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THE POLITICS OF DIALOGUE IN CHESNUTT'S THE CONJURE WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF DIALOGUE IN CHESNUTT'S THE CONJURE WOMAN

By

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A brief summary and close examination of Charles W. Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman, paying special attention to the frame story, the dialogue that takes place in it, and the political implications of that dialogue. After the summary of the novel, a critical context for discussing the dialogue in The Conjure Woman is shown through a review of scholarly articles by Andrews, Britt, Dixon, Farnsworth, Feinberg, and Ferguson, all focusing on the framing story. Then there is a discussion of the ideological implications of dialogue, using Bakhtin's idea of discourse as a social act. Lastly, there is an examination of the political/social importance of the dialogue in the framing story of The Conjure Woman through an original critique based on the previous discussion of Bakhtin.

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INTRODUCTION

> The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites—for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism— I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined crusade against it.
>
> Chesnutt's Journal, May 29, 1880

At age 22, Charles Wadell Chesnutt laid out his political as well as literary agenda. Nearly 20 years later, reaching out to a white, northern audience he was certain was sympathetic but whose interest lay in "a version of America in which superficially rendered character types acted out their amusing idiosyncrasies in a setting distinguished by uniqueness and a perceptible atmospheric effect" (Andrews 42), he published The Conjure Woman. Unlike the success of local colorists such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, Chesnutt's success was modest by all measures. Critic and biographer William L. Andrews attributes this modesty to Chesnutt's desire to produce literature that would reap financial reward and also move his readers to recognize and change the insidious social caste system affecting blacks and whites alike (13-14). As Andrews sees it, "the accommodations of these twin ambitions would pose fundamental technical problems for Chesnutt's artistry, problems which

would greatly affect the quality of his work and the unsteady course of his brief, active literary career" (13).

In this paper I will discuss the frame story and its participants, its relationship to the tales Uncle Julius tells and Chesnutt's attempts to accomplish his political and social goals. Andrews identifies a critical failure on Chesnutt's part in a harsh critique of Chesnutt's ability to balance his "twin ambitions": "Julius'... behavior [does] not upset the frame of the conventional plantation story, which posits the black man's subordination to a white patron's largess, in The Conjure Woman" (52). While it is true that the novel does not affect a radical stance and did little to change the lot of African-Americans in a concrete way, it may have led "'whites out of their prejudices... imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step'" (Andrews 15). Using the novel's intrinsic ability to create a dialogic discourse, the explicit recognition of an other, The Conjure Woman intuitively connects with the "material of the verbal sign [which] allows one most fully and easily to follow out the continuity of the dialectical process of change, a process which goes from the bases to the superstructures" (Bakhtin 24).

SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The Conjure Woman opens with "The Goophered Grapevine," a chapter which introduces us to the main players in the novel: John, the narrator, Uncle Julius, the storyteller, and Annie, John's wife. In the frame story, Annie and John have come to Patesville, North Carolina from the Great Lakes region to relieve Annie's health problems and for John to take advantage of the unique money-making opportunities available to him in the post-Civil War South. Most notably, John expects to plant grapes where "labor was cheap, and land could be had for a mere song" (3). While he is not at first impressed by the business activity of Patesville, he soon learns that this "somnolent" exterior hid "deeper currents of life—love and hatred, joy and despair, ambition and avarice, faith and friendship" (4).

On their first visit to an old plantation up for sale, John and Annie meet Uncle Julius sitting on a pine log, eating grapes. He is described by John as:

> a tall man, and, though slightly bowed by the weight of years, apparently quite vigorous. He was not entirely black, and this fact, together with the quality of his hair, which was about six inches long and very bushy, except on the top of his head, where he was quite bald, suggested a slight strain of other than negro blood.

> There was a shrewdness in his eyes, too, which was not altogether African, and which, as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character. (9-10)

At the time John and Annie meet him, Julius is eating grapes on the land John is considering buying. His inquiries and intimations that he is considering buying the "ole McAdoo plantation" compel Julius to tell the first of many stories to the northern couple, as John says later, to discourage him from buying the vineyard from which Julius has evidently derived a goodly revenue from the neglected vines.

Julius' tale is about the old master, Mars Dugal' McAdoo, and his attempts to get the slaves from his plantation and the neighboring ones to stop eating the grapes from his vines. He first tries to scare them off by setting up steel traps and spring guns and staying up at night with a gun. He never catches any of the perpetrators, but does end up with a "leg shot full er cow-peas" (14). He decides, finally, to talk to an old conjure woman named "Aun' Peggy." After he makes the appropriate payment of food and wine to her, Aun' Peggy puts a spell on the vineyard so that any slave who eats a grape from the vines will die within a year. Two slaves do die, affirming for the slaves that the goopher is a powerful one.

When a new slave, Henry, unaware of the goopher, comes to the plantation and eats the grapes, Peggy tells him how to get around the conjuration. There are consequences to this

new spell, however: Henry's physiology works in sympathy with the seasons. In the spring, he is strong and spritely. As the fall and winter come on, he becomes weak and sickly, just like the grape vines from which he has derived his magical new life. Mars Dugal, quick to see the opportunity for profit, sells Henry every spring when he is strong and vigorous, and buys him back in the fall when he becomes, in body, like an old man. This works well until McAdoo takes the advice of a carpetbagger on how to increase his yield from the vineyard and, in the process, kills most of the plants. Henry, of course, dies along with the grapes.

In the frame, we learn that John buys the plantation, a "striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries" (34). Not surprisingly, John hears nothing of any ill effects from the grapes. Julius also becomes John's coachman, which gives him the opportunity to tell more tales to the northern businessman and his wife.

In the second chapter, entitled "Po' Sandy," John and his wife are planning an addition of a kitchen to their home. John proposes using a small, old frame house that sits on his property as the raw material for the new kitchen. By his estimations, however, he still needs to buy "several hundred feet of lumber" (38) to build the kitchen to his wife's specifications and he asks Julius to take him and his wife to the lumber mill to order the lumber. When they arrive at the mill, the foreman is off visiting a neighboring farmhouse,

which gives Julius the opportunity to tell a tale. The apparent impetus for the tale is their casual observation of a pine log being cut into lumber. As we later find out, the teller has an ulterior motive in reciting the tale.

The tale is about Sandy, a slave of Mars Marrabo McSwayne, who is so valued by his owner that he is passed around to all of McSwayne's children to help them in their times of need. Sandy's first wife is sold to a speculator while he is being lent out and he is given a new wife named Tenie. Just as he is getting "on mighty well" with his new wife, Sandy is told that he will be lent out again. Tenie, it turns out, is a conjure woman, and she goophers Sandy, turning him into a tree: "'I kin turn you ter a tree,' sez Tenie. 'You won't hab no mouf ner years, but I kin turn you back oncet in a w'ile, so you kin git sump'n ter eat, en hear w'at's gwine on'" (47). As a tree, Sandy is subjected to woodpeckers and men stripping the tree-bark for turpentine. Tenie sees that this plan cannot go on indefinitely and she plans to turn them both into foxes so that they could run away to the North. In the midst of preparing the goopher mixture, Tenie is sent away to help on another plantation. While she is gone, Sandy is cut down to build a new kitchen for the mistress of the plantation. Tenie returns to the plantation just in time to see Sandy cut up in the sawmill and, not surprisingly, she goes mad. The kitchen that is built from his body is never used at night because it is rumored to be haunted by Sandy's spirit. The kitchen is

finally torn down and the lumber is used to build the frame house that prompts Julius' tale.

In the frame story, Annie is appalled by the conditions of slavery and says, "What a system it was…under which such things were possible!" (60). John is amazed by this response, asking her if she seriously thinks that the man had been turned into a tree. She says no, but she has clearly been moved by the story when she murmurs "Poor Tenie!" (61). Later, she convinces John that she "will get no pleasure in that kitchen if it were built out of that lumber" (61) and John orders enough new wood to build the kitchen in its entirety. A few weeks later, Julius convinces Annie that his church needs the structure for a meeting place.

The third chapter is entitled "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." In the frame story for this chapter, Julius introduces his grandson to John with the hopes of getting the boy a job on the farm. Although he is not favorably impressed by the young man, John hires him out of respect for Julius. The youth turns out to have no sense of responsibility and John dismisses him.

Julius tries to get his grandson's position back through a tale he tells to John and Annie shortly afterwards as they wait for the water spring to be cleaned. The tale involves the young master on a neighboring plantation. Mars Jeems works his slaves very hard, denying them even the opportunity to marry and have children, saying that he is raising cotton, not slaves. There seems to be some hope, however, when he is

smitten by the young daughter of "Mars McSwayne." She won't have him, however, when she finds out how he abuses his slaves, saying that his treatment of a wife would probably not be much different.

