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REPRESENTATIONAL LOVE
TRIANGLE OF DION BOUCICAULT'S
"THE OCTOROON"

Honors Thesis



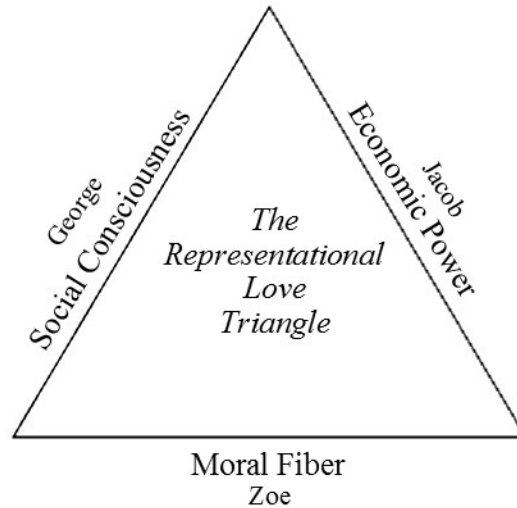
PEDRO E. ALVARADO
HON 4880

OCTOROON – (noun) – a person of one-eighth black ancestry. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

The Octoroon, by Dion Boucicault, is a play that Boucicault himself argued is “an effective intervention in the slavery debate, one designed to reveal the real cruelties of the slavery system” (Mullen 91). By calling *The Octoroon* an intervention, Boucicault intimated that his play could influence what was happening during the antebellum period of United States history by starting a dialog between opposing factions. While Boucicault did indeed contribute to this dialog, he is also known for not choosing a side. “‘Nothing in the world,’ protested the *Times*, ‘can be more harmless and non-committal than Mr. Boucicault’s play.’ It had in it ‘no demonstrations in favor of the down-trodden, no silly preachings of pious negroes, no buncombe of Southern patriots, no tedious harangues of Eastern philanthropists.’ *The Octoroon* was exactly what it had intended to be ‘a picture of life in Louisiana!’” (Kaplan 551). By simply writing a play that paints “a picture of life in Louisiana,” Boucicault was able to allow his work to present the complex issues that are the ingredients in this dramatic portrait.

Boucicault’s portrayal of antebellum Louisiana life showed how slavery destroyed the identity and life of a young octoroon girl and, symbolically, the identities and lives of real slaves as well as the nation. Very cleverly, Boucicault used the three main characters, George Peyton, Jacob M’Closky, and Zoe to represent three different aspects of the slavery debate. “By restaging racial conflict between several liminal characters in the play, *The Octoroon* dramatizes the problems and processes of passing or assimilating into a specific kind of U.S. ‘whiteness’ (Chiles 31). Additionally, by staging the racial conflict between these characters, *The Octoroon* also symbolically dramatizes the debate over slavery. The melodramatic love triangle that joins George Peyton, Jacob M’Closky, and Zoe is also a representation of another triangle; the social

conscience, economic power, and moral fiber triangle of the slavery issue and the tension it created with regards to assimilating into a “specific kind of U.S. ‘whiteness’” – See figure below.



Each side of the triangle corresponds to one of the mores that was debated over as part of the slavery issue, with each character representing one of the mores. George Peyton represents the social conscience aspect of the slavery debate, Jacob M’Closky represents the economic power aspect of the slavery debate, and Zoe represents the moral fiber aspect of the slavery debate.

This essay will argue that Boucicault’s *The Octoroon* foretold how the abolition of slavery would codify a significant shift in the economic power, social conscienceness, and moral fiber of the United States.

During the antebellum days of United States history, non-whites in general, and slaves specifically, were simply seen as present. “...non-whites are facts of existence... They are part of the physical world within which the whites revolve, but by no stretch of anyone’s imagination can they be considered human” (Richardson 162). No consideration or expression was given to the humanity of slaves. Even in the case of an octoroon like Zoe, who was raised and educated in the fashion of a “lady” and thought to be free, in the larger context of society she was still just

a slave. Zoe, and other fair-skinned slaves like her may have been treated differently than their dark skinned brethren, receiving work assignments inside the house and better food; but they were still treated like slaves. “Our sufferings as Black [people] of different shades are not identical, and they aren’t even always equal, but they most certainly are mutual” (Pabst, 178). Furthermore, in real life, mixed race slaves were not only subjected to being treated like slaves by white people, but they were also subjected to discrimination by other slaves because of the light complexion of their skin. “The notorious cultural nationalist Marcus Garvey, for instance, who publicly held that light-skinned blacks were “traitors,” degenerates,” and “monstrosities,” declared [W.E.B.] DuBois “a mulatto ashamed of his black ancestry, surrounded by pale-skinned associates and close friends, harping on his European ancestry” (Pabst 185). This is an important fact because it made the fair-skinned slaves double outcasts. They were placed between the proverbial rock and a hard place; being mistreated by whites for being a slave and being mistreated by slaves for being too light.

