with a new social environment. Chesnutt criticized publishers for now wanting to publish colored writers based not on their talent but on their race. If he chose to reintroduce his novel he may have experienced the best of both worlds.

Since African American art, literature and music had become popular, society began to change the way it viewed African Americans. No longer were they considered less than human; however, complete equality was still a long way in the making. The contributions that African Americans made to music, art and literature changed the way these arts were created in the future. Ransom explains that the Harlem Renaissance was a way for blacks to use the arts to create a link between the two races (Ransom 13). Through this link, African Americans were able to prove to white society that they had the capacity to be intellectuals and they had something to offer society.

The Harlem Renaissance not only dealt with the way African Americans looked at themselves, but it also allowed them to voice experiences about their past (Ransom 15). After being able to define their past, they were then able to progress into the present and record dreams of the future. Ransom argues that the multiple race riots that occurred after World War I inspired African American intelligentsia to take steps to elevate blacks in society (Ransom 16). Instead of a focus in strictly public speaking or editorials, the Harlem Renaissance sought to change society through forms of entertainment. In this way they were not overtly bucking the system, but using entertainment pleasure to lure people into reevaluating the current social structure.

Ransom states whites became “fascinated with black life” (Ransom 35). Many whites would travel to Harlem seeking forms of entertainment that were lacking in their society. For them, it was an escape to break away from the structure of their high class forms of entertainment and experience a more liberating version. They were simply piggybacking on the new found liberation that blacks were themselves celebrating. The fact that prohibition had restricted life and there were popular establishments in Harlem, such as the Cotton Club, that provided secret accessibility to the newly banned substances also helped accelerate the popularity of black arts (Ransom 35). White society would “slum” to Harlem in order to partake in illegal alcohol and be exposed to these arts. This exposure brought about a curiosity to learn more.

These new societal changes inspired many to take advantage of the situation and publish works by black authors, but all the obstacles were not eliminated. It was not only the turn of the century when *The Marrow of Tradition* was published that black writers

had difficulty reaching a target audience of black readers. Charles Scruggs in his article “‘All Dressed Up But No Place to Go’: The Black Writer and His Audience During the Harlem Renaissance” claims “the black writer of the 1920’s *knew* that more white people than black read his works. He often expressed the naïve belief that black art was removing racial barriers. Yet he worried about his relationship to his own community, and he was sometimes puzzled and angered by the response of the black audience to his best efforts” (Scruggs 543). Scruggs continues to remark that black writers had to walk a fine line; if he chose to write a novel directed at black audiences, he ran the risk of alienating the white audience which was the main source. Scruggs states “ironically, the black writer often felt more comfortable with the white publishers and white readers than he did his own people, because at least he knew what they wanted” (Scruggs 546). Since the dilemma of audience and topics was confrontational, attempts were made to try to expand black readership, but with little success, at least enough to make a drastic change in the outcome (Scruggs 558).

Charles Chesnutt’s heroes were educated and sought justice through elevated society. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of prospering education, which included African Americans, and a renewed desire for entertainment through reading, especially novels (Ransom 25). Although there were still more uneducated African Americans than educated, those who were educated were taking the initiative to speak out for the whole of their community publicly and in journals such as *The Crisis*. Harlem Renaissance writers’ target audience was the educated and upper levels of society. This coincides with Chesnutt’s logic when he was writing for the white society about the racial situation and prompting his readers to view African Americans in a different light. Both were

seeking social equality through the medium of literature and both were using mostly elevated writing styles to appeal to their audience. By conforming to the type of writing that audiences were used to, African American authors could prove their talents and voice their opinion.