At the same time this fruitless courtship is taking place, a more productive relationship develops between two slaves, each belonging to one of the white lovers. Solomon, who belongs to Mars Jeems, is unable to see his sweetheart, so he goes to Aun' Peggy for a solution. Her solution is a goopher that will give Mars Jeems a "monst'us bad dream" (77). The day after the goopher is administered in his soup, Mars Jeems leaves the plantation to check his other plantation and, Julius tells us, leaves an overseer in charge. "Ole Nick," as he is called by the slaves, decides that while Mars Jeems is gone, the plantation will be particularly productive so that Mars Jeems will be impressed upon his return. In the meantime, a new slave is brought to the house to be broken by Mars Johnson whose reputation for "breaking" new slaves is legendary. The new slave is beaten, starved, and abused to get him to work, but even then it seems he "did n' 'pear ter know how ter han'le a hoe" (83). Finally he is sold away, his master acknowledging that if Mars Johnson can't get the man to work, no one can. When Aun' Peggy hears all this from Solomon, she is very interested and gives Solomon a sweet potato, telling him to seek out that unbreakable slave and give it to him to eat. The next day, Mars Jeems shows up in the swamp on the property, looking

poorly, complaining about having had a terrible dream, and asking about what has been going on. Solomon tells him everything and the next day Mars Jeems has Mars Johnson give his account of everything that has happened in the time he was gone. Johnson tells how much money has been made and how much work has been done and, of course, about the new slave. After hearing this story, Mars Jeems dismisses the bewildered overseer. It is completely clear by this time that Aun' Peggy's goopher has turned Mars Jeems into the new slave and that he now has a new perspective on the life of a slave.

In the frame story, Julius shares the moral of the story, "dat w'ite folks w'at is so ha'd en stric', en doan make no 'lowance fer po' ign'ant niggers... is li'ble ter hab bad dreams" (100). Much to his disappointment, Annie believes that Julius has "made up" the story, even in the face of his assertion that he heard the story from his own mother. The frame ends the next day with John seeing Julius' grandson back on his place, working. Apparently, Annie had given him another chance.

The frame setting for "The Conjurer's Revenge" is a balmy Sunday afternoon at John and Annie's home. John has remarked to Julius that he is thinking of expanding his scuppernong field. Julius suggests that if John is going to do some more plowing, he knows of a horse for sale that might do. John tells him he is leaning towards buying a mule instead. Julius' objection to these plans leads to his tale.

Uncle Julius says that when he was young there was a slave named Primus who made his own rules and used to slip off the plantation at night to visit women on other plantations. One night when he is out, Primus finds a shoat and, finding himself irresistibly drawn to the animal, kills and eats it. Unfortunately for Primus, the animal belonged to an old conjure man and after he eats it, he disappears. Soon afterwards, Primus' master buys a new mule whose face contains some "fermilyus" features. The creature turns out to be a queer one, with a predilection for tobacco and fermented wine pressings. In addition, when the wife that Primus has left behind becomes interested in another slave, this mule begins to abuse the new man, biting him and kicking him about. The man, named Pete, is asked by the old conjure man, who is dying, to bring the offending mule to his home. There, Pete finds out that the mule is really Primus and the conjure man wants to take his goopher off him before he dies. Through a mix-up, the old man ends up poisoned and dying even faster than he had anticipated, leaving Primus intact, with the exception of one foot, a potent reminder of his tangle with conjuring.

In the frame story, Annie is most disappointed with the story because "It isn't pathetic, it has no moral that I can discover, and I can't see why you should tell it. In fact, it seems to me like nonsense" (127), but John takes it to heart, changes his mind about a mule, and purchases a horse on Julius' advice instead. The horse quickly dies and John

learns a valuable lesson about horse-trading, especially in the light of his further discovery that Julius owned an interest in the horse John purchased. For a "long time afterwards [he] took [Julius'] advice only in small doses and with great discrimination" (131).

"Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" is the fifth chapter of The Conjure Woman. In the frame story, Annie, whose health has steadily improved for two years, suddenly falls victim to "a settled melancholy" (132). Everything John tries to cheer her up is singularly ineffective. One day, while Annie sits on the piazza, Julius appears carrying with him a lucky rabbit's foot. In a lively debate over the effectiveness of such a talisman, John demands proof, which Julius offers through the tale of Sis' Becky.

Sis' Becky was a slave who belonged to a man named "Kunnel Pen'leton." She had a son named Mose by her husband who belonged to a different white man. Soon after her husband had been sold away, Sis' Becky's master, whose life was consumed by horses and racing, fell in love with a horse named Lightening Bug. At the limit of his credit, Pen'leton agrees to trade one of his slaves for the animal and, of course, he chooses Sis' Becky. The colonel doesn't want to break up Becky and her son, but the horse-trader will not even take the pickaninny for free: "I doan raise niggers; I raises hosses" (142). Pen'leton doesn't want to make any trouble, so he tells Becky that she is only going with the trader to be dropped off at his son-in-law's plantation to

help out for a few days. When she discovers the truth, she is heartbroken.

Meanwhile, little Mose becomes distraught just one day after Becky is gone. Aun' Nancy, made responsible for Mose, sees the boy begin to waste away; he doesn't eat, he turns pale, and his eyes lose their shine. When the colonel's wife looks at the pickaninny, she is concerned and administers a medicine of dubious value. Aun' Nancy seems to know, however, that this is not what Mose needs and she takes him to Aun' Peggy, the conjure woman. Peggy recognizes immediately what Mose needs and arranges for it by turning him into a hummingbird so he can fly to his mother. The visit does both Becky and Mose a lot of good—Becky recognized in the little bird's hum "her little Mose croonin' on her breas'" (47)—but only for three or four days. Aun' Peggy again turns Mose into a bird, this time, however, into a mockingbird. As he sung all day long, Becky imagines, rightly, that it is her little Mose, "crowin' en crowin', des lack he uster w'en his mammy would come home at night fum de cotton-fiel'" (149). This visit has no longer effect than the other, however, and Aun' Nancy asks the conjure woman if there isn't some way to just get Becky back home again. After acquiring Nancy's best Sunday head-handkerchief, Peggy goes to work. The first thing she does is have a hornet sting the new horse's knees to make them swell up. The colonel is infuriated, thinking that he has been taken by the horse-trader, and writes a threatening

letter saying he wants his slave back. The trader, however, is not easily threatened.

After this first setback, Peggy begins to work on Becky. Becky dreams three nights in a row that her little pickaninny is dead and after the third time, she finds a small bag from Peggy filled with roots. Convinced that she has been conjured, she goes to bed, ready to die. The trader, sure that there is nothing wrong with the horse he has sold and equally sure that Becky is going to die, writes a new letter to Pen'leton proposing that they negate the trade. When Becky returns, she and Mose both grow strong. Eventually, Mose makes enough money as a blacksmith to buy not only his mother's freedom, but also his own.

John's response to the tale is that it is a "very ingenious fairy tale" while his wife declares "the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did" (159). Her contention is that the "ornamental" details of the birds and hornets do not detract from the fact that it was "true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war" (159). Still not satisfied, John insists that, at least, the tale does not address the value of a rabbit's foot. Annie, of course, recognizes that "Sis' Becky had no rabbit's foot" (160).

Annie, in the following weeks, improves dramatically. One day, when they are going out for a ride in their

carriage, John finds, to no one's surprise but his own, Julius' rabbit's foot among Annie's things.

The sixth chapter of The Conjure Woman, entitled "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," begins with John and Annie again on the piazza, confined to indoors because of rain. To entertain his wife on such a dull day, John volunteers to read to her from his volume of philosophy. After one paragraph, she asks him to stop. Luckily, Julius arrives. He is there to be sure that they will not be going out in their carriage, which is indeed the case. John asks for Julius' advice on clearing a section of woods near the swamp and how much he thinks it will cost. Julius thinks that it would cost "a couple hund'ed dollahs" (166), but he asserts he would not bother. Upon questioning, he says it is too new for grapes, too low for cotton, and too close to the swamp to avoid corn-eating raccoons. When John thinks he might try for corn anyway, Julius tries a now familiar maneuver; he tells a tale.

In his tale, he warns of bad luck that follows those who disturb that particular tract of land. Snakes and scorpions plague the adventurer who, if he gets past them, might disturb the haunt of the gray wolf. As the tale goes, there was a slave named Dan on Mars Dugal' McAdoo's plantation. Dan was mild mannered, always working hard, until he was provoked. On the plantation there was also a woman named Mahaly, who Dan started spending his time with. At the time, there was a conjure man who had a son that also became enamored with Mahaly. Dan and Mahaly were given permission by

their master to marry, which they soon did. This conjurer's son, however, did not let up on Mahaly and one day, she says to Dan, "I wish you'd do sump'n ter stop dat nigger man fum follerin' me 'roun'" (171). Dan responds by seeking out the other man. This other man pulls a knife on Dan who clobbers him in the head, knocking him down and out. Dan leaves him on the ground, believing he will come to and go about his business. Unfortunately, the man is found dead from the tremendous blow, but, because he is a free-man, no one takes much interest and Dan is off the hook.

When Dan finds out that he has killed the man, he is afraid that his father, the old conjure man, will find out that he has killed the man and poison his food or put a spell on him. To get some protection, he goes to Peggy, the new conjure woman in the area. She tells him that he needs a life-charm to protect him and agrees to make him one, the price being a pig. Dan buries the charm under a live-oak and it does indeed protect him against all the conjure man's attempts on his life.

As the conjure people often do, the old man employs a jay-bird to follow Dan and find out where the life-charm is hidden. It soon does and the old man takes to riding Dan in his sleep. When they finally meet in the day, the old man is so nice to Dan, that when he offers to help Dan with "the witch" that has been riding Dan at night, Dan accepts. and goes to his house. The old man tells Dan it is the old woman who lives down by the creek and that the only way to get her

to stop is to kill her. The old man tells Dan that she is coming to him as a black cat and that he will turn him into a wolf that night so he can catch and kill her.