It is within this cultural context that Boucicault introduces George Peyton to represent the social conscience side of the representational love triangle. This particular side is in similar fashion to the abolitionist belief that slavery violated the basic human right of freedom. According to Jenny Martinez in her book *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law*, “contemporary human rights law has its origins in the early nineteenth-century movement in Great Britain to abolish the transatlantic slave trade” (149-50). George Peyton, although an American, represented the “foreign” viewpoint of life in Louisiana. “George ... [is] an outsider who has spent his youth in Europe and has thus failed to assimilate American racial attitudes” (Richardson 162). Having been raised in Europe, George had a very different idea about slavery and the races. By having George arrive in Louisiana from Europe,

“Just one month ago, I quitted Paris,” (Boucicault 4) Boucicault established George’s paradigm of slavery as French.

“Faced with a *fait accompli* in Saint-Domingue, France in 1794 became the first great power to abolish colonial slavery. However, this achievement was undone by Napoleon. He reestablished both colonial slavery and the slave trade in 1802, before proceeding to repress the remnants of the first French abolitionist groupings. It was not until the latter part of the Restoration monarchy of Louis XVIII and Charles X, and especially after the advent of the July Monarchy of King Louis Philippe in 1830, that French anti-slavery was reborn. ...this second French abolitionist movement from its inception until the final abolition of colonial slavery by France in 1848” (Jennings vii).

While France’s final abolition of slavery was only 16 years before the Emancipation Proclamation, there was at least 70 years-worth of the French abolitionist movement, including eight years of actual freedom for slaves; far less than anything the United States government had done about slavery to this point in time. In addition to France being an abolitionist state, “when the [U.S.] Civil War broke out, British opinion was for idealistic reasons largely on the side of the North” (Enkvist 169). Coming from a cultural background where there were no slaves and, presumably, no anti-miscegenation laws, George is well suited to fill the role of social conscience representation. It makes sense then, with George’s French paradigm of slavery that he is appalled at the way Zoe is treated by Dora and Sunnyside while breakfasting at Terrebonne Plantation. When Mrs. Peyton tells Dora and Sunnyside that George is unacquainted with their customs, but he will learn, George replies, “Never, Aunt! I shall never understand how to wound the feelings of any lady; and, if that is the custom here, I shall never acquire it” (Boucicault 7).

To Dora and Sunnyside, and even to Mrs. Peyton, their condescension toward Zoe was normal treatment for a woman of her status. "...Zoe's position is locally clear, but not universally so. It hints at... the workings of specific social institutions, and their opacity to an outsider" (Meer 91).

Another reason for George being the social conscience side of the representational love triangle is his desire to marry Zoe even though the laws of the land prohibited it. At first, George did not realize that Zoe is an octoroon. His only thought about her was that she was an extraordinary woman. When Zoe revealed that she is an octoroon, George is completely nonplussed and did not waiver for one moment in his desire to marry Zoe; after all, she was still an extraordinary woman. George said to her, "Zoe, I love you none the less; this knowledge brings no revolt to my heart, and I can overcome the obstacle" (Boucicault 17). This is why "George, who is ignorant of the American anti-miscegenation legislation, is mortified to learn that the object of his desire cannot be recognized as his legal wife" (Brody, "The Yankee Hugging the Creole" 106). George is completely shocked by the fact that he cannot legally marry Zoe based solely on the fact that she is 1/8 black. "...George's incomprehension shows Zoe's 'tragedy' to be founded in habit and practice rather than biology" (Meer 92) because it is obvious, by Zoe's birth and those of other children of slaves and slave owners, that there are no procreational issues with regards to interracial marriage. Be that as it may, it would have been easy for George to throw in the towel on the idea of marrying Zoe but continue to pursue her so that she could fulfill his carnal passions; especially since the anti-miscegenation laws did not prohibit sexual relations between the races. And, as was not the case most of the time, Zoe would likely have agreed to be George's mistress since her feelings were mutual and being George's mistress would have been the only way for them to be together. "...only the southern hero George--a perfect specimen of the aristocratic planter class--is deemed worthy of Zoe's

love” (Brody, “The Yankee Hugging the Creole” 104). George is portrayed as colorblind, at least where Zoe and the other Terrebonne slaves are concerned, to the point where he became willing to sacrifice his own “freedom” to protect them. “...if Miss Sunnyside will accept me as I am, Terrebonne shall be saved: I will sell myself, but the slaves shall be protected” (Boucicault 21).

This is what provides the final reason for George being the social conscience side of the representational love triangle; his willingness to sacrifice himself to save the plantation and the slaves. “...the hero George offers to “sell” himself in marriage to an heiress to save the plantation and the slaves” (Howes 88). George unequivocally wanted to marry Zoe, but since he could not, he sacrificed, or gave up his love for her, in order to help the others. In this particular circumstance, by agreeing to marry Dora, George made an additional type of sacrifice; one that required him to bear a burden that he did not want, in addition to giving up his freedom.

Although Dora was a perfectly eligible bachelorette, she was not the object of desire for either the protagonist, George, or the antagonist, Jacob. This role was filled exclusively by Zoe. “Given the genre, Zoe is, perforce, the object of the villain’s lust and the hero’s love” (Richardson 159). Zoe, the tragic heroine (more on her later), is the cause of the tension between the social conscience side and the economic power side, personified in Jacob M’Closky, of the representational love triangle. “Thus begins a battle for ownership of Zoe between George Peyton, the hero who wishes to save and marry her, and Jacob M’Closky, who wishes to sell her with the rest of the slaves, then make her his mistress” (Stupp 70).

Whereas George, through his foreign paradigm of slavery, his abhorrence of anti-miscegenation legislation, and his sacrifice, demonstrated that social change should emerge from moral obligation, without regard for one’s own selfish desires, Jacob is almost the complete

antithesis of George. Unlike the social conscience side of the representational love triangle, the economic power side focuses almost exclusively on increasing one's own financial holdings. In antebellum United States history, the economic power side is referent to capitalism; "a way of organizing an economy so that the things that are used to make and transport products are owned by individual people and companies rather than by the government" (www.merriam-webster.com). Much like contemporary capitalism, the antebellum economy placed emphasis on the freedom of the individual to buy and sell over the stability of society. This definition describes Jacob M'Closky and the pro-slavery movement of the day.

One of the ways that men who preeminently pursued the economic power side of the representational love triangle during antebellum America increased their social status was by owning slaves. "[t]he stakes were high, for their identities as masters and mistresses, planters and paternalists, hosts and hostesses, slave breakers and sexual predators were all lived through the bodies of people who could be bought and sold in the market" (Johnson 16). Being able to purchase people demonstrated to the rest of the community that the purchaser was a man of means and made that man the envy of his neighbors and friends and being envied was one of the goals of the "M'Closky's" of the day.

In addition to merely having to the ability to purchase slaves, one of the most efficient ways to fast-track your ascent on the antebellum America most enviable list was to own light-skinned, female slaves. "Light-skinned black women were often considerably more expensive than their darker sisters, thus the ability to purchase a light-skinned slave served as a symbol of wealth and prestige for slave masters" (Carpenter 19). The desire to be respected and envied was so great that it bordered on obsession. The ability to buy and sell people the same way one would buy livestock not only increased one's social status, but also altered the purchasers own self-

perception. “Fetishizing the ownership of human beings through the ritual transaction of the marketplace created a cognitive space where the individual and collective desires of witnesses could converge, thereby enabling temporary transformations of the self” (Stupp 67).

As mentioned earlier, anti-miscegenation laws did not apply to mere sexual relations and as a result many sexual atrocities were committed against female slaves by their masters and overseers. “Long-standing American anti-miscegenation laws made marriage between blacks and whites impossible, although they did not expressly forbid mere sexual relations between them” (Brody, “The Yankee Hugging the Creole” 102). These acts were committed for several reasons. One of those reasons is that during this period of U.S. history, quality white women, that is women of a certain social standing, were not supposed to have sex before they were married. This meant that the young white men of the day, for whom pre-marital sex was not taboo, sought sexual partners whose “quality” could not be jeopardized. Therefore, “sexual domination of a nearly white, “virtuous” female slave was an expression of repressed male sexual desire in a southern culture that prohibited sexual behavior in unmarried white women of “quality” (Stupp 70). In other words, light-skinned female slaves were often used to “service” young white men while they waited to get married to a quality white woman. And even after he was married, he would, in many cases, still use the slave for sex.

One did not have to own a light-skinned female slave to use them for sexual gratification, however. Sometimes, the simple opportunity to purchase a light-skinned female slave was used to provide white men a sexual experience. “The stated concern about the woman’s capacity for reproduction served as public cover for a much more general interest in her naked body. The careful stories buyers used to explain their actions were revealing denials of something everybody knew: that for white men, examining slaves, searching out hidden body parts, running

hands over limbs, massaging abdomens and articulating pelvic joints, probing wounds and scars with fingers, was erotic” (Johnson 149). Light-skinned female slaves on the auction block were touched, fondled, and probed in the same way a new car is examined by a potential buyer on the showroom floor in contemporary culture.

In *The Octoroon*, it was clear that Jacob was genuinely attracted to Zoe. But unlike George, who wanted to marry Zoe so they could share a life together, Jacob was primarily interested in making Zoe his mistress and he used her purchase to demonstrate his economic dominance. In Act 3, lines 478 – 525, Jacob, in defiance of the “Free Zoe” crowd gathered at the auction, made sure his bids were far higher than anyone else’s who wanted to buy Zoe for the purpose of freeing her. He even bragged about it in response to Salem Scudder stating that Jacob wouldn’t be successful in buying Zoe, “Shan’t I! Fifteen thousand. Beat that any of ye” (Boucicault 29). Jacob did not think it was wrong that he and Zoe were not allowed to get married nor did he care, as long as he could have his way with her. Jacob even tried to manipulate Zoe into thinking that it was in her best interest to align herself with him. “I am rich, jine me; I’ll set you up grand, and we’ll give these first families here our dust, until you’ll see their white skins shrivel up with hate and rage” (Boucicault 11). It was Zoe’s refusal to go along with Jacob, because of her feelings about George that hardened Jacob’s heart and strengthened his resolve to own both Terrebonne Plantation and Zoe. “...M’Closky’s purchase of Zoe would result in his ownership of her for the purpose of sexual violation, a situation she would not have had the prerogative to refuse” (Merrill 140). Additionally, M’Closky’s purchase of Terrebonne Plantation and Zoe demonstrated one of the negative aspects of the capitalist economic system; the freedom of the individual [to buy or sell] over the stability of society.

Based on the discussions regarding George and Jacob, or the social conscience and economic power sides of the representational love triangle, or the abolitionist and pro-slavery viewpoints, the moral fiber side, represented by Zoe, is the side that brings balance to the other two, making the representational love triangle equilateral. In Zoe, the octoroon daughter of a deceased white slave owner and an unnamed quadroon slave, we find a convergence of both the social conscience and economic power as well as the abolitionist and pro-slavery aspects of the slavery debate. It is natural that all these things amalgamate in Zoe because "...it is the purpose of the octoroon to pose (as) the problem of racial discernment" (Brody, "Impossible Purities" 50). Zoe, as the prize being fought for between George and Jacob, represents the implicit need for morality to be the scale that weighs the balance between that which is economically viable and that which is socially necessary. According to David Davis, slavery "...was the base on which the entire economy rested, and was the main route to individual wealth and imperial grandeur; it was therefore essential that the government ensure a continuing supply of Africans and protect slaveholders in the free enjoyment of their property" (128). On the one hand, slavery was necessary to sustain the economy, but on the other hand slavery was socially negligent. In his speech on the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision, Abraham Lincoln emphasized the human rights implication in the Declaration of Independence by stating "I think the authors of that notable instrument intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal *in all respects*. They did not mean to say all were equal in color, size, intellect, moral developments, or social capacity. They defined with tolerable distinctness, in what respects they did consider all men created equal – equal in 'certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' This they said, and this they meant." (Lincoln and Fehrenbacher 398). These two dichotomous statements illustrate the need for morality to bring

balance between them. Zoe's entire existence calls into question the morality of the peculiar institution as well as its economic function. Based on the aforementioned economic idea, pro-slavery defenders could argue that slaves were necessary to sustain the economy while slavery's critics could simultaneously argue, based on this same idea, that slavery only benefited the individual slave owners, not the entire economy. As a result of this debate, Zoe, the slaves in *The Octoroon* and in real life, as well as the unity of the states were placed in jeopardy. This debate inevitably ended. "With very few exceptions, however, it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that public policy was influenced by a belief that slavery was incompatible with basic ideals or institutions" (Davis 128). In other words, the greater public began to realize that no matter how great the financial gains were, for the individual or even for the national economy, the ideals that slavery espoused did not coincide with the human rights that the authors of the Declaration of Independence intended.

Additionally, the text further paints a picture of Zoe as the tension between the way life in Louisiana was and the way life in Louisiana could have been. *The Octoroon* does not provide any evidence suggesting that Judge Peyton and Mrs. Peyton had any children together or even if Mrs. Peyton was able to have children. There is also no evidence suggesting that Judge Peyton raped the quadroon slave who was Zoe's birth mother. What *The Octoroon* does make clear, however, is that Zoe was freed by Judge Peyton. "The free papers of my daughter, Zoe, registered February 4th 1841" (Boucicault 13) and that she was raised as a lady and loved by Mrs. Peyton as if Zoe were her own child. Salem Scudder says, "Don't you know that she is the natural daughter of the judge, your uncle, and that old lady there just adored anything her husband cared for; and this girl, that another woman would a hated, she loves as if she'd been her

own child” (Boucicault 6). Mrs. Peyton’s full acceptance of Zoe as a daughter and her concern for Zoe’s well-being suggests, as Jennifer Brody points out, that:

“while her paradoxical social placement is clear from the beginning of the play, it is continually and more overtly confirmed during the play’s performance. The inevitable drive toward Zoe’s degradation (and increased gradation) is heightened by the presumption in the first act that she is free. In act 2, she learns that, in fact, she is enslaved. The massive contradictions that underwrite the play work to delegitimize certain societal values. The oppositions of slave and free, white and black are disrupted when figures such as Zoe enter the dominant national, familial structures” (“Impossible Purities” 50).

Not only does Zoe disrupt these oppositions by being the illegitimate product of an extramarital interracial relationship, but she was also involved in an interracial relationship that was forbidden to result in a legal marriage, and she was the sought after prize of two other white men, Jacob M’Closky and Salem Scudder, who desired her for completely different reasons.

All of these events were happening to, or at least, because of Zoe, but it wasn’t clear why or how until George showed up. “...Zoe is socially anomalous, but in her case the strangeness of the situation is only laid bare by a suitor with a European perspective” (Meer 91). It’s important to note that George, an American with a European perspective, is the reason Zoe’s peculiar social status is made plain for everyone else to see by bringing a paradigm shift to the status quo of life on Terrebonne Plantation with his fresh, European perception of life and humanity. However, when Jacob, the European with an American perspective became aware of the strangeness of Zoe’s situation, he decided to exploit it for his own social, sexual, and financial gain. Jacob’s desire for more money and power superseded any type of social responsibility or

moral obligation. Once each of these paradoxes is understood, it is easy to see why Zoe is the moral fiber side of the representational love triangle.

In terms of the representational love triangle, the three sides of the triangle are the moral fiber, social conscience, and economic power elements of *The Octoroon*, represented by Zoe, George, and Jacob respectively. The three angles of the representational love triangle are the points where the circumstances in the lives of the three main characters intersect and give the triangle its shape. With Zoe's death, the moral fiber side is removed from the triangle and the economic power and social conscience sides cease to intersect with it causing the entire triangle to collapse.

In light of Boucicault's declaration that *The Octoroon* is "an effective intervention in the slavery debate, one designed to reveal the real cruelties of the slavery system" (Mullen 91), Zoe's death reveals the ultimate cruelty of the slavery system; the death of a nation. Zoe's death symbolized what happens when one side of a structure is disregarded, overlooked, viewed as insignificant, and mistreated. In the same way that George, Jacob, and Zoe represent the social conscience, economic power, and moral fiber sides of the representational love triangle as well as the abolitionist movement, pro-slavery movement, and the slaves themselves, the outcomes of these characters lives foreshadowed potential outcomes for the United States during this time period. For example, George gets the good news that he will indeed inherit Terrebonne Plantation, but this information does not come until after Zoe has taken the poison that ends her life. Symbolically, *The Octoroon*, shows that even after the slaves are freed, it is too late to undo the damage inflicted upon them by their enslavement and the one's responsible for their enslavement. With regards to Jacob, who, according to the stage directions in the text, ends up dead at the hands of Wahnotee, "*Light fires. – Draw flats and discover PAUL'S grave. –*

M'CLOSKY *dead on it* – WAHNOTEE *standing triumphantly over him*" (Boucicault 40), the text foreshadows that the cruel and greedy will eventually receive their karmic comeuppance; whether by due process of law, vigilantism, or by some other means. With Zoe's death, *The Octoroon* symbolically suggests that the removal of morality as the balance between social justice and economic anarchy ends in the death of that which is being fought over. Moreover, Zoe's death being a suicide demonstrated that not only is the ultimate cruelty of the slavery system the death of a nation, but that this death would be self-inflicted.

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