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Torment of the Repressed: Race and the Gothic in Hannah Crafts' and Charles Chesnutt's Fiction

SHARRISSE VILTUS

Gothic literature is a literary genre that combines elements of horror and death within fiction originating from eighteenth-century Europe. However, it also serves the purpose of capturing society's abuse against the weak. As explained in Jerrold E. Hogle and Andrew Smith's "Revisiting the Gothic and Theory," "…The Gothic comes alive (like Frankenstein's creature) as an important, multi-layered, and profoundly symbolic scheme for dealing with Western culture's most fundamental fears and concerns" (1). In other words, the genre can be used to its full potential if it confronts a society's underlying fears, including the treatment of the marginalized. The Gothic genre possess distinct characteristics that help underscore that confrontation, including an ominous setting which reflects a broken, decaying landscape—representing the deconstruction of societal idealism—and a recurring villain that epitomize the "evil" of the narrative. The characteristics also extend to supernatural oddities such as restless spirits, hauntings, and transformations that serve as external conflicts for characters to either succumb to or overcome.

Gothic fiction, therefore, has a unique place within African-American literature of: recovering lost agency, characters fighting to survive, antagonists transforming into an evil entity, and society doing its best to repress the horror of its sin. The fiction of Hannah Crafts and Charles Chesnutt demonstrate that, with the right strategies, the Gothic genre can serve as a perfect device for black authors to confront the system of slavery and the extent it has subjugated the humanity of the black marginalized. In doing so, they also uncover the nightmarish memory of terror, cruelty, and death passed down the generations. Crafts' novel follows the first-person narrative of protagonist Hannah, a biracial slave, when her life changes after her master's engagement to a beautiful, unnamed woman—who becomes the household's new mistress. She confides her own African heritage to Hannah on the night of the engagement after a malicious lawyer, who makes a fortune uncovering terrible secrets from wealthy families, threatens to expose her secret to her fiancé. The mistress, in a moment of passion and unable to bare subjection, urges Hannah to escape with her. Thus, the story commits itself to the themes of perseverance while Hannah and the mistress flee across the wilderness. Crafts' employment of Gothic strategies is hinged on the eerie physical environment of the South, apparitions that inflict terror on slaves, and the reoccurring antagonists in the form of slaver owners. The original, handwritten manuscript of the novel remained unchanged for its 2002 publication, including the author's strikethroughs of deleted sentences and passages. "The Goophered Grape" from Chesnutt's short story collection, The Conjure Woman, uses the frame narrative to return the audience back to the antebellum era in order to convey tales of how blackness was treated for a post-bellum audience. In the short story, a black southerner and former slave named Uncle Julius McAdoo recalls the gruesome transformations of a cursed slave to white northerners John and Annie, who both wish to purchase an abandoned property. However, in "The Dumb Witness" the story-telling role transitions to John, who tells the tale of a speechless freed slave woman named Viney in the ruined Murchison Mansion. All three works demonstrate the various ways to utilize Gothic fiction's influence. Crafts' recently discovered novel, The Bondwoman's Narrative (2002), uses the Gothic genre to expose the horror of dehumanization faced by black slaves in antebellum America; whereas Chesnutt's short stories, "The Goophered Grapevine" (1899) and "The Dumb Witness" (1899)

reveal how the genre can also revive the pain of the forgotten for post-bellum multiracial audiences.

Crafts and Chesnutt use the Gothic genre to unify the racial interests of black and white audiences to convey universal themes of horror in the antebellum and post-bellum eras. In his 1928 article, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," James Weldon Johnson presents a theoretical argument on the way black authors such as Crafts and Chesnutt should approach their craft and deliberately choose an audience: "Instead of black America and white America as separate or alternating audiences…there needs to be a fusion." Johnson goes on to conclude that success ultimately relies on: "…something that rises above race, and reach[es] out to the universal in truth and beauty" (382). To apply Johnson's theory to Crafts and Chesnutt, both authors balance the interests of white and black readers to sell the story of human triumph and the infliction of horror that was committed against black characters. The Bondwoman's Narrative fuses the literary genres of the slave narrative and Gothic fiction, making the novel, more than a century later, a success by combining fictitious supernatural elements with the reality of slavery. However, in the post-bellum era, "The Goophered Grapevine" and "The Dumb Witness" exemplify Johnson's theory more than The Bondswoman's Narrative through transitioning narrative perspectives. From Uncle Julius' narration in "The Goophered Grapevine," the audience witnesses the legacy of slavery through the eyes of a black character. However, Chesnutt alternates to John's perspective in "The Dumb Witness" to allow accessibility for a white audience. By allowing two racially distinct characters to reflect on tales of antebellum suffering, Chesnutt gives his works more opportunities for a diverse audience to understand his message.