Later that same day, the old man tricks Mahaly into coming to his cabin where he turns her into a black cat and put her into a basket. When night falls, Dan comes back where the man turns him into a wolf and he goes to his own home to wait for the witch. Of course, when the conjure man lets Mahaly loose, she runs directly home, as a cat, and Dan kills her. As soon as the blood began to flow, Mahaly transforms back into her human form and Dan knows that he has been tricked by the old conjure man. In a rage, he returns to the cabin and bites the old man's neck until he is sure he will die. The old man, with his seeming last breath, declares he is even with Dan, and that if he wanted to be turned back into a man, he must follow his directions. Believing that the conjure man wouldn't lie with his dying words, Dan follows his directions explicitly, drinking the potion he directs him to. Unfortunately for Dan, the spiteful conjure man was also getting revenge for his own death and the potion makes him unable to return to his human form.

The frame story ends with John deciding to clear the land despite the sad tale. He professes to looking for Mahaly's grave or for the bleached bones of the wolf, but he only found a bee-tree which he suspects had been frequented by a certain old man for years.

The last chapter of The Conjure Woman is entitled "Hot-foot Hannibal" has a very different type of frame story. In it, John's sister-in-law is staying with the family and she has become engaged with a young man named Murchison. As the story opens, the fiery Mabel and high-spirited Murchison are fighting. Things are said "that no woman of spirit could stand" (198), and Annie believes the rift is permanent. John disagrees, but after a week, begins to suspect that the break may well be permanent.

Ten days after the rupture, Julius takes the family on a drive. After trying to get them to go the long way to their friends' house and being overruled by Annie, the horse mysteriously will go no further. Julius suggests that they might sit for five minutes and see if the horse will change its mind. John and his family agree and, after a short while, Julius remembers a tale that explains why the horse will not go any further: the ghost of Chloe, dead these forty years.

When Julius offers to tell the tale, John gladly accepts, putting the old man's tale into a classic ghost story setting, describing the stream as "the waters of Lethe" and the forest as reminiscent of "funeral wreaths" (204). The tale Julius tells is about Chloe, a slave of old "Mars' Dugal McAdoo," who was the personal maid to the mistress of the house. When McAdoo brings Hannibal to work in the house, he promises Chloe will be his wife in the spring. Chloe, the hotheaded girl she is, sets herself dead against the marriage

ever happening and begins to scheme how she could get her sweetheart, Jeff, to take Hannibal's place in the house.

To achieve this, Chloe asks Jeff to go to Aun' Peggy, the conjure woman, and pay her to work her spells. She agrees to, for a silver dollar, and when he returns the next day, she has a small doll for him to put under the house where Hannibal will have to walk over it every day. The doll has a "peth head" and "pepper feet" and as long as it is near Hannibal, he will be "light-headed en hot-footed" (208). As Jeff leaves, Peggy warns him that he must give the doll back to her as soon as Hannibal is out of the house, or it will cause a lot of trouble.

The very next day, the goopher began to work: Hannibal dropped the firewood in the morning, waking the mistress an hour early, he dropped dinner in the yard, he overslept, dug up the mistress' bulbs, and finally got a whipping for it. The whipping, however, doesn't do any good and Hannibal is sent from the house and Jeff replaces him, according to plan. In their glory, Chloe and Jeff forget that they are supposed to return the goopher and Hannibal is distracted to the point that McAdoo threatens to sell him in the spring.

Luckily for Hannibal, the goopher finally wears off. When he has regained full use of his mind, he realizes that Chloe and Jeff are responsible for his downfall and he resolves to get his revenge. Hannibal meets Chloe on the road and tells her that he has seen Jeff meet a woman by the creek on Sunday nights. Even though she says she doesn't believe

him and goes on her way, she still starts to think. During this time, Jeff has been at McAdoo's daughter's house and she remembers hearing stories about a woman that Jeff had been interested in. True to the jealous female stereotype, she decides she should go to the creek, just in case.

Sure enough, when she reaches to creek, there is Jeff, anxiously looking up and down the road, waiting for some one. When he jumps up and runs down the road to embrace a woman coming from the neighboring plantation, Chloe turns heal and runs to McAdoo. She tells him half the story of Hannibal's goophering (leaving out her own role) and he vows to make Jeff an example to the other slaves. The very next day he sold Jeff to speculators who took him down river and Chloe pretended that she was so mad that she didn't care that he was gone.

One day, when she was walking down the road, Chloe met Hannibal on the road. As soon as he sees her, he starts to laugh and laugh. Finally, after being asked over and over what he is laughing at, he says, "I's laffin' at myse'f, tooby sho', — laffin' ter think w'at a fine 'oman I made" (220). He mean, of course, that he set up the two lovers, sending word, as Chloe, to Jeff to meet her at the creek on that fateful day.

Upon hearing this, Chloe faints and, in the coming month, gets worse and worse. The doctor is sent for and, finding nothing physically wrong with her, learns from her that she in pining away for want of Jeff. McAdoo tries to get

Jeff back, but he finds out he has died on the boat to Alabama. When Chloe learns this, she just gets worse and worse, wandering around like she was looking for Jeff and, finally, she is found dead by the creek where Julius and the family are listening to his tale.

Annie and Mabel are deeply moved by this tale and Annie asks Julius to take them to their friend's house by the route he had originally proposed. John, trying to lighten the mood, asks Annie if she is, indeed, frightened by the tale. "Oh, no," said Annie, "but I've changed my mind. I prefer the other route" (226). On the new route, they meet Murchison's servant who tells them that he is going away to New York. This comes as a shock to them all. They continue along the road where they are sure to meet Murchison on his way to the wharf and Annie asks John to do several favors for her that involve stopping the carriage and him leaving. When he finally finishes, he discovers his sister has walked on ahead. Soon after, Mabel and Murchison come down the road towards them, arm in arm, "aglow with the light of love" (228). John wonders if there had been an arrangement between Julius and Murchison, especially when Julius is invited to work at the newlyweds' home. John leaves the novel, however, with assurances that Julius stayed in his employ.

CRITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STORYTELLER AND FRAME IN THE CONJURE WOMAN

Most of the critics argue that Julius, an ex-slave still living at the site of his former slave life, has little success in his struggle with a white man from Ohio. That struggle is identified variously as economic, that of the folk trickster, or of Julius asserting his individuality and manhood. We will examine these three stances, their strengths and weaknesses, and finally their failure to show Julius' true triumph in Chesnutt's work.

To read the frame story and its relationship to the tales in Chesnutt's conjure stories in terms of economics and commerce is enticing . John, the protagonist and narrator of the novel, is a businessman/agronomist from northern Ohio. At the beginning of The Conjure Woman, he has just moved to North Carolina from "that region of the Great Lakes [where] the raw winds, the chill rains, and the violent changes of temperature… characterized the winters" (1) to relieve his wife of her health problems exacerbated by their former residence. This is not, however, his only motivation for choosing North Carolina; John intends to continue his successful work in grape-culture and has looked to France, Spain, and even California to do so. But in a typically entrepreneurial move, John, ever on the lookout for business

opportunities, goes to North Carolina. Here, he says, he "was enough of a pioneer to start a new industry, if [he] could not find a place where grape-culture had not been tried" (2). The clincher, in fact, seems to be the free-marketer's siren-song that "labor was cheap, and land could be had for a mere song" (2-3). With a narrator so focused on the dollar—indeed, it controls his vision throughout the novel—one should look to commerce as the controlling idea in the relationship between the characters in the frame story of The Conjure Woman.

In her article "Chesnutt's 'The Conjurer's Revenge': The Economics of Direct Confrontation," Sally Ann H. Ferguson focuses exclusively on the issue of "'manhood' narrowly defined as skill in controlling money—a rarity for black characters in turn-of-the-century American Literature" (37) to explain the relationship between John, Annie, and Julius. For Ferguson, the most significant occurrences in The Conjure Woman are the confrontations concerned with explicit and implicit negotiations over money and property. It is through these negotiations that, she says, the significance of the frame becomes apparent. Necessarily, however, she concludes that Julius loses in the confrontation. The implication, of course, is that, by the end of the novel, Chesnutt fails to lead whites very far from their prejudices that would relegate Julius to the realms inhabited by Uncle Remus and the black storytellers of Page's novels.

She begins her discussion with "The Goophered Grapevine" where Uncle Julius' apparent strength is that he is able to tell "slick conjure tale[s]" designed to frighten or outwit his money-clever opponent (37). Unfortunately for Julius, John's economic cleverness surpasses Julius' ability for subterfuge. This pattern continues until, in Ferguson's words, "in direct man-to-man confrontations for dollars, poor Julius can give [John] no real competition" (38).

In "Po' Sandy," "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," and "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," Ferguson notes the intercession of Annie on Julius' behalf. Julius plays on her sympathy and emotions to win her over and reduce his formidable economic opponent to the role of "doting husband" (38). Although Julius attains his economic goal in each of these stories, the use of such tactics does not qualify him as "'man' enough to part the white from his dollars" (38); identifying and capitalizing on an opponent's weakness, in Julius' case at least, makes him less of a man. This reasoning is somewhat elusive, however, because John does much the same thing. He is apparently more of a man for identifying Julius' weakness, his lack of money, his inability to buy the property or materials so often in question, or his lack of negotiation experience, and exploiting them. John is not seen as manipulative or womanly, presumably because as a rich, white man skilled in negotiating over money and power, he is the epitome of "manhood". Interpreted as such, the likelihood that the frame

story can ever establish and sustain a new position for blacks in post Civil War America is slim indeed.