Harlem Renaissance writers and Charles Chesnutt sought to be a voice for their entire community. However, according to Ransom, just like Chesnutt, the writers were out of touch with their subject. Ransom claims the Harlem Renaissance failed to provide equality for black society simply because it was the educated minority that were in the spotlight. Ransom attributes the success of the Civil Rights Movement to the “grass roots” strategy (Ransom 37). Instead of relying upon only the highly educated to lead a revolt, Civil Rights leaders sought the help of the common community. The education of the Harlem writers set them apart from the ability to portray the common, working class with accuracy. Although this obstacle prevented the absolute success of a racial uplift, Chesnutt, as a writer, would have fit into the Harlem Renaissance writing guild nicely. Many of the Harlem writers are cherished and of the most well know African American writers in today’s society. If Chesnutt were to publish *The Marrow of Tradition* during the Harlem Renaissance, his success rate would have been greater considering his motives and writing style are similar to those of the most famous writers of the time period.

When, in the 1920’s, a rise of African American literature began to surface, Andrews states “...Chesnutt started out welcoming the New Negro writers but soon took to scolding them like a Victorian father” (Andrews 267). Chesnutt chastised Harlem

Renaissance writers for not portraying their race with more idealism, but he was “impressed by the changing policy of white publishers toward black writers” (Andrews 268). In 1928 the NAACP awarded Chesnutt the Spingarn Medal. Chesnutt hoped that this honor would help him to revive his literary career once more now that publication was becoming a more promising enterprise, but he found his description of “middle-class mixed-blood as race leaders” did not accurately reflect the more serious problems that African Americans were facing (Andrews 269-271). Chesnutt states in his article “The Negro in Art,” published in 1926, “the difficulty of finding a publisher for books by Negro authors has largely disappeared – publishers are seeking such books. Whether the demand for them shall prove to be more than a mere passing fad will depend upon the quality of the product” (Chesnutt 26).



## CHAPTER VII

### CHESNUTT'S WRITINGS DURING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE CONTRASTED WITH HIS EARLIER LITERATURE GOALS

Of his later writings William Andrews states “Chesnutt was becoming separated from the contemporary realities of life for Afro-Americans in the North or South. What little writing he did became increasingly retrospective” (Andrews 264). Andrews further describes Chesnutt’s elation to the broken barriers the Harlem Renaissance provided, but claims Chesnutt was disappointed in the type of material that was being produced by black writers. Chesnutt preferred to depict black society as professionals who exonerate the life and abilities of their people; however many Harlem Renaissance writers used the forced poverty and lack of education of the black community as their basis for writing (Andrews 267). Andrews explains Chesnutt was most disappointed with Claude McKay and the lack of an inspirational male lead in most writers (Andrews 268). Andrews states Chesnutt’s focus on middle class, mixed race professionals was becoming obsolete with time and the entire economy progressing toward the Depression (Andrews 271). Even

though Chesnutt was less than impressed with Harlem Renaissance writers, the availability of publishing possibilities would have provided him with an opportunity to contrast those writers with himself instead of simply criticizing their choices. Had Chesnutt chose to revive his literary career he would have found the social environment that prohibited his success previously diminished and an audience more willing to accept changes in the racial caste system. His readers would have also included educated black society as well as white. Along with his demonstrable ability to write well, his voice could have been more accepted and appreciated.

After the poor reception of *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* Chesnutt returned his attention to his business instead of literary endeavors, but he still wrote short stories for *The Crisis* and essays regarding race relations. In 1912 Chesnutt wrote "The Doll," a piece of short fiction, in *The Crisis*. The story depicts a very difficult situation and multiple perspectives. Tom Taylor, a barber who owns his own shop, finds himself in the presence of a man, Colonel Forsyth, who retells the story of how he killed Tom's father. While reciting this story, Tom is giving the colonel a shave. The colonel describes the situation which leads to him shooting a black man as necessary in order to make sure the black man knows his place in society. The colonel is demonstrating his arrogance, and what he feels is his right, to belittle the black race while in a black owned barber shop with a black man giving him a close shave. Tom ignores the degrading remarks until he hears the tale of his father's death, a death he has dreamt of avenging for decades. His first reaction is to slit the colonel's throat, but upon further thought he itemizes what he would loose and what the community would loose in a black professional if he were to fulfill his vengeful side. After consideration, Tom decides to

take a morally superior route and resist taking the life of the colonel. When the colonel walks out of the barber shop, he comments to his friend the judge, who had been watching the entire situation with astonishment at the colonel's arrogance, that he has just proven his point about the lack of substance to the black race because the son of the man he had shot years ago had just endured his retelling of the story without taking action.