The Gothic genre is effectively used in The Bondwoman's Narrative to introduce the audience to the fear of being denied humanity in the antebellum period. Crafts creates an atmosphere of surreal, beautiful scenery that contains a hidden, decaying element––a strategy of Gothic literature that constructs an eerie reflection of slaves' dehumanization. At the climax of the novel, Hannah is sold to her final owners before her escape the South for good. She is unfairly punished for allegedly gossiping about her new mistress, Mrs. Wheeler, and is forced to work as a field slave despite her lack of experience. The act is a cruel moment of devaluation for Hannah and only progresses as an overseer turns her into a sexual object for others to own. He offers another slave, Bill, to have possession of her without her consent: "You seem interested in Hannah…Take her to your cabin" (214). Hannah has no choice but to comply after long, grueling work and expects the worst as she accompanies him to the "cabin" only meant for field slaves. As Hannah moves from the Wheelers' main estate to the slaves' domain, there is a Gothic approach to introducing the state of black slaves' humanity: "They said that many of these huts were old and ruinous with decay, that occasionally a crash, and a crowd of dust would be perceived among them… head and limbs are so plentiful that they seem of small account" (205). The scene is a depiction of the slave huts, yet it is coalesced with the description of the field slaves' condition. Inanimate objects are treated in the same tone of disgust as the people while Hannah observes the ugly characteristics of the otherwise beautiful Wheeler plantation. The scene is portraying the state of the society in the antebellum era: lush, eye-pleasing beauty on the surface, but nurturing an ugly mistreatment of human beings underneath. Hannah then witnesses the atrocities that strip people of their humanity by observing Mr. Wheeler's slaves' conditions inside the huts; she notes that the slaves were, "…scarcely conscious that any link exists between themselves and other portions of the human race. Their mental condition is briefly summed up in a phrase that they know nothing. care for nothing, and hope for nothing" (206). Hannah is surmising the condition of the field slaves in her owner's land—they are in no condition to care about themselves beyond the necessity to survive, resulting in their destitute state. She strikes-through "care for nothing, and hope for nothing" as if aware that she is dehumanizing the field slaves as well, drawing a line between depicting cruelty and being cruel herself. Members of the black and white audience are to feel horror that black slaves were reduced to animals from the lack of attentiveness to their basic human needs.

The antebellum period use of Gothic genre utilizes the

characteristics of the supernatural in the struggle for black slaves to gain agency over their bodies and fates in The Bondwoman's Narrative. Hannah's environment heavily relies on elements of the supernatural to impede her escape from bondage, representing society's unwillingness to allow black Americans control over their fates. The background becomes dark and terrifying when she and her mistress run away from the Lindendale mansion: "Trees in the dusky gloom took the forms of men, and stumps and hillocks were strangely transferred into blood-hounds crouching to spring on their prey" (53). Hannah is unable to differentiate reality from her own imagination, a repetitious technique used by the text to fuse supernatural elements with the novel's reality. However, the supernatural also plays a crucial role in aiding Hannah's mistress. The mistress, who discovers she is of African descent, attempts to escape with Hannah rather than be confronted by her husband, and both are eventually caught by Mr. Trappe, the narrative's ominous antagonist. After her mental degradation and facing the inevitable outcome of spending the rest of her life in bondage, the mistress takes matters into her own hands through unseen circumstances: "He was interrupted by a slight scream from his victim…A gleam of satisfaction shone over her face. There was a gasp, a struggle, a slight shiver of the limbs and she was free" (103). Through her own willingness to die, the mistress briefly takes control of her agency and frees herself before Mr. Trappe could have the satisfaction of selling her. Blood is heavily described in the scene of her death, and Hannah can barely comprehend it, but can see that the mistress has achieved freedom. There is no explanation of her sudden demise: however, Gothic conventions can be observed in the nature of the scene with a tragic undertone. It reveals to Hannah one certain way of attaining true freedom from a life of cruelty—through death.