Ferguson allows that Julius becomes a man, but only fleetingly, when he mediates and manipulates John's vision directly. This mediation takes place in "The Conjurer's Revenge." Ferguson says that in this fourth tale, "Julius comes better prepared, with his intellect so sharpened by his previous experiences [of losing to John but winning through Annie] that he can now manipulate John into deceiving himself" (38). He does this by playing on the white couple's inability to "imagine" and "see past externalities" (39). If they, especially John, could imagine, they would be able to "see that the Uncle Remus-like darky telling the quaint conjure story is really a poor but clever black who boosts his profits and 'manhood' by selling a defective product" (39). John is taken advantage of in this story, but to imply that John is momentarily blinded, that suddenly he does not recognize that Julius tells his stories to obtain something for himself or for his own advancement, monetarily or otherwise, is absurd.

Every tale of this novel, in fact, ends with the narrator's recognition that Julius is indeed clever and that more often than not, he accomplishes exactly what he sets out to achieve—in five of the seven stories Julius is triumphant! I suggest that instead of playing upon the "sensory prejudices of John" (39) to get him to buy the horse, as Ferguson suggests, John acknowledges that for once the

economic issue at hand is one in which he had little expertise—"At the time I was not a very good judge of horseflesh" (130)—and he asks for Julius' advice. His reliance on his senses and on Julius' advice is perfectly reasonable considering his inexperience and Julius' expertise. John even says that "[Julius] was a marvelous hand in the management of horses and dogs" (64). Although he is rather disparaging of the story Julius tells, it is apparent that John is convinced by Julius' assessment, has relied on his advice in the past, and continued to in the future, even after purchasing the broken-down horse and recognizing that Julius played a "more than unconscious part in the transaction" (131).

Ferguson's identification of this story as Julius' highest point of status as a black male is weakened when we ask if there was really any economic confrontation at all. In the other stories, both sides tacitly acknowledge the contest taking place. However, "The Conjurer's Revenge" is not so much an economic struggle between two men, but more a case of the knowledgeable defrauding the ignorant. Ultimately, Ferguson's analysis of The Conjure Woman as a series of economic confrontations between men fails to instruct us very deeply about the gains Chesnutt made for African-American literature.

In "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Conjure Stories'", Chesnutt biographer William L. Andrews quotes William Dean Howells as saying that Chesnutt's short stories'

"racial interest" is not what makes the stories worthwhile. Rather, "it is much more simply and directly, as works of art, that they make their appeal" (79). As Andrews later says, Chesnutt's adherence to traditional styles and structures within the short story is what made him popular in his own day. More specifically, Chesnutt followed the conventions of "dialect stories, of small peculiar groups isolated and analyzed, of unique local 'characters' presented primarily for exhibition,... of unfamiliar people whose quaint and often out-dated mode of living had survived only in out-of-the-way places" (80). Moreover, the "use of an outsider [John] to explore this unfamiliar life was standard fare for local color writing" (81).

Andrews also points to several alterations of local color writing that were important to the novel's success and, presumably, to its place in American letters. The first is Chesnutt's use of the folktale motif. Joel Chandler Harris, whose Uncle Remus stories were contemporary to Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman, consciously told entire folk stories from the African-American tradition. Chesnutt's contribution was the use of "folk tradition as a basis and unifying principle for stories whose plots, characters, and themes were largely products of his own imagination" (83-84).

Chesnutt also extended the folktale envelope by expanding the role of the storyteller. Although largely common stock, none of the tales expand local color writing's subject or scope, "Julius' often remarked technique of

adapting a story to prevent his employer's intentions from clashing with his own interests does constitute one individualizing trait in him" (85). Andrews says that the addition of an ironic conclusion to the frame story popularized by Thomas Nelson Page expands the realm of the storyteller, but not enough to flesh out the black character fully or make a great impact on the relationship between the black employee/white employer relationship. In this assertion, Andrews misses a great opportunity to understand Chesnutt's significant political gains for blacks through the frame mechanism.

According to Andrews, a third expansion of the black storyteller is the trope common to all the stories of "conjuring as a means by which a slave expresses and attempts to preserve his most deeply felt emotions, human relations, or identity" (93). Although the ex-slave storyteller relates slave experience and many of its profoundly negative aspects, Andrews says that Chesnutt does not spotlight the issue of race. Instead, he is careful to show the characters' "essential humanity beneath the accidents of his peculiar ethnic background and social status" (93). The slave is depicted as a victim, but this victimization is secondary to Chesnutt's efforts to show how, within the confines of that horrible institution, the slaves of the conjure stories exhibit the kind of heroism that can only arise when one acts against a seemingly omnipotent opponent. Facing such a system, the slave acts not out of the "dog-like loyalty" or

"open militancy and defiance" seen in the local color stories of his contemporaries, but rather out of their "freedom from the enslavement of the spirit" (94). However, although the tales reveal potentially humanizing portraits of slaves, it is difficult to see the freedom Andrews alludes to when we consider the frame story. The view contradicts the observation that Julius:

> maintained a peculiar personal attitude, that might be called predial rather than proprietary. He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance. (65)

In the absence of the institutional aspects of slavery, Julius does indeed seem to be enslaved in spirit, unable to break an instinctive bond to the plantation and its ante-bellum way of life.

The last significant contribution that Andrews says that Chesnutt makes to the genre of local color stories, and perhaps his only technical innovation, is the suggestion that the frame story reveals at least two different readings of the tales. Andrews moves again towards seeing the real value of the frame story when he suggests that the reader could

"join the businessman in regarding Julius' stories as 'ingenious fairy tale[s]' and 'absurdly impossible yarn[s]' concocted to entertain and subtly manipulate his employers or respond to the stories as absorbing and moving narratives in themselves, as the businessman's wife does" (97). He says that whichever reading one makes Chesnutt presents the black man in a new and more human way.

The literal, economic interpretation assumed by John serves to humanize Julius because the "average reader of local color in Chesnutt's day" would expect unquestioning loyalty to the slave system of the storytellers, as in Page's In Ole Virginia, or naked revolt against injustice. Chesnutt's local color stories reveal to the reader an enlightened version of the everyday life of ex-slaves, one in which the economy of common affairs plays an important role. Instead of representing unrealistic, stereotypical literary characters only concerned with either service or revolution, even the representation of John's rather shallow reading of the tales serves to edify the reader.

Annie's sensitive and emotional response to the plight of slaves in the tales guides the reader towards a deeper understanding of the human tragedy inherent in the ante-bellum South. The reading offered by the businessman's wife can move the reader to grasp, sympathetically, the "inadequacy of [the] traditional local color attitude towards such stories" (98), where the storytellers are devoted to the slave system or rebel against its inequity. Even if the

reader cannot progress to Annie's more sensitive position, Chesnutt has still moved the reader beyond the uncles of Page and Harris.

Lorne Feinberg's article entitled "Charles W. Chesnutt and Uncle Julius: Black Storytellers at the Crossroads" is a kind of synthesis of Andrews' "double narrative' and Ferguson's economic concerns. He says that "the narrative act and the economic contract that frames the tales provide Uncle Julius with opportunities to annul and invalidate some of the brutal conditions of his slave past" (161-162). The danger of this re-negotiation is that the position of storyteller is one of accommodation. In The Conjure Woman, this accommodation can easily give way to the validation of roles assigned in the Old South's caste system. Of course, it also affords Julius the opportunity to reshape the relationship between the listener and the tale.

To dramatize his point, Feinberg illustrates, through a discussion of Thomas Nelson Page's In Ole Virginia, the conventional framework confronting Chesnutt when he chose the ex-plantation as the setting where he would re-negotiate the status of ex-slaves:

> conventionally in the plantation genre, the tales of the black teller are framed by the introductory remarks of a cultivated, well educated, white narrator. The white narrator's frame creates the illusion of distance for the comfortable reader, a kind of *cordon sanitaire* which makes it safe to contemplate the words and deeds of

> social and racial inferiors. The white narrator is perfectly free to interrupt the black storyteller at any juncture of his tale to pass judgment or to point out to the reader the comical ignorance or superstition of the narration. Even his silences are significant, for they are silences of condescension that leave him firmly in control of the narrative situation. (164)

Feinberg says that the power negotiations between John and Julius, similar to the "confrontations" noted by Ferguson, offer Julius not only the chance to "test [his] worth in the marketplace, [but also] to question the control of a white man, [and to] represent radical new freedoms for the freed slave" (165). Although he acknowledges the purely economic exchange—his words are offered up in exchange for his employment and in John's "economic absolutism" we see Julius' ulterior economic motives—Feinberg rejects their central importance, suggesting, unlike Andrews, that they are completely dehumanizing and "express nothing of his inner self" (165-66).

Feinberg also expands the interaction between Julius and John beyond Ferguson's "manhood/skill in controlling money" issue. He maintains that the purely economic issue that John misses is the connection between his own motivations and the "economic grasping" (168) of the tales, the "absolute financial standard of value [that he as] the Yankee entrepreneur seems to share with his plantation predecessors" (171).

Another issue upon which Feinberg remarks is the "economics of 'Storytime'" (166). In the frame story of The Conjure Woman, Chesnutt upsets the typical power arrangement of an adult telling a tale to an audience of non-judgmental children who have willingly given up authority to listen to a tale. This arrangement is found, for example, in Harris' Uncle Remus stories. Chesnutt introduces a new audience of sophisticated, white Northern adults, the effect of which, Feinberg says, is to free Julius from the usual constraints of telling a strictly engaging, imaginative tale and allows him to confront "the issue of race oppression and the brutality of his slave past" (167) in a way Uncle Remus never could. The pitfall, Feinberg says, is that Julius cannot "fix" his place as a storyteller; John and Annie, well-educated adults, *choose* to maintain their silence during the tales and reserve their "intellectual and moral judgment" until the end of the tales (167). Implicit in the relationship is, though, the constant threat that they *could* speak, instantly reversing Julius' power as a teller.

To maintain his control over his audience, Feinberg says that Julius resorts to a variety of strategies. He first seeks "refuge in deliberate stereotypes to veil his condemnation of the slave system" and present his listeners with comfortable characterizations. Feinberg also asserts that his use of the theme of metamorphosis is the "most cunning of Julius' strategies to control his audience" (167). Julius embeds his critique of exploitation through

objectification in chapters such as "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy" where characters are transformed through witchcraft into things and ill-used in a manner parallel to the sale and barter of slaves.

In another innovation in the relationship between the black employee/white employer, Chesnutt's storyteller offers an important and, ironically, ignored lesson on how to avoid the trap the slave owners in the Old South fell into. Feinberg adds little to the discussion not already covered by Andrews except to say that when Annie accords "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" a truth value—"'Why John!' said my wife severely, 'the story bears the stamp of truth, if ever a story did" (159)—"she suggests a new status for Uncle Julius as a historian and chronicler of his culture" (171) and that Julius is exploring his own changing identity in the Reconstruction Era.

Feinberg's final comment is that there is a strong parallel between Julius' position as a teller and Chesnutt's "status in the literary marketplace" (172). He suggests that Chesnutt's subversion of the plantation tale afforded him a success in much the same way that Julius' subversion of the folktale allows him success. The efficacy of his doing this is underscored by Chesnutt's lack of commercial success in his later writing where he more directly confronted his racial themes. Feinberg says that they both "encounter the perils of a dynamic relationship with their white audiences… establish[ing] the crucial lesson of the crossroads, that

survival as an occupation cannot be taken too seriously" (172).

David D. Britt is another critic who sees The Conjure Woman's most important feature as its ability to work at two different levels of meaning. He says that the effect of the various levels of meaning in the novel is to "allow the reader to be deceived about the more significant levels of meaning if he chooses, or needs, to be deceived" (271) in order to understand the plight of African-Americans. Chesnutt embeds his more radical intentions of enlightening a largely white readership in the deeper layers of his frames to allow the stories access to the wider audience, many of whom might never read the novel if its politics were made blatant. Britt identifies the device that initially allows for the deception as the double narrative of the stories. Britt interprets Chesnutt's technique of allowing the white narrator to introduce each of the tales (he usually presents Julius with some kind of business problem) and to also interpret the tale in his closing final words in much the same way as Andrews interprets the businessman's position as typical "reader of local color" (Andrews 80). This, Britt says, "creates a surface level of meaning that leaves the Southern caste system undisturbed" (271). Unlike, Andrews, however, Britt does not consider the depiction of the average slave's life as mitigating the ex-slave's depiction in the slave/master hierarchy. In fact, Britt reads John's background as a northerner, presumably disinterested in the system, as

validating the status quo: "It becomes clear that John perceives Julius as crafty but of low intelligence and essentially servile in spirit. In other words, he subscribes to the racial biases common to most Americans" (273). Britt dismisses the importance of the interaction between John and Julius in the frame story and argues that though "The Conjure Woman [is an] apparently 'safe' work, a reassuring collection of tales that depicts a contented, entertaining black man working within the unchallenged framework of American social and intellectual mores" (273).

Britt finds a "double narrative," much the same way Andrews and Feinberg do, but he argues that the innovative use of dialect is the defining factor for Chesnutt's double meaning. Through dialect, he says, Julius creates a "language buffer" through which he can safely "work" on John. Because John cannot take him seriously while he listens to his "quaint and humorous" (274) way of speaking, Julius gains the opportunity to manipulate him. How, then, does one read the frame story? Britt suggests that reading the conjure stories as Julius' attempt to manipulate John economically would reduce Uncle Julius to the status of an unsuccessful hustler—Britt points out that in only one of the stories does Julius reap some material benefit for himself. He also asserts that viewing Julius as a "'darky entertainer' in the minstrel tradition" (274) is invalid and that the "stories are not about financial matters at all… in the way the surface narrative implies" (274). Britt finally contends, in much the

same way as Feinberg does, that the stories are "elaborate metaphors, allegories really, in which the supernatural elements point toward those dread realities of the slave's life that lie beyond the comprehension of the ruling class. The black man is laying bare the nature of the slave experience… showing the limitations of the white man's moral and imaginative faculties" (274).

Once Britt has stated this "most obvious technique" (273) to deceive John into seeing the two sides of the ex-slaves tales, he illustrates this "tension between the outside and inside narratives [and] establishes the thematic patterns" (275) in "Po' Sandy." The outside narrative, Julius wanting to use the old school house as a meeting place for his church, functions to prevent John from using the school to provide the wood for his new kitchen. The inside narrative, the extended metaphor of the tale, "reveals the dehumanization of the slave, the brutality of treatment afforded the slave, and the intense love that a black man and woman have for one another" (275). Britt points to the recurring metaphor of homelessness which prevents Sandy from establishing any "roots" and his transformation into a tree. Through Sandy's metamorphosis, Britt says we can see the dehumanizing aspects of slavery, the homelessness and the objectification of these people, and its consequences: Sandy is "mutilate[d, and] impotent," while his wife experiences a "love that drives [her] to distraction" (276). Clearly, Britt

says, these must be viewed as compelling commentaries on the suffering of slaves that, presumably, John must recognize.

Elaborating on the metaphorical aspects of the tales, Britt contends that harmony or dissonance with the natural order is a metaphor for the "natural, moral order of the universe" (277) that can be consistently found in the conjure stories. "The white men seek to exploit nature (cotton, vineyards, and especially other men), with a resulting atrophy of their capacity for human emotion" (277). Slaves, on the other hand, exist in close alliance with nature, evidenced by "the acts of goophering [which] show birds, animals, and even the growing seasons working in concert with black resistance against inhumane treatment" (277). Britt's primary illustration of these extended metaphors is "The Goophered Grapevine." In this tale, the white master, "Mars' Dugal," first exploits goophering's connection with nature by having his vineyard conjured: even though he does not buy into the power of conjuring, he knows that his slaves will not risk eating the grapes. Later, he exploits the seasonal cycle of his new slave, Henry, whose body works in amazing sympathy with nature as the result of another goopher, by selling him in the spring when he is youthful and buying him back in the fall when he grows old. Mars Dugal is on the way to profiting handsomely. The slave owner's exploitative greed catches up with him, however, when he takes advice purported to boost the output of his vineyards. The recommendations are bad, exposing the roots of the vines to the elements, and

they all shrivel and die, Henry in harmony along with them. Britt contends that this "natural" death is somehow positive while McAdoo's death on the battlefield defending the immoral institution of slavery bears out the immorality of the plantation system.

At the end of the article, Britt contends with the metaphors in "The Conjurer's Revenge" and "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," two stories set entirely within the slave community. Both of these stories, Britt says, counter a number of stereotypes about black people, most notably that of the "obsequious" black and the lack of ethics among blacks. Primus, the protagonist in "The Conjurer's Revenge" is not submissive in the least. In fact, he is "feared by both whites and blacks" (281) because he is willful and powerful: "[He] did n' min' de rules, en went w'en he felt lack it; en de w'ite folks purten' lack dey did n' know it, fer Primus was dange'ous w'en he got dem stubborn spells, en dey'd ruther not fool wid 'im" (Chesnutt 109). Britt says that the second myth, the lack of morals, is dealt with swiftly in these same two tales. The petty thefts from whites are "presented as a matter of course by Julius" in the other tales. In these two tales where the crimes are black on black, however, such transgressions are "viewed as serious breaches of the norm and are dealt with accordingly" (281). Blacks are free to exert a degree of control over their ethics when whites are not present and, as revealed in "The Conjurer's Revenge" and "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," the slaves

retain "enduring humanity despite the exploitive propensities of the whites" (282).

In "The Teller as Folk Trickster in Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman," Melvin Dixon makes the strongest claim for Chesnutt's success in his struggle for black identity through the frame story and the tales. Early in the essay, Dixon says that "the fictional trickster and the novelist construct an elaborate fictive world which... is a playground for playing out [his] aggressions [and in which] he is able to achieve a kind of precarious masculine identity for himself and his group in a basically hostile environment" (187-188). Dixon's argument relies primarily on our understanding of what he calls the "process of identification which takes place between the teller and the hero of the story" (188). Although he is speaking about Julius and the characters of his tales, we presumably should apply this same insight to Chesnutt and his fictive alter ego, Julius.

Dixon is careful to point out in "The Goophered Grapevine" the similarities between old Henry, the slave who eats the conjured grapes, and Julius himself: a love of grapes, old age, light complexion, and a bald head. The importance of the identification between the teller and the hero is, as Dixon tells us, quoting Roger D. Abrahams, crucial to our understanding of the folktales: "the conflict of the hero must in some way echo the conflict of the narrator and his audience in order for the story to get the approbation of being heard, applauded, and remembered" (189).

Dixon contends that the conflict in the tale between Henry and his master over the grapes "mirrors" the conflict between Julius and John. Although John sees through Julius' trickery at the level of the immediate and material, Dixon believes that the story acts at another, more important, level: as a vehicle for Julius' "masculine and artistic self-esteem" and "his aggression against the institution of slavery which dehumanized him, and which now continues to emasculate him in his present relationship with his employer" (190). Although Dixon has shifted the discussion to use the terminology appropriate for discussing folklore, he continues the debate over a metaphorical reading of man-to-man confrontations.

Dixon moves past the readings offered by the other critics by positing Annie's symbolic sexual seduction by the black storyteller and John's figurative cuckolding. Instead of reading the relationship between Julius and Annie as that of a story teller and an understanding listener particularly sensitive to the pathos of the tales as other critics have, Dixon finds a sexual connection, presumably because he is working to prove that Julius is asserting his manhood. The underlying assumption for his argument seems to be that the ultimate gesture of defiance and virility for the male ex-slave is to seduce the master/white man's wife/sister/mother.

Dixon says that the "symbolic seduction of the wife by the language and drama of Julius' speech is heightened" (193) in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny." In a reading that runs counter to Feinberg's idea of "Storytime," Dixon cites Abrahams to

assert that "Julius, as teller in the oral tradition… is 'master of the situation he is narrating; he is the director of the lives of the heroes of the pieces and of the structure in which they are appearing'" (190). Dixon adds that, according to Abrahams, "the assertion of masculine identity" (191) is one of the primary functions of the oral tradition. Moreover, Dixon says that "Julius gains mastery over his employer by asserting his masculine and artistic power in the verbal dramatization of conflicts endured by his slave ancestors" (191). The simple act of telling a story, then, becomes a profoundly important act, laden with the sexual power of the word.

The interaction Dixon examines in most depth is Julius giving Annie a rabbit's foot in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny." A shift in the site of exchange between Annie and Julius occurs in this chapter: it is originally verbal, it becomes concrete when Annie accepts the foot, and finally, when John discovers the foot wrapped in Annie's handkerchief, "Julius' trickery [progresses] to the level of metaphorical sexual union with the employer's wife" (192). Dixon invests a phallic quality into the rabbit's foot, arguing that the dried up left hind foot of a rabbit "kilt by a cross-eyed nigger on a d'ak night in de full er de moon" (Chesnutt 135) and originally described as "some small object in his hand" (Chesnutt 134) is his symbolic penis. Dixon argues that its association with the night and the graveyard "gives the foot sensual as well as supernatural characteristics" (193).

In his attempt to bolster his interpretation, Dixon reads the relationship between the mother and child in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" as "the perverse sexual intimacy [that mirrors] the growing sexual attraction between Julius and [Annie]" (193). He says "their incest is implied by the physical intimacy of their life and the fact that: 'W'en little Mose growed up.. He tu'nt out ter be a smart man, en l'arnt de blacksmif trade... En bimeby he bought his mammy en sot her free, en den he bought hisse'f, en tuk keer er Sis Becky ez long ez de bofe libbed (Chesnutt 158)" (193). Why this is sexual and not the loving son aspiring to and obtaining the freedom of his family Dixon does not address. As he continues to reach for sexual connections, he reads Annie's response to Julius' story—"her countenance.... had expressed in turn sympathy, indignation, pity, and at the end satisfaction" (158)—as sexual. By turning this into a sexual response and claiming a mirroring between the frame and the tale, he implies that Julius and Annie's relationship is also "perverse" and "incestuous" (193). Again, he does not explore this issue.

The last extension Dixon makes is that this "paper is a study of the character Julius as teller and trickster for his small audience, and, on a larger scale, a study of Chesnutt as teller and trickster for his wider literary audience" (187). To this end, Dixon says "just as the Julius masked his moral lesson in the fictive world of his folklore to get what he wanted, so too did Chesnutt use the fictive world of the

novel to accomplish his professional goals" (196). Those goals, to "reveal the underlying facts of injustice and rebellion", are reached, Dixon says, through Chesnutt's use of folklore entertainment, the only guise in which the message would be tolerated by nineteenth century America (197).

CRITICAL STANCE

Although it is true that Chesnutt did not, as Andrews has pointed out, make any technical innovations in the novel genre, a reading of The Conjure Woman particularly sensitive to the subtleties of discourse and to what M. M. Bakhtin calls the understanding that "verbal discourse is a social phenomenon" (259), can add significantly to our appreciation of Chesnutt as a politically progressive writer. We have seen, through the critics we have reviewed, that Chesnutt is regarded by most as having fallen far short of his goal to lead "whites out of their prejudices… imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step" (Andrews 13), but I contend that, when the discourse of the novel is viewed as a social construct, Chesnutt has indeed deeply debated white prejudice.

Bakhtin's work must first be put into a philosophical context. Foucault says in The Order of Things that in the nineteenth century the study of language was born out of the revolutionary idea that it was merely a "particular domain of objectivity…. one object of knowledge among others, on the same level as living beings, wealth and value, and the history of events and men" (296). This is a fundamental shift where the "critical elevation of language… implied that it had been brought nearer both to an act of knowing, pure of

all words, and to the unconscious element in our discourse" (Foucault 299). This system of binary oppositions, later formalized in the twentieth century by Saussure, is synthesized by Bakhtin and other Marxist critics into a system of interaction between these two elements.

Caryl Emerson outlines the primary postures of this stance fully developed in Marxism and the Philosophy of Language by V. N. Voloshinov in her article "Outer Word and Inner Speech." Bakhtin and his circle "posited four social factors that make the understanding of speech and writing possible" (23). The first posture they take is that "each ideological product is meaningful not in the soul but in the objectively accessible ideological material" (23). Emerson argues that the word "ideological" (23), as a translation of the Russian *ideologija* and as it is used by Bakhtin and his circle, expresses "an 'idea system' determined socially" (23) rather than the politically-laden English usage. This distinction is important because, for Bakhtin, the verbal sign is a social construct rather than an individual's mental construct, as Saussure had claimed, and any struggle over semantics must occur in public discourse rather than within the person: "this outer experience, if it is to register significance, must in some way be organized socially. Signs can only arise on 'interindividual territory'" (Emerson 23). Bakhtin asserts that in this territory, "signs do not arise between any two members of the species *Homo Sapiens*. It is essential that the two individuals be organized socially,

that they compose a group (a social unit); only then can the medium of signs take shape between them" (Bakhtin 12).

The other social factors that Bakhtin posits are the ones that relate directly to considerations of Chesnutt as a political writer. Bakhtin says that "ideology always exists as a relation between (or among) speakers and listeners and, by extension, between or among social groups" (Emerson 24). This means, or course, that the negotiation over meaning between these groups or individuals takes place through the word: "the word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and, what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological systems…. The word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change" (Bakhtin 19). The novel, therefore, becomes a social barometer at several different levels.

The world constructed by an author has the powerful ability to influence and be influenced by the reading public—if it falls too far from a shared vision and the ideas readers are concerned with, the book will fail to attract an audience; if it represents an acceptable or interesting view, it can even be celebrated. Caryl Emerson says, "each social group—each class, profession, generation, religion, region—has its own way of speaking, its own dialect. Each dialect reflects and embodies a set of values and a sense of shared experience…. every act of understanding involves an act of

translation and negotiation of values" (24). From the perspective we are adopting, then, a reader wresting some meaning from a novel constitutes a haggling over signification and ideas.

The representation in the novel of contemporary society grappling with current issues becomes, therefore, particularly critical, volatile, and political. The manner in which individuals and groups interact in a novel is itself important as a social construct because it ultimately communicates to a reader, through the text, a universe with which the reader becomes engaged in dialogue. That reader internalizes the interactions between characters in the novel, perhaps empathizing with one of the perspectives or arguing against another, but ultimately engaging in an internal dialogue with the novel. "Understanding strives to match the speaker's word with a counter word. Only in understanding a word in a foreign tongue is the attempt made to match it with the 'same' word in one's own language" (Bakhtin 102). The novel, the word, then, becomes one of the most important sites in which the "medium of signs" acquires ontological significance. Even if one character rejects the ideas that have been spoken by another, the evidence that the idea has been translated, understood, and debated, even internally, is politically important.

Lastly, Emerson says that for Bakhtin "words cannot be conceived apart from the voices who speak them; thus every word raises the question of authority" (Emerson 24). Since

Bakhtin already posits that every word, in order to have meaning, must take place between two individuals "organized socially," every utterance is engaged in the negotiation of a group or individual's status in the represented world and, by extension, the social context in which the novel finds itself. In the novel, new ideas struggle to be acknowledged:

> new aspects of existence, once they are drawn into the sphere of social interest, once they make contact with the human word and human emotion, do not coexist peacefully with other elements of existence previously drawn in, but engage them in a struggle, reevaluate them, and bring about a change in their position within the unity of evaluative purview. (Bakhtin 106)

In The Conjure Woman, Chesnutt introduced a new existence into the represented world of the post-Civil War South. As a new significance issuing from an old one, this manifestation, inherently contradictory to the old one, engages it and, in the end, shakes it to its very foundations.

PREDECESSORS TO CHESNUTT'S LOCAL COLOR FRAME

Before examining the frame stories in The Conjure Woman, it is important to place the novel in the context of other contemporary local color novels whose success Chesnutt was eager to duplicate, while avoiding their political and/or racial stance. One highly successful example of the genre is Thomas Nelson Page's novel In Old Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories, published in 1887.

The frame story opens with a chapter entitled "Marse Chan." The narrator, spending the afternoon on a leisurely ride on his horse, wonders to himself about the people who used to reside on the plantations he casually passes by. He reflects on what he says must have been their "desire [for] a level path in life" and that, while their lifestyle was possible, "the outer world strode by them as they dreamed" (1). From the start, this narrator is clearly sympathetic to the old South and to the system that sustained its dream.

The narrator's revelry is interrupted by a black man calling for his dog. So intent is the man upon finding the animal that he does not hear the narrator approach and so affords us Page's "candid" glimpse of the ex-slave. The story falls a short seven years after the end of the Civil War and one might think the man would be enjoying the fruits of his emancipation. Instead, Page's ex-slave, finding himself

without a human master to serve, chooses to serve a canine one:

> The setter sauntered slowly up to the fence and stopped, without even deigning a look at the [ex-slave], who immediately proceeded to take the rails down, talking meanwhile:
>
> "Now, I got to pull down de gap, I s'pose! Yo' so sp'ilt yo' kyahn hardly walk.... Jes' like white folks—think 'cuz you's white and I's black, I got to wait on yo' all de time. Ne'm mine, I ain' gwi do it!" (3)

Of course, he already has, and in a manner one might expect from a stereotypical ex-slave: ready acquiescence accompanied by slight verbal resistance.

Upon noticing his white observer, the black man, half apologizing for letting him see the interactions with the dog, termed strictly a "family affair" (3) by the narrator, tells him that the dog's late owner was "Marse Channin'", also owner of the now decrepit mansion and surrounding plantation. The narrator, dismounting, relates that the self-named Sam—there is no reason for them to introduce themselves to each other—takes hold of his reins "instantly, as if by instinct" (4) and instantly begins to relate Marse Channin's tale when the narrator demands he "Now tell [him] about Marse Chan" (4). Clearly, the relationship established between these two men, and indeed continued throughout the novel, is little changed from that between a white man and a slave before the war.

The political stance of the novel says that Sam is a receptacle, a repository for stories about the white man's Old South. He does not possess the stories, but acts like a jukebox—telling stories upon demand, giving them up to those who own them. In this negotiation over the word, if it can be called that, the winner is quickly apparent. There is no need for any "act of translation" or striving to understand the story on the part of our narrator; the story is, as Page says in his dedication, "To my people—This fragmentary record of their life".

The only thing remaining after the ex-slaves finish the tales is a sign of approval from the narrator. The story of Marse Chan's biography ends with a typical appeal to a total stranger for verification: "Dey tells me dat de Bible sey dyar won' be marrying nor givin' in marriage in heaven, but I don' b'lieve it signifies dat—does you?" (38). The narrator "comforts" Sam, as if he were truly agitated, that his "interpretation" of his dead master's fate is consistent with his own and rewards Sam in the only manner he seems to know—not with thanks, but "with several spare 'eighteen-panced'" (38). At its closure, the frame story ends with no negotiation, only a simple act of condescending magnanimity and token payment for services rendered.

"'Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin'. A Plantation Echo", "Meh Lady: A Story of the War" are other chapters in <u>In Ole Virginia</u> where, although the tales are told by different ex-slave storytellers, the relationship between the tellers and

the narrator of the frame story remains the same. The storytellers, all victims of the slave system, recall over and over again an idyllic past for which they seem to sincerely long: "Deses heah free-issue niggers don' know what Christmas is…. Hit techs ole times to mech a sho'-'nough, tyakin'-down Christmas" (40) or "Lord! suh, hit cyars me back so sometimes, I mos' furgit de ain' never been no war nor nuttin'…. We wuz rich den, quarters on ev'y hill, an' niggers mo' 'n you could tell dee names" (79-80). The tales they tell are, again, those of their masters.

"Ole 'Stracted" is the only chapter of the novel in which the story of a black family, newly freed and suddenly at the mercy of "half-strainers" and "po' white trash" (147), is told. Consistent through the chapter is the assertion by these former slaves that Ole 'Stracted's life had been much better as a slave with his first master and that perhaps theirs was too. After Ole 'Stracted was stolen as a young man and sold by someone other than his master, he was, since that day, without a name or identity: "Everything since that day was a blank to him, and as he could not tell the name of his master or wife, or even his own name, and as no one was left old enough to remember him, the neighborhood having been entirely deserted after the war, he simply passed as a harmless old lunatic laboring under a delusion" (153). He waits and waits for the return of his master to "buy [him] back—den [they] gwine home" (156). Not surprisingly, the Master that comes to take the ancient is God. In Page's

formula of the Old South, the Master of the plantation and God are equated. In a final, ironic twist at the end of the chapter, even though the system has been destroyed, Ephriam, who, it turns out, is the old man's long lost son, receives from his dying father money he had made as a slave with which he intended to buy back the boy, if he ever could have found him. Even from its grave, Page's genteel South takes care of its responsibilities.

A second novel to which The Conjure Woman is often compared, both because of its frame structure (another "Uncle" narrator telling tales) and the time period when the tales are told (post-Civil War) and the places (the Southern ex-plantation) is Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings. This comparison is illustrative more of the difference between the two works than of the similarity: these superficialities mark the end of the similarities between the novels. In the first place, Harris says in his preface that Remus' tales are, like Page's, meant to be white people's stories: "my purpose has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect—if, indeed, it can be called a dialect—through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family; and I have endeavored to give to the whole a genuine flavor of the old plantation" (vii). Though these tales are from the slave tradition, they are told because of their connection to the Southern white experience. Harris goes on to say that

"the myth-stories of Uncle Remus are told night after night to a little boy by an old Negro… who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery—and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the system" (xvii). With this approach, one is not surprised to find that Harris reads the trickster tales as "thoroughly characteristic of the Negro" (xiv).

Lest the reader endeavor to interpret the tales allegorically in favor of the black man, Harris' introduction prefaces any debate that might arise by saying that "it needs no scientific investigation to show why he selects his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals, and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness; it is not malice, but mischieviousness. It would be presumptuous of me to offer an opinion as to the origin of these curious myth-stories; but, if ethnologists should discover that they did not originate with the African, the proof to that effect should be accompanied with a good deal of persuasive eloquence" (xiv-xv). It is as if Harris is in a dialogue with his audience before the tales are even told, anticipating that the reader will try to match Remus' word with his own counter word, attempting to place that experience against his own, and will acquire an ontological significance.

Harris also recognizes the social context in which his novel will be read and he tries to "place" Harriet Beecher Stowe's "wonderful defense of slavery as it existed in the

South. Mrs. Stowe, let me hasten to say, attached the possibilities of slavery with all the eloquence of genius; but the same genius painted a portrait of the Southern slave-owner, and defended him" (viii) in the same camp as his own version of the slave system and his portrayal of Uncle Remus.

It is not surprising then, that the frame for the "Legends of the Old Plantation" section of the novel is set up with a benevolent old black man storyteller doting over a favored son as heard by the mother: "One evening recently, the lady whom Uncle Remus call 'Miss Sally' missed her little seven-year-old boy. [She] saw the child setting by Uncle Remus. His head rested against the old man's arm, and he was gaping with an expression of most intense interest into the rough, weather-beaten face, that beamed so kindly upon him. This is what 'Miss Sally' heard" (3-4) and so begins the tales. Since we never return to Miss Sally, we must presume that all the tales are related to us as heard by the woman. I think that this context could hardly be infused with less authority: an ex-slave's tales to a little boy, as filtered through a woman. The frame is very carefully constructed to insulate the tale as fully as possible from the real authority that existed and which is, in fact, never seen or heard in the novel. While Page's white male narrator validates or even tells the tales that strengthen his position, here, it seems, the tales could not even hold up under such pressure or perhaps can only exist where there is no one authoritative challenge to their legitimacy. If we are

looking at this in terms of negotiation over social authority, we again see that there is no negotiation taking place—in the context of the nineteenth century South, women and children are hardly in a position to negotiate the status of the tales.

A second section of the novel where we see the frame story is in a short section of the novel entitled "A Story of the War". In our discussion of Chesnutt's use of the frame story, it is striking how similar the frames are in "A Story of the War" and in The Conjure Woman. "A Story of the War" begins with a white Northerner, Miss Theodosia Huntington, moving south. For Miss Huntington, there are three reasons for the move: 1) to be with a relative, 2) to improve her health (her friends had "persuaded her that to some extent she was an invalid" (204)), and 3) to "explore a region which she...pictured to herself as remote and semibarbarous" (203-204). Upon her arrival in Atlanta, she is met by Uncle Remus, whose function is, for the first time, defined: he is the family driver. Then, in a setting with which we are familiar, "One Sunday afternoon...the family were assembled in the piazza" (206), reading and talking. When Remus comes into the piazza, complaining about "deze yer sunshine niggers" (206) who do no work and beg Remus' tobacco, John "wants" Remus to tell his experience during the Civil War. Remus is clearly uncomfortable—"he shuffled around in an awkward, embarrassed way" (207)—but does tell the story, with apologies.

The two novels' frame structures are strikingly similar, making me wonder if Chesnutt copied the elements deliberately or whether they were simply so common that their use was second nature. The tale that is surrounded by the frames is similar to another work as well. But this time, the resemblance is not to Chesnutt, but to Page's tales. Remus' tale is told, as Miss Theodosia observes, "from the standpoint of a Southerner" (207-208) and with the air of one who expected his hearers to thoroughly sympathize with him.

In his tale, Remus confesses that "hit didn't strike me dat dey wuz enny war gwine on" (208). Remus remembers fondly all the praise his master received during the war and speaks easily of how "lonesome" he becomes as the war progressed and men all around him are conscripted into the army. Ironically, he is lonesome for the very men whose morality would keep him in servitude. Eventually, the mistress of the house gives Remus responsibility for running the plantation and his master, on a short visit, gives him responsibility for defending his wife and sister from an imminent Yankee attack. Remus literally becomes caretaker for the Southern slave tradition that keeps him in bondage.

When the battle moves to the area surrounding the plantation, Remus takes up a rifle and goes into the battle with very ambiguous intentions: is he "deserting" his post? or is he out to defend his master's plantation? As he reconnoiters in the woods, he spots a Yankee sharpshooter in a tree. At the same time, he spots his master coming down the

road and, knowing he is the next target, Remus points, closes his eyes and fires! At this, Miss Theodosia can not contain herself and she bursts into the narrative—"Do you mean to say…that you shot the Union soldier, when you knew he was fighting for your freedom?" (214). In the final twist of the episode, Remus admits that he did, in fact, consider this, but in what has, by this time in the novel, become a typical fashion, Remus reacts in a way that validates the white, Southern experience.

This shared experience is not negotiated—in fact, it is a balanced and tried equation, one that Remus is compelled to explain to the Northern sister—the man he shot is her brother. Though Remus cost him an arm, he says he has more than paid him back: Remus inducted John into the Southern lifestyle, which he has embraced, given him a wife and a child, "'en I gin 'im deze—holding up his own brawny arms" (215). Central to the deal is Remus' giving himself up to a new, Northern master.

THE POLITICS OF CHESNUTT'S LOCAL COLOR FRAME

After examining Page's and Harris' novels as popular models of local color writing to which Chesnutt and the reading public were accustomed, the radically different political use of the frame device in The Conjure Woman can be seen. The idea systems defined by the relationships in the frame are still growing, working towards accommodation in the system already regularized and portrayed in In Ole Virginia and Uncle Remus. In fact, the system is fully in place at the outset of The Conjure Woman. There, a powerful white community dictates the ideas and actions of an ex-slave community. As The Conjure Woman progresses, however, Chesnutt adds important new aspects to the power relationships depicted in the local color frame.

One of the most weighty outward signs of the ideological struggle to which The Conjure Woman is sensitive is the relationship between Uncle Julius and his white employers. At a very basic level, The Conjure Woman posits a black man educating a white audience by telling his history of the slave-holding South before the Civil War. Unlike Page's ex-slaves, Julius does not focus on the white man's experience as the only viable narrative of that time period. Instead, he tells directly the black perception of the conditions to which he was subjected—a far cry from the doting storytellers

in In Ole Virginia. In a powerful shift of authority, Julius gains, in Annie's estimation at least, the status of historian: she says at the end of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" that the tale "is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times... in those horrid days before the war" (Chesnutt 159). Julius' role, as defined by Annie, is not merely that of an old storyteller concerned with his personal welfare. Instead, he tells a true history of the South.

Even John, who at one point says that Julius' tales are "grotesque... broadly humorous... [and] palpable inventions" (Chesnutt 168), acknowledges in the frame of "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" the truth value of the tales as history: he hears:

> "some [stories] bearing the stamp of truth, faint, perhaps but still discernible.... But even the wildest was not without an element of pathos,—the tragedy, it might be, of the story itself; the shadow, never absent, of slavery and of ignorance; the sadness, always, of life as seen by the fading life of an old man's memory. (Chesnutt 168)

By directing the tales at the very group who have inherited the legacy of the slave system, Chesnutt depicts, through Julius and the dialogue of frame story, the negotiation of nothing less than the relative status and power of the participants.

Beyond simply directing his tales of slavery at his new employers, Julius evokes from them one of the most crucial gestures in the bargaining over social power and position.

Chesnutt depicts Julius as not only a historian, but also as the person able to lead John and Annie to "match [Julius'] word with a counter word", the only way they can have an understanding of what they hear (Bakhtin 102). Julius' direction and definition is critical to his listeners' understanding of the tales and guides then to a premeditated sense of the tales' ontological significance. For instance, "The Goophered Grapevine" tale is prefaced by the necessity of explaining "goophering":

> "Well, I dunno whe'r you b'lieves in cunj'in' er not,—some er de w'ite folks don't, er says dey don't,—but de truf er de matter is dat dis yer ole vimya'd is goophered."
>
> "Is what?" [John] asked, not grasping the meaning of this unfamiliar word."
>
> "Is goophered,—conju'd, bewitch'."
>
> He imparted the information with such an air of confidential mystery, that I felt somewhat interested, while Annie was evidently much impressed…." (Chesnutt 11-12)

Despite Feinberg's assertion that there hangs over this "storytime" the threat of role reversal where John and Annie arbitrarily resume their dominant positions in the relationship (Feinberg 166), Julius' authority while he is telling his tales is, in fact, never violated—he is never interrupted once he begins telling a tale. In this representation of new responsibilities, Julius provides the

framework of the black experience and the language essential to building a new political climate of significant, shared meaning.

Another function of the dialogue between Julius and his employer is to establish the general conditions under which Julius works. Unlike its predecessors in local color, The Conjure Woman represents a new relationship where Julius holds some sway over the terms of his service. For instance, as a direct consequence of Julius' telling the tale "The Goophered Grapevine," John recognizes in the frame the value of what he denies Julius when he purchases the vineyard:

> I found when I bought the vineyard, that Uncle Julius had occupied a cabin on the place for many years, and derived a respectable revenue from the product of the neglected grapevines…. I believe… that the wages I paid him for his services as coachman, for I gave him employment in that capacity, were more than an equivalent for anything he lost by the sale of the vineyard. (Chesnutt 35)

Clearly, such a negotiation over the black man's value as an employee and the impact white society might have on his life is a major development in the represented world of the frame. Page and Harris offer no such opportunity for contesting the outcome of their association—indeed, the relationship seems immutable from the outset of both novels.

The nature of the relationship between the two men is further refined in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." In this frame,

it becomes clear that Julius is an invaluable source of information to John and his wife, as well as the primary shaper of their vision of the world they now inhabit. Rather than rely on John's cousin or upon white neighbors for information about Patesville, the two recognize that Julius "had a thorough knowledge of the neighborhood, was familiar with the roads and watercourses, knew the qualities of the various soils and what they would produce" (Chesnutt 64). Julius clearly offers a perspective more valuable to John and Annie than that of the gratuitous storyteller in In Ole Virginia, mouthing a dead history. Julius has an intimate understanding of the area—he had never strayed more than twenty miles from his home—that is probably consistent with experience of most of the inhabitants, both ex-slave and white, of Patesville and, indeed, most of the rural South.

A fourth dimension Chesnutt adds to the frame story that pushes the boundaries of the relationship between the black and white characters posits Julius as a reliable source in the investigation of the narrator's human nature, as well as further negotiating with John over his relationship with his black employees. In the frame of "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," John's comment that young Mr. McLean "looks as though he were ashamed of himself" (Chesnutt 69) for beating his horse into a frenzy of fear compels Julius to say that "a man w'at 'buses his hoss is gwine ter be ha'd on de folks w'at wuks for 'im" (Chesnutt 70). Unmistakably, in the context of this frame where John has just discharged Julius' grandson because

he "turned out to be trifling, and [John] was annoyed by his laziness, his carelessness, and his apparent lack of any sense of responsibility" (Chesnutt 66), Julius wants John to put himself in the place of the boy and consider his own actions from that perspective:

> "W'ite folks w'at is so ha'd en stric', en doan make no 'lowance fer po' ign'ant niggers w'at ain' had no chanst ter l'arn, is li'ble ter hab bad dreams, ter say de leas', en dat dem w'at is kin' en good ter po' people is sho' ter prosper en git 'long in de worl'." (Chesnutt 100)

Although not his doing, when Annie rehires the boy the next day, apparently taking Julius' admonitions to heart, does not discharge him again.

Although John implicitly recognizes Julius' centrality to his understanding of the South, he often complains about them, saying that "some of these stories are quaintly humorous; others wildly extravagant, revealing the Oriental cast of the negro's imagination" (Chesnutt 41), "absurdly impossible yarn[s]" (Chesnutt 61), and "very ingenious fairy tale[s]" (Chesnutt 159). How, then, do the tales themselves function to further Chesnutt's political goals, over and above the content seen in Page's and Harris' novels? How do they differ from an allegorical reading of Uncle Remus' tales where one finds an ideological stance that seems so similar (and perhaps explains why Harris felt compelled to say that "such a[n allegorical] interpretation may be unreasonable"

(Harris xiv))? In the first place, Julius' tales directly represent, with great authority, the thoroughly cruel and dehumanizing elements of slavery--these stories, "poured freely into the sympathetic ear of a Northern-bred woman, disclose[d] many a tragic incident of the darker side of slavery" (Chesnutt 41). Faced with the graphic depiction of such incidents in a local color novel, a critical response seems unconscionable. It is very difficult to dismiss the tales as one might Uncle Remus' stories which are directed at a child.

The content of the tales also evokes a consistent discussion in the frame over the meanings inherent in the tales and, thus, models for the reading public appropriate responses to the tales. As we have seen, the relationships portrayed in the frame embody many important "new aspects of existence" (Bakhtin 106) and Chesnutt confronts headlong "the white world's fumbling inability to appreciate the wisdom, humor, and heart of a black man's experience, rooted in the cruelties of the slave experience" (Farnsworth xvii). The relationships constitute such politically profound ideas that he seems unable to simply leave the interpretation to his readers. In his quest to elevate whites, Chesnutt will not allow his readers to misconstrue the profound power of the black experience and the unfamiliar world that challenges the very foundations of an assumed white privilege.

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