While this ending is a revelation and very entertaining to the reader, instead of honoring the black man for taking the moral high ground, it diminishes his ability to stand up for himself and take pride in his being. Chesnut concludes with "the judge was not sure that the colonel had proved his theory, and was less so after he had talked, a week later, with the barber" (Chesnut 252). This ending clearly states the colonel was mistaken in his thinking, but it is a lackluster ending to a dramatic situation and does not enhance the moral superiority of the black race. Although an entertaining story, "The Doll" missed the mark if Chesnut's intention was the same as *The Marrow of Tradition* and he wanted to write an intensely racial story where the colored man is the victor. If Chesnut's purpose was to help elevate his race in the eyes of his readers, "The Doll" misses the mark. Although this ending is not a forceful empowerment, it does coincide with Chesnut's own feelings as portrayed in his essay "Race Ideals and Examples" where he states "one of the most interesting traits of successful colored men is the fine diplomacy with which they steer their way along difficult channels; and this is doubly interesting and indeed admirable when it is accomplished without the sacrifice of self-respect" (Chesnut 332). Tom displays great diplomacy and does not hinder his self-respect because he values his family and business more than revenge.

However one significant difference between *The Marrow of Tradition* and “The Doll” is the target audience. *The Marrow of Tradition* sought to change perspectives in white readers while “The Doll” was written in *The Crisis*, a magazine targeting black readers. It is therefore curious that Chesnutt would not take this opportunity to really drive his point home since his readers would be likely to agree with his conclusions regarding the quality of the black race. Why would he give more power to a white character in a story intended for black readers?

There were more short stories which Chesnutt wrote that were published in *The Crisis*. In April 1915 *The Crisis* featured Chesnutt’s “Mr. Taylor’s Funeral,” a comical story about mistaken death. Instead of racial indifferences, this short story only touches on religious differences between Baptist and Jerusalem Methodist. In May 1930, Chesnutt published “Concerning Father” in *The Crisis*. Again, this story lacks the racial tension of the black white dynamic, but does touch on a mix of East Indian. One of his character’s states “while I have no prejudice against color myself, and consider one man as good as another, other things equal, yet I know how most people feel about such matters, and it’s just as well not raise the question” (Chesnutt 155). This statement attests to Chesnutt’s beliefs of a colorless society, but the ending lacks any emphasis of this point. Chesnutt’s later writings lack the punch that novels such as *The Marrow of Tradition* enforced in order to make his political points clear and thought provoking.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CHESNUTT'S NEW GOALS FOR LITERATURE

“The Negro in Art,” another article by Chesnutt, appeared in *The Crisis* in 1926. In this article Chesnutt questions the validity and quality of a black artist. Chesnutt claims the black artist has the right to depict whatever subject in whatever way he chooses, but “it is the highest privilege of art to depict the ideal” (Chesnutt 28). Chesnutt states it is reasonable for a black novelist to portray the absolute worst in either black or white society, but unrealistic and not ideal for the betterment of the race. Chesnutt claims “the propagandist, of whatever integumentary pigment, will, of purpose or unconsciously, distort the facts” (Chesnutt 28). When critiquing the writers of the 1920’s Chesnutt states “the colored writer, generally speaking, has not yet passed the point of thinking of himself first as a Negro, burdened with the responsibility of defending and uplifting his race” (Chesnutt 28). Chesnutt sought to uplift his people, but he envisioned a society where race was not a factor in classifying human beings; he envisioned not a color blind society, but a color less society.

In Chesnutt's speech to Oberlin College students in 1929 Chesnutt expresses that he is unimpressed with black writers of the time period. "I regret to say, the moral equality of these books has not kept pace with their growth. In fact they seem to grow baser and baser" (Chesnutt 518). Chesnutt believed it was not the quantity of black authors who were being published, nor the amount of work they produced, but more the quality and enlightenment that he believes they lacked that matters more than anything else. Chesnutt also criticizes the amount of pressure black writers allow the "white man" to influence their writing (Chesnutt 522). This is slightly ironic considering Chesnutt himself had problems publishing his works as he wanted them without the influence of the white publishers and the support of white readers. Chesnutt was disappointed in the lack of "noble male characters in any of the Negro novels" (Chesnutt 523). Again this is interesting considering his first novel that lead him to fame did not have that strong black male presence as well. His main character was Uncle Julius who reminisced about days of slavery, but was not an uplifting character himself. Chesnutt concluded the speech with the hope that new and improved black writers would soon be prolific, but he was unsure if he would be able to experience such a period in his lifetime (Chesnutt 526). Before the failure of *The Marrow of Tradition* and Chesnutt's shortened career, he sought to eliminate racial boundaries. He wanted a world without color barriers, one where skin color was not a factor. Therefore it is ironic that he would chastise Harlem Renaissance writers for not creating a strong, black leading character. If his ideal world included a raceless society, why would it matter if writers created this ideal black character? Through his literary experiences, Chesnutt has changed his view on what society should be and how literature should reflect that society. Perhaps he realized that a raceless

society was not possible without equality. Equality, then became a mandatory element in literature according to Chesnutt. This is the quality that Chesnutt demands from other writers, but shies away from himself. After the poor reception of *The Marrow of Tradition* Chesnutt is unwilling to push the boundaries, but wants others to take that step for him.

Chesnutt's infamous novel *The Marrow of Tradition* was written for white audiences. This would have coincided with the audience of the Harlem Renaissance. The subject may have been still a difficult sell, but the writing style would have appealed to white audiences while the subject would have been more directed toward black audiences. He had the strong male character present that Chesnutt found lacking in so many of the Harlem Renaissance literature and encouraged other authors to follow in his footsteps. He was already vocal at the time, so it is a wonder he would not try to infiltrate both sides of the audiences and renew his literary career.

In "What is a Black Author?: A Review of Recent Charles Chesnutt Studies" Henry Wonham claims there has been a revival of Chesnutt's popularity. He cites the publication of several novels, such as *Paul Marchand*, and critical texts, such as *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches*, as representative of his theory. Although these manuscripts have been recently published, this does not ensure a revival of Chesnutt's works. It is understandable for scholars to view this as a flood of popularity, but the new publication of texts does not mean that the general public is more aware of Chesnutt and his accomplishments, nor does it ensure a surge of book sales.

Wonham's position is that "Chesnutt was a forgotten black voice speaking from the nadir of African-American history, and his novels and stories provided the starting point for an unprecedented discussion of African-American creative fiction" (Wonham 830). He continues to state "it may turn out that Chesnutt's most profound contribution to American literary culture lies not so much in the founding of an African-American novelistic tradition as in the complicating of such seemingly unproblematic terms as black author and white reader, which have received much attention but little scrutiny in the articulation of that tradition" (Wonham 834).

The obstacles that prevented the success of *The Marrow of Tradition* include the attitude attributed to race relations, the historical content of the novel and restricted perspective Chesnutt had concerning his audience. Many of these obstacles became obsolete during the Harlem Renaissance. Those obstacles that persisted were items such as the educated few trying to represent the masses. This type of obstacle was one Chesnutt already faced. The Harlem Renaissance provided an atmosphere that would have been more conducive for a black educated writer to express his views on racial relations. Chesnutt, unfortunately, was too revolutionary in his endeavors and ultimately failed. His writings are considered significant today, but he has also failed to reach the popularity of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, a truly sad fact.



## WORKS CITED

- Andrews, William L. *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.
- Baker, Barbara A. *The Blues Aesthetic and the Making of American Identity in the Literature of the South*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003.
- Bentley, Nancy. "The Strange Career of Love and Slavery: Chesnutt, Engels, Masoch." *American Literary History* 17.3 (2005): 460-85. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.
- Brodhead, Richard H. *Cultures of Letters*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- . Introduction. *The Conjure Woman*. By Charles W. Chesnutt. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 1-21.
- ., ed. *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *The Marrow of Tradition*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- . *An Exemplary Citizen: Letter of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1906-1932*. Jesse S. Crisler, Robert

C. Leitz, III, and Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

--. *Charles w. Chesnutt Essays and Speeches*. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Robert C. Leitz, III,

and Jesse S. Crisler ed. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

--. "Concerning Father." *The Crisis*. May 1930: 149-175.

--. "Mr. Taylor's Funeral." *The Crisis*. April-May 1915. 313-316, 34-37.

---. *Stories Novels, and Essays*. New York: The Library of America, 2002.

--. "The Doll." *The Crisis*. April 1912: 248-252.

---. *The Marrow of Tradition: A Bedford Cultural Edition*. Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002.

--. "The Negro in Art How Shall He Be Portrayed: A Symposium." *New Crisis* (15591603) 107.4

(200): 26. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO.Web. 24 Jan 2011.

Danielson, Susan. "Charles Chesnutt's Dilemma: Professional Ethics, Social Justice, and Domestic Feminism in *The Marrow of Tradition*." *Southern Literary Journal* 41.1

(2008): 73-93. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.

Hamilton, Geordie. "Focalization as Education: The Race Relation of the Narrator of

Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901)." *Style* 42.1 (2008): 49-72.

*MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.

Hardwig, Bill. "Who Owns the Whip?: Chesnutt, Tourgee, and Reconstruction Justice."

*African American Review* 36.1 (2002): 5-20. *MLA International Bibliography*.

EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.

Keller, Frances Richardson. *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell*

*Chesnutt*.

Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1978.

Lutes, Jean Marie. "Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist." *American*

*Literary History* 19.2 (2007): 456-81. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO.

Web 26 Oct. 2009.

McElrath, Joseph R. ed., *Critical Essays on Charles W. Chesnutt*. New York: G.K. Hall

&

Company, 1999.

McWilliams, Dean. *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*. Athens: The

University of Georgia Press, 2002.

Michaels, Walter Benn. "Plots Against America: Neoliberalism and Antiracism."

*American Literary History* 18.2 (2006): 288-302. *MLA International*

*Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.

Moses, Jeremiah Wilson. The Golden Age of Black Nationalism. Hamden: Archon Books, 1978.

Najmi, Samina. "Janet, Polly, and Olivia: Constructs of Blackness and White Femininity in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*." *Southern Literary Journal* 32.1 (1999): 1-19. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.

Pickens, Ernestine Williams. *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Progressive Movement*. New York: Pace University Press, 1994.

Ramsey, William M. "Family Matters in the Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt." *Southern Literary Journal* 33.2 (2001): 30-43. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.

Ransom, Portia Boulware. *Black Love And the Harlem Renaissance*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005.

Scruggs, Charles. "'All Dressed Up But No Place To Go': The Black Writer and His Audience During the Harlem Renaissance." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History*,

- Criticism, and Bibliography* 48.4 (1977): 543-563. *MLA International Bibliography*.
- EBSCO. Web 12 Feb. 2011.
- Wagner, Bryan. "Charles Chesnutt and the Epistemology of Racial Violence." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 73.2 (2001): 311-37. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.
- Wilson, Matthew. "Who Has the Right to Say? Charles W. Chesnutt, Whiteness and the Public Sphere." *College Literature* 26.2 (1999): 18-35. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.
- Wonham, Henry B. "What Is a Black Author? A Review of Recent Charles Chesnutt Studies." *American Literary History* 18.4 (2006): 829-35. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. Web 26 Oct. 2009.