The antebellum period use of Gothic genre gives the black repressed a voice to demonstrate pain through hauntings and tales in The Bondwoman's Narrative. In the tradition of African American slave narratives, Crafts' novel also exhibits the suppression of trauma of black slaves while the narrative articulates how the system of the country reinforces the silent degradation. The Gothic genre is used in The Bondwoman's Narrative in giving the silenced a way to voice the pain of their dehumanization—as curses and oral tales. Hannah's first place of work as a house slave is where the audience first encounters a black slave's pain in the text: the Lindendale mansion. The mansion houses the curse of the Linden tree, a tale rooted in a history of blood and violence of black bodies. The original mansion owner, Sir Clifford, is remembered for his cruelty to his slaves and how he tortured an old slave woman and her dog, both of whom died on the Linden tree. The slaves recall the tale with apprehension: "Such was the legend of the Linden as we had heard it told in the dim duskiness of the summer twilight or by the roaring fires of wintry nights…an unusual degree of interest was attached to the tree and the creaking of its branches filled our bosoms with supernatural dread" (25). The tale is far older than any slave alive in the narrative and yet is told and passed down the generation, granting the old woman a voice when she wasn't allowed to have one while living. The woman's pain becomes a "curse" as expressed in her last words to Sir Clifford: "I will hang here till I die as a curse to this house, and I will come here after I am dead to prove its bane" (25). In "'The Strange Ideas of Right and Justice': Prison, Slavery and Other Horrors in The Bondwoman's Narrative," Jason Haslam asserts that the tree extends to more than just a Gothic strategy in the narrative: "…the roots of the family tree…are supported by the 'human blood' of slaves, and that ideal can therefore be threatened by the possibility of a slave's voice being raised in the narrative rebellion, outside the bounds of the master's control" (34). Haslam is arguing that the voice of a slave—and that voice being heard—is a violation of the system itself. With the old woman's last words heard and her story remembered, the Gothic narrative serves its purpose of demonstrating the pain of the repressed.

In the post-bellum period, the Gothic genre is employed to remember the torment of black slaves in Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" and "The Dumb Witness." In comparison to the antebellum use of Gothic conventions by Crafts, Chesnutt demonstrates to the audience that the post-bellum period Gothic genre can focus on resurfacing the legacy of the antebellum oppression.

Chesnutt implements Gothic strategies to criticize the system that continued to subjugate black Americans for a contemporary black and white audience. In his pursuit, he uses the African American conjure tale tradition—tales that contains folk magic passed down the generations of black families. "The Goophered Grapevine" follows narrator, John, and his wife, Annie, as they search for their new prospective home in North Carolina when they meet Uncle Julius. The property, as it is later revealed, previously belonged to Uncle Julius' former master McAdoo. In the short story, John represents the audience, as an outsider looking in and listening to strange stories of magic and curses. The reader's suspicion of Uncle Julius' antebellum stories is reflected in John's character by his lack of sympathy in comparison to Annie, noting how the former black slave benefits from telling the tales. Regardless of what Uncle Julius gains at the end, Chesnutt fuses the conjure elements that reflect the Gothic genre conventions and African-American subculture of folklore to remember the body horror common within the slave system. "The Goophered Grapevine" narrates, through Uncle Julius' reminiscence, the story of an unfortunate slave who is cursed by a grapevine and how his suffering is used as a commodity by his master. "The Dumb Witness," transitions the story-telling role to John, who discloses the tale of a speechless freed slave woman named Viney in the ruins of a mansion. The short story uses the frame narrative device to convey how a black female slave's voice is lost and recovered with Gothic strategies of historical revival—that is, for repressed black slaves to be remembered and not forgotten in time. While there are varied applications of supernatural strategies, "The Goophered Grapevine" and "The Dumb Witness" are ultimately directed for post-bellum black and white audiences to critically gaze at the suffering of the oppressed.

In using Gothic conventions, Chesnutt revives the legacy of the repressed by revealing how black personhood was used as a commodity in "The Goophered Grapevine." In the short story, Uncle Julius relates to John and Annie the tragedy that befell a slave at the vineyard the couple wishes to purchase. Gothic strategies are presented to describe the state of the old vineyard, "…partly supported by decayed and broken down trellises…and the few scattered grapes they bore were the undisputed prey of the first comer" (6), in order to give the setting a dreary and haunting mood for the couple. Uncle Julius, representing the antebellum perspective, is the audience's bridge to the slave narrative where black bodies were treated with horror: of how a conjure woman "goophered"—or cast a spell—on the luscious grapevine at the behest of the master when it was discovered that slaves are stealing grapes. Misfortunate falls on a recently purchased slave, Henry, when he eats from the goophered grapes and his life becomes linked to the vineyard. The tale is one of grisly bodily horror when Master McAdoo takes advantage of Henry's curse and makes a profit from his suffering—by selling Henry to slave buyers while he is strong, knowing that the slave would later be returned feeble and weak and be nursed back to health to recycle the process. The slave's life is nothing more than a commodity, and it only ends after a northerner gave McAdoo the wrong agricultural advice and causes the grapevine to die, along with the cursed Henry. Although Chesnutt utilizes supernatural conventions, such as a physical human link to nature in the frame narrative, he forces the audience to understand the terror of how avarice and power can dehumanize the black repressed. In Hyejin Kim's analysis of the Gothic storytelling in The Conjure Woman, he asserts the importance of "The Goophered Grapevine:" "…Julius's transformation tales conjure up the return of the socially repressed elements that were once abjected and Gothicized under slavery, thereby reconstituting a point of view that draws attention to the same danger of racial hegemony in post-bellum America" (415). In other words, Chesnutt is using Gothic strategies to criticize the thoughtless way black bodies were commoditized during slavery and how they are remembered in the post-bellum era.

Chesnutt's post-bellum short stories use the Gothic genre to refuse to permit the suffering of the black repressed past to be forgotten. In "The Dumb Witness," Chesnutt has the opportunity to remember a voice of the repressed from a post-bellum perspective in contrast to an antebellum view point. John, rejecting the validity of Uncle Julius's perspective, interprets the story of the Murchison

Mansion where the aging Malcolm Murchison resides with his former slave, the elderly Viney. The pair live in tense discord and are mentally tied to the past when the property was once beautiful and economically flourishing before the Civil War and not the dwindling mansion John observes. Chesnutt employs Gothic strategies in showing the decay of what used to be a prosperous property: "… a few collards and okra-plants and tomato-vines struggled desperately against neglect and drought and poverty of soil" (757). The decay John observes epitomizes post-bellum deterioration of the South, suggesting society's values are rotten due to past treatment of the repressed. In John's frame narrative of the Murchison story, Malcolm mutilates Viney in rage and robs her ability to speak, leaving her without the agency she once had at the start of the tale. Viney's loss of her voice is similar to Rose's torture in The Bondwoman's Narrative, where she temporarily loses her ability to speak until she bares her curse. However, unlike Rose, Viney's pain is forgotten by those close to the Murchison Mansion as well as all the other slaves who move on after the war; only Uncle Julius and Malcolm are present to remember what was done to her. The condition of the landscape makes the act even more unsettling: the prosperous land begins to wane as Malcolm tries to cajole the whereabouts of documents from her that could give him permanent ownership of the estate. The voice of a slave in this context is, ironically, of value—Chesnutt gives Viney the ultimate ownership of her master's future just as Malcolm has always had over hers. She stays by his side as a "dumb" witness to his psychological breakdown–which John describes as: "…some gruesome attraction in the scene of her suffering" (767)—until finally Malcolm dies after John concludes the tale. To John's astonishment, Viney can speak shortly after Malcolm's death: "Her articulation was not distinct, but her words were intelligible. I was never more surprised in my life" (768). There is no application of the supernatural in John's tale; instead, Chesnutt uses with Gothic strategies such as remembering the torment of the repressed and witnessing the physical decay of the land. The strategies are employed to remember Viney's pain and in doing so, her voice returns after John tells her story to the audience and the antagonist is vanquished.

The Gothic genre is a western literary genre that exposes the worst in society in a fictional backdrop. The setting includes a physical decay of a once beautiful estate and the conflict between a heroine and sinister antagonist that ends with the protagonist's triumph. However, not every author follows the Gothic formula. In Hannah Crafts' The Bondwoman's Narrative, the protagonist's victory is her escape from bondage after cruel necessity forces her to flee. Charles Chesnutt also doesn't follow the typical Gothic formulaic plot—his short stories resurface a suppressed pain that remind descendants of both oppressors and oppressed that the suffering of the past will be heard. What makes Crafts' and Chesnutt's works differ from the mainstream Gothic literature genre is the canon the works belong to—the African American canon. Both works confront the themes of slavery and freedom, while criticizing the system that co-opts the pain of black Americans. In addition, Crafts and Chesnutt combine the interests of black and white audiences, a theoretical practice that is suggested by James Weldon Johnson. In Crafts' The Bondwoman's Narrative and Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" and "The Dumb Witness," there is a use of the Gothic genre to unveil the horror of systematic dehumanization in antebellum America; however, it progresses as a tool to resurface the suffering of black slaves post-bellum to remember their legacy and criticize the silencing of trauma.

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