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BETWEEN LAW AND CUSTOM: A VIEW OF THE RACIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CHARLES WADDELL CHESNUTT'S "THE HOUSE BEHIND THE CEDARS"

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ABSTRACT. ***Between Law and Custom: A View of the Racial Relationships in Charles Waddell's Chesnutt's "The House behind the Cedars".*** The aim of this paper is to investigate the manner in which Charles Waddell Chesnutt skillfully uses the conventions of the sentimental novel and of the tragic mulatto/a character, familiar to his white readers, in order to dismantle racial preconceptions and expose the terrible ramifications of racism. The novel *The House behind the Cedars* shows that race is artificially constructed out of various external markers such as custom, law, dubious scientific findings, which, however, can have dire consequences for the individuals who need to obey such limitations.

Keywords: *mixed-race, racism, prejudice, tragic mulatto/a, African-American literature, law, passing.*

REZUMAT. ***Între lege și tradiție: o privire asupra relațiilor rasiale din romanul „The House behind the Cedars" de Charles Waddell Chesnutt.*** Scopul acestei lucrări este acela de a investiga maniera în care Charles Waddell Chesnutt se folosește de convențiile romanului sentimental și ale pesonajului tipic "mulatrul/mulatra tragic/ă", familiare cititorilor din epoca sa, pentru a submina prejudecățile rasiale și pentru a expune teribilele ramificații ale rasismului în America. Romanul *The House behind the Cedars* arată faptul că rasa este o construcție artificială tributară unor elemente constitutive externe cum ar fi: tradiția, legea, descoperiri științifice dubioase, dar care are consecințe tragice pentru persoanele care sunt forțate să se supună limitărilor sociale impuse de legile rasiale.

Cuvinte cheie: *rasă mixtă, rasism, prejudecată, mulatrul/mulatra tragic/ă, literatură afro-americană,* lege, *a trece drept alb.*

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Charles Waddell Chesnutt is considered to be the first African-American writer in American Literature to gain recognition for his literary achievement. The presence of African-American writers on the literary stage had been, up to the end of the nineteenth century, rather sporadic and mostly connected with the fight for emancipation. Many white writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, George Washington Cable, Kate Chopin, only to mention few of the most famous, had been interested in the depiction of race or mixed race in their works, but "no other American writer had so assiduously (and so interestingly) probed the profound and growing diversity of the US and, indeed, the central role race has played (and continues to play) in the formation and evolution of the country" (Duncan 68).

Chesnutt's life and career were marked by contradictions arising from his racial heritage, as a man of mixed race, white enough to pass, but refusing to do so, from his career, as a school teacher, lawyer and man of letters, and from his position, as a writer in nineteenth century American literature dominated by white voices, but gradually opening towards regional and ethnical diversity. These contradictions are visible in his writings, as Chesnutt turns to the novel traditions of his time, such as the plantation romance, the sentimental novel, or the novel of manners, that were largely used by pro-slavery, nostalgic Southern writers as the medium for the transmission of racist ideas. In reality, Chesnutt was aware of the seeming dangers of his choices, but was faithful to them as he strongly believed that, by using conventions familiar to his white audiences, he could "educate white readers about African Americans" (Duncan 71). As he confessed,

> The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of colored people as the elevation of the whites – for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism – I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. Not a fierce indiscriminate onset, not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect, but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner. The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most Americans cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate, so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it. (qtd. in Bell 64)

Just like himself, his mixed-race characters, lead a complicated and often contradictory existence, too white to accept inclusion in the black community, segregated and marginalized after the Reconstruction, black enough to suffer the consequences of the "one-drop" rule, they lead a marginal existence, struggling to find their place in still racist society. Thus, he tried to reveal to his white audiences the terrifying consequences of racism by appealing to mixed blood characters because, as Werner Sollors aptly notes, "conceived for white readers, these characters invite empathy because they are so much like whites and so little like blacks" (225). Chesnutt was aware, therefore, that racism was a delicate matter that should be treated with great care. He knew that, though the tragic mulatto/a was not a character new to American readers, problems could arise from the audiences' tolerance to them and from the writers' ability to turn his characters into a subversive weapon used in order to alter the public's preconceptions about race. Ryan Simmons mentions some of the difficulties Chesnutt encountered in his endeavor to "educate" his readers:

> Although he assumed that a sympathetic audience, consisting of some black readers but primarily liberal whites, was capable of supporting his writing career, he also seemed to sense that this audience would react favorably only to an approach that was reassuring rather than challenging. He writes implicitly with the attitude that his white, Northern readership will welcome an exposé of racism in the South, but might squirm if asked too directly to regard their own implication in racial injustice or to consider their own responsibility to act. Such an approach as his readers would find acceptable could not satisfy Chesnutt's desire to be a politically effective writer unless he managed to exercise great care and skill, and his attempts to negotiate the problem of audience carefully and skillfully account for much of what can be seen in his fiction. (57)

Matthew Wilson also points out the difficulties encountered by Chesnutt, an African-American writer who, using the convention employed mostly by white writers, tries to transmit a different, and potentially rebellious view on race and racism: "when Chesnutt decided to write a novel primarily for that white audience, he realized that he had to be less subtle but not so confrontational that he risked alienating his audience. In other words, he faced a complicated problem of genre and audience" (60).

His first novel, *The House behind the Cedars*, published in 1900 and based on a previous short story *Rena,* uses the conventions of the sentimental melodrama in a story of "passing" that presents the destinies of two siblings, brother and sister, with white skin and black ancestry, in the post-Civil War South. Like other writings by Chesnutt, this novel deals with inter- and intra-

racial relationships that highlight the liminal position of the mulattoes in a segregated and racist society. By combining the conventions of the "passing" novel with his legal insight, Chesnutt tries to expose the artificiality of race as a social and legal construct.

The "passing" novel is closely connected with the drama of the mixed race individuals who, in their attempt to avoid the discrimination and marginalization of the African-Americans in a post-Civil War America, pretend to be white. "Passing" is short for "passing for white" defined by Werner Sollors as " 'crossing over' the color line in the United States from the black to the white side" (266). But, Sollors insists, passing is more than this, it implies entering a "forbidden" community, concealing his original racial ancestry suggesting that "only a situation of sharp inequality between groups would create the need for the emergence of a socially significant number of cases of 'passing'" and so, passing occurs in those communities in which racism is accentuated and the subordinate race is degraded and marginalized (252). What these "passing" situations suggest is that the racial boundary is much more difficult to cross than the class boundary reflected in the attempts of the poor to rise in the society:

> The boundary between Negro and white is not simply a class line which can be successfully crossed by education, integration into the national culture, and individual economic advancement. The boundary is fixed. It is not a temporary expediency during an apprenticeship in the national culture. It is a bar erected with the intention of permanency. It is directed against the whole group. Actually, however, "passing" as a white person is possible when a Negro is white enough to conceal his Negro heritage. But the difference between "passing" and ordinary social climbing reveals the distinction between a class line, in the ordinary sense, and a caste line. (Gunnar 58)

Thus "passing" is considered a form of betrayal of race, of dishonesty and deception, an "instance of racial self-hatred or disloyalty. It is predicated, so the argument goes, on renouncing blackness – an 'authentic' identity, in favor of whiteness, an 'opportunistic' one" (Pfeiffer 2). The result of this negative view on passing is that "many passing narratives focus on the experience of disconnect between a character's inner (supposedly black) self and his or her outer (ostensibly white) self" (Pfeiffer 4). Therefore, it seems that passing, instead of blurring the color line, highlights it by implying that the people who try to pass commit a dishonest and illegal act, only pretending to be what they are not and thus deceiving those around them, both the "white race" where they want to be included, and their "black ancestry," which they need to forget. What Chesnutt tries to imply is that passing can be viewed from a different

perspective. The division between the white and the black race, argues Chesnutt, is a legal division and these people pass because they are legally black but visibly white. In this light, the argument according to which they "cheat" their way into the white race can be easily contradicted since they are as much white as they are black. If "passing for white" means, in the eyes of the nineteenth century conscience, renouncing their black ancestry, does it not mean that "remaining black" would imply renouncing the white ancestry? What is "black" and "white", anyway? Chesnutt implies in an essay entitled *What is a White Man?* published in *The Independent* in 1889. In this famous article, he investigates the legal situation of the mixed-race individuals, whose double ancestry makes them a difficult case for the legislature. Because of the ambiguity of racial inclusion, these mixed-race individuals challenge the white supremacist claims of the Southern states who tried hard to establish the color lines according to the "proportion of African blood", from one-sixteenth "Negro blood" to one-fourth. Henceforth, Chesnutt gives several examples, from Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina to the Northern States of Ohio and Michigan, only to suggest the artificiality of a law that establishes different percentages of "Negro blood" in deeming a person legally white or black. He also pays specific attention to the state of South Carolina, more lenient to this problem and where, even if the color line is established at "one-eighths African blood", the judge may have the freedom to decide the race of a person also on account of "reputation" and "reception into society" (*Essays* 70-71). The creation of these laws was subjected to various factors. For instance, Chesnutt suggests, the South Carolina law may have been influenced by the fact that "the colored population of South Carolina always outnumbered the white population, and the eagerness of the latter to recruit their ranks was sufficient to overcome in some measure their prejudice against the Negro blood" (*Essays* 71), while the law in Ohio was influenced by its proximity to the slave states. These details further enforce the idea that race does not have a real, biological determination, but an artificial, legal basis submitted to contextual variables.

Chesnutt also argues that there is great variety in the types of legal documents connected to the color line in the American states: such as Federal Laws, state codes, decisions of the Supreme Court that clarify state laws, and even judges and juries who can decide whether a person is black or white on account of various factors exposed in the law. These laws do not only vary from state to state, but they also differ from one period of time to the other: "Some of these laws are of legislative origin; others are judge-made laws, brought out by the exigencies of special cases which came before the courts for determination. Some day they will, perhaps, become mere curiosities of jurisprudence; the 'black laws' will be bracketed with the 'blue laws,' and will

be at best but landmarks by which to measure the progress of the nation" (Chesnutt, *Essays* 69). Nevertheless, these laws have terrible consequences for those who need to abide by them. First, there is what Chesnutt bitterly calls the "disability of color" (*Essays* 69) as he refers to the fact that, while enforcing white supremacy and striving to classify people according to race, the Southern states condemn a part of their population to a life of submission, pain and veiled slavery, preventing them from enjoying the liberties that come with the status of "American citizen." In other words, since the variety of definitions of "whiteness" existing in the state laws suggests that there is no consensus on what a white or black man is in the United States, it is possible that in one state a person could be legally white, henceforth free and in full possession of all the rights of an American citizen, while in another state, the same person could be legally black, and, as such, segregated, discriminated, living in "hopeless degradation" (Chesnutt, *Essays* 68). Moreover, there are other legal ramifications of these racial classifications besides the obvious abidance of the African-Americans to the segregation codes, which touch the realm of the family, more precisely marriage. On account of the legal difference between races, interracial marriages are forbidden in many states in order to protect "the purity of the white race" (Chesnutt, *Essays* 71), and, Chesnutt points out, in this situation, the presumption of illegitimacy is, or at least was, true for most people of mixed blood. Since this mixed-blood population, says the author, is "more than half of the colored people of the United States" (*Essays* 73), it is time to reconsider this reality and the laws that result from it:

> Whether or not, therefore, laws which stamp these children as illegitimate, and which by indirection establish a lower standard of morality for a large part of the population than the remaining part is judged by, are wise laws; and whether or not the purity of the white race could not be as well preserved by the exercise of virtue, and the operation of those natural laws which are so often quoted by Southern writers as the justification of all sorts of Southern "policies" are questions which the good citizen may at least turn over in his mind occasionally, pending the settlement of other complications which have grown out of the presence of the Negro on this continent. (Chesnutt, *Essays* 73)

All these legal complications are, in fact, the outcome of slavery and the coexistence of the two races on the American continent coupled with the impossible dream of white purity which, in fact, was meant to hide the centuries of abuse, discrimination and humiliation of the black population. The presence of the light-skinned Americans is the best example of the impossibility of racial purity and, basically, race differences are not real, but a "historically

produced social fiction" (Wilson 19) enforced by the law. The law, on the other hand, Chesnutt seems to suggest, is made by people who can and need to change their opinion and adapt to new conditions. In fact, in another essay published in 1900, the same year as the novel *The House behind the Cedars,* and entitled *The Future American*, Chesnutt argues that "proceeding then upon the firm basis laid down by science and the historic parallel, it ought to be quite clear that the future American race, the future American ethnic type will be formed of a mingling, in a yet to be ascertained proportion, of the various racial varieties which make up the present population of the United States" (*Essays* 122). According to the census, he argues, "any dream of a pure white race, of the Anglo-Saxon type, for the United States, may as well be abandoned as impossible, even if desirable" (*Essays* 123), since the future of the nation consists in a harmonious mingling of the white, black and Indian.

In the light of such theoretical considerations that offer a background to his fictional texts, it is clear that his novels are based upon a thorough knowledge of the law and are meant to make people ponder upon the effects of racism and segregation in a world in which racial amalgamation can become, in Chesnutt's view, the future of a better America. With this legal background in mind, Chesnutt chooses to set the plot of his novel right after the Civil War, a time in which more lenient race laws made it easier for light-skinned individuals to pass. According to Matthew Wilson, Chesnutt refers to the same Supreme Court decision of 1831 in South Carolina he mentioned in *What is a White Man?* and which made this state one of the most tolerant with regard to the definition of whiteness. Wilson further refers to other legal provisions: "this decision was superseded by an 1879 law in which the legislature decided that anyone with one quarter or more of black blood was Negro; in 1895, that proportion was reduced to one-eighth" (88). Thus, Chesnutt chooses for his characters a "historical window" between 1865 and 1879, "a period less racially repressive than his readers' present, and he is trying to recover a part of the past that was being erased by the more rigid enforcement of the color line in the era of Jim Crow. In this interregnum, John can pass into the white world" (Wilson 88). According to Ryan Simmons, the choice of this specific time-frame for the novel's setting can bear further significance, as the readers of the 1900, when the novel was published are part of the novel's future and "Chesnutt uses the theme of time in an attempt to make the novel's events personally compelling for readers, something in which readers are involved rather than a document to be inspected from an abstract, detached position" (74).

These legal oscillations enhance the artificiality of race as a social and historical construct. The novel's main characters, John and Rena, are legally white in South Carolina and legally black in their hometown, Patesville, in North

Carolina. They are born out of the illegal union between a beautiful mixed-race free woman and her white lover, a rich Southerner, who failed to draft a will and officially acknowledge his children. Moreover, their dilemmas do not arise only from the law, but also from the people's mentalities that do not change so easily. As Judge Straight remarks to the young John Walden/Warwick, a light-skinned man who passed for white: "I remember we went over the law, which was in your favor; but custom is stronger than law – in these matters custom IS law" (Chesnutt, *The House* 15). Chesnutt, therefore, does not focus on the dangers of passing as a form of breaking the law by setting his story at a time when the law was more favorable. Instead, he dwells on the complications that arise from custom, from people's mentalities that are harder to change than the laws. Moreover, by foregrounding a pair of siblings, brother and sister, Chesnutt reveals a variety of issues that are connected to the fate of the mulattoes, from legal provisions to impediments of custom and prejudice, from racial distinctions to gender conditioning. Discriminated and forced to pass on account of their race, John and Rena do not, however, share the same fate, as they are separated by their gender and the ensuing ramifications of nineteenth century mentalities connected to the roles and opportunities of men and women.

The plot revolves mostly around Rena, a beautiful quadroon, who leaves her home and her mother, enticed by her brother, John, who settled in the adjoining state, South Carolina, passing for white and entering an important land-owning family. Hoping to start a new life, free from the constraints of their race, Rena falls in love with a white young man. The hopes of happiness and freedom are shattered as her identity is accidentally discovered by George Tryon, her suitor. The situation is complicated by the unwanted attention of a mulatto, Jeff Wain, who pretends to be rich and single only to draw Rena in an unlawful relationship. Running away from both of them, Rena loses her way and her health in a ravaging storm, and dies soon after being found by a third lover, Frank Fowler, son of a former slave, the only one who was loyal and loving, but whose dark skin and slave past prevented him from hoping that his love could be shared. The three man in Rena's life: the white, rich heir, the mulatto, and the black worker are, in fact, the possibilities offered to her: passing for white, leading a middle-class existence in an ever smaller group of light-skinned, yet discriminated individuals or accepting the black, low class existence offered by the newly-emancipated slaves.

Chesnutt uses the conventions of sentimental fiction, "evocative of 'heavy' emotions, tough confrontations between the recognizable forces of good and evil, innocence beleaguered by perfidious villainy, disastrous turns of the plot, the power of coincidence, and tears at the end" (Sollors 243). Though apparently recognizable, these conventions are used by Chesnutt to a

different purpose as his characters are more nuanced than the traditional two-dimensionality of the sentimental novel. Caught at the crossroads of their own individuality, desires and aspirations, humanity and the conditioning of a particular environment, the characters are more than embodiments of good and evil and represent an almost naturalistic confrontation between humanity and milieu, between the desire of exceptional individuals to fight against injustice and the exceptional power of the environment to stifle them. According to Simmons, "the characters' agency is, as the novel portrays it, exceedingly limited: the best one can hope to do is to capture a glimpse of the forces by which he or she is constrained, but even that insight is likely to carry a heavy cost" (66). In this way, the characters' actions and reactions should not be read as simply good and evil, but with a special attention to the particular environment that produced them. Coincidence and fate, which function as external forces that control the actions of the characters, have the role of shifting the focus from internal weakness, or villainy to external agency (Delmar 98). It does not mean, however, that human beings are not flawed, but they are mostly controlled by stronger forces that work against them. In this way, Chesnutt is able to stress the utterly negative effects of racism and bigotry that distort people's souls.

The protagonists of the novel, Rena and John, seem to be prototypes of sentimental fiction, but, at a closer look, they offer a nuanced view of race and passing. Apparently, John may be seen as a tragic mulatto, "possessing an inner flaw in his overwhelming ambition to pass" (Watson 60), while Rena's defect is her weakness and her attachment to her family, which lead to the terrible chain of coincidences resulting in the discovery of her origin. Seeing them, though, only in terms of the traditional mulatto/a figure of sentimental melodrama is a narrowing vision, and, in Chesnutt's view, Rena and John, born out of the illegitimate union between a quadroon and a white man, legally black because of their mother's African descent, but visibly white, become the protagonists of a racist drama. John chooses passing by rejecting his ancestry, moving to another state, becoming a lawyer and marrying into a white family. In many ways, John, though racially marked, can be seen as a typical representative of American individualism connected to "notions of autonomy, self-determination, and free choice" (Pfeiffer 4). Always looking towards the future, he urges his sister to forget the past and embrace the white identity he offered her through education and social position: "George Tryon loves you for yourself alone; it is not your ancestors that he seeks to marry" (Chesnutt, *The House* 32). Having a white father, he claims his right to enjoy all the opportunities America offers to this race and embraces the "American dream of perpetual renewal and reinvention" becoming a "figure of the frontier ideology, for the endless

possibilities of rootlessness" (Ryan 39). At end of the novel, he takes his son and leaves the South opting for a new identity and a new life as a white, free citizen.

Rena does not manage to sustain the white identity for too long. Constantly drawn to her childhood home and to the aging, ill mother, Rena finds it almost impossible to break with her past and ignore her family's background. Rena's failure to imitate her brother's model is explained by Melissa Ryan on account of gender difference: "John becomes a white man, but Rena becomes something quite different: a white woman. In attempting to transcend race, Rena encounters gender" (40). While John creates this new, white identity for himself, through his own efforts, Rena can do so only with the help of men: her brother and, even better, a white husband. She may be successful in passing only if, as an object of desire, she draws the attention of a white man. Time and again, Rena's body is "seen" by John, Tryon, Wain, and Frank. She is rejected by Tryon when she appear not to be white enough and coveted by Wain for being whiter than he expected a mixed-race girl to be. Posing as a southern belle in a tournament when she draws the attention of young Tryon, she turns into a desirable quadroon when her identity is discovered: "her now public identity as an attractive, light-skinned African American woman leaves her vulnerable to the advances of both black and white men" (Rudolph 31), just as her mother had been. In any situation, black or white, wife or mistress, she depends on the men who choose her. Kirsten Rudolph insists on the importance of gender, suggesting that:

> African American men who were light enough to pass had an advantage in that their assumed white masculinity referenced a firmer, more secure social capital than that of passing women. The light-skinned John may fare better in the postbellum racist South because his masculinity enables him to more easily bypass a racial past that is predominantly transacted over the African American woman's body, her symbolically exaggerated sexuality and her reproductive role in birthing babies that may or may not look black. (33)

The gendered difference between the siblings is highlighted by the fact that John: rational, cold, aloof opposes a more sentimental and superstition Rena, gnawed by doubt, care for the mother she left behind, bad dreams and premonitions. This distinction between reason and feelings appears to be stereotypical, forcing the woman into an inferior position. However, out of the two, Rena is more complex as a character. While John simply chooses the path of passing, Rena oscillated between the two identities that are part of her, but which do not allow her to fully embrace any of the two worlds: the white, or the black. Born in the house behind the cedars, lost in the storm and then

dying in the same house, Rena reenacts the drama of many other women of her time, white or black, confined in their homes, limited in their choices, eliminated from the public sphere and from the opportunities offered to men, victimized, desired, seen, chosen by others, but lacking the freedom to choose for themselves. She is allowed to leave the narrow spaces of her existence only after she dies, her spirit free of the racial and gender conditioning that ultimately led to her death: "Mary B. threw open a window to make way for the passing spirit, and the red and golden glory of the setting sun, triumphantly ending his daily course, flooded the narrow room with light" (Chesnutt, *The House* 114).

The same nuanced approach is visible in the delineation of the other characters. Though close to the requirements of the sentimental novel, Tryon, Wain and Frank, the men whose actions are decisive for Rena's final fate, cannot be dismissed easily, as either heroic or villainous. Tryon and Wain, for instance, could be more easily associated with the villain prototype, as their actions cause Rena's death. However, seen within the context that created them and conditioned their way of thinking and behaving, they appear more complicated.

Tryon is ultimately a good man. Genuinely in love with Rena, he first rejects her when he finds out that she is not white, but them returns to her, ready to accept her black ancestry in the name of love, only to discover that this change came too late. In reality, just like Rena, Tryon is caught between his love for Rena and his family obligations that push him towards Blanche, a woman his mother approves of, in other words, following his heart or abiding by an age-old Southern code of obligations, duty and white supremacy. Even before knowing that Rena is black, he creates, in his mind, a clear distinction between white and black women, thinking he could never fall in love with the latter: "He could not possibly have been interested in a colored girl, under any circumstances, and he was engaged to be married to the most beautiful white woman on earth. To mention a negro woman in the same room where he was thinking of Rena seemed little short of profanation" (Chesnutt, *The House* 47). He is conditioned in his reactions by his upbringing as a Southern gentleman, which makes him agree with Dr. Green who becomes the spokesman of white supremacy in the novel:

> "The negro is an inferior creature; God has marked him with the badge of servitude, and has adjusted his intellect to a servile condition. We will not long submit to his domination. I give you a toast, sir: The Anglo-Saxon race: may it remain forever, as now, the head and front of creation, never yielding its rights, and ready always to die, if need be, in defense of its liberties!"

> "With all my heart, sir," replied Tryon, who felt in this company a thrill of that pleasure which accompanies conscious superiority, - "with all my heart, sir, if the ladies will permit me." (Chesnutt, *The House* 54)

Dr. Green and George Tryon become united in their upholding of the values of the Old South that seem to survive into the age of the Reconstruction and they cherish the idea of keeping the black population in an inferior position as they resist the changes brought about by the Civil War and the Emancipation. However, Chesnutt's attitude towards them is nuanced as "they are not the 'villains' of the novel. They have not authored bigotry in the South; they are merely subscribers to it, and, in the case of Tryon, at times tragically ambivalent toward its code." (Andrews 284).

Tryon's first reaction upon discovering that Rena was not white ranges from astonishment and horror, to rage and disgust. Such feelings are the result of his education as a white Southerner who feels betrayed:

> A negro girl had been foisted upon him for a white woman, and he had almost committed the unpardonable sin against his race of marrying her. Such a step, he felt, would have been criminal at any time; it would have been the most odious treachery at this epoch, when his people had been subjugated and humiliated by the Northern invaders, who had preached negro equality and abolished the wholesome laws decreeing the separation of the races. But no Southerner who loved his poor, downtrodden country, or his race, the proud Anglo-Saxon race which traced the clear stream of its blood to the cavaliers of England, could tolerate the idea that even in distant generations that unsullied current could be polluted by the blood of slaves. The very thought was an insult to the white people of the South. (Chesnutt, *The House* 57)

He sees passing as an unpardonable sin, a crime and his thoughts seem to recall all the elements present in the lost cause ideology: the humiliation of the South by the North, the pride of the Southern cavalier, the need to preserve white supremacy and racial purity as part of the duty of every Southerner. These words seem artificial and pompous because they are not his genuine feelings, but a sort of rehearsed reaction coming from his belonging to a specific social and racial background. A more honest reaction is his despair, longing for Rena, regret and love, as he declares that: "Custom was tyranny. Love was the only law" (Chesnutt, *The House* 114). His words mirror Judge Straight's bitter comment at the beginning of the novel, that custom is stronger than law in the South. Unfortunately, the tragic the denouement of the novel supports the judge's experience and not Tryon's belated awakening to the truth of humanity and emotion out of the fake world of customs and prejudice.

Uneducated, not white enough to pass, lying about his real family and financial situation, violent and shrewd, Wain embodies all the stereotypical traits associated with the black character in fiction. The fact that his skin is lighter makes him acceptable to Rena's mother who dreams of a caste of lighter-skinned people, separate from the former slaves with dark skins and evidently superior to them. Wain is never truly in love with Rena, like Tryon, but merely drawn to her whiteness, which, to him, becomes a symbol of superiority and a possibility of advancing into a higher caste: "Wain stared a moment in genuine astonishment, and then bent himself nearly double, keeping his eyes fixed meanwhile upon Rena's face. He had expected to see a pretty yellow girl, but had been prepared for no such radiant vision of beauty as this which now confronted him" (Chesnutt, *The House* 79). Though he appears as the villain in the novel, Chesnutt does not allow Wain to control the action in any way as he suggests a different reading of Wain's behavior, one conditioned by "feelings of self-hatred…formed by the institution of slavery and racism" (Watson 56). Matthew Wilson, on the other hand, considers Wain a failure, "a figure out of a plethora of Southern fictions of this period" (97), the black rapist, the sexual predator who pursues Rena because he perceives her as white. Wilson concludes that: "In the end, the figure of Wain goes a long way toward canceling the force of the rest of the novel – both John and Tryon are atypical in their life choices, in their willingness to undermine current racial orthodoxy; Wain simply confirms that orthodoxy" (97). On the other hand, though, by introducing this "evil" mulatto, an apparently realistic image to the nineteenth century readers, alongside the "good", educated, intelligent one, John, an almost idealized figure, Chesnutt also plays with literary stereotypes arguing that, to the white audiences, the mulatto is only a constructed literary character, never fully understood, inexistent in reality. Disappearing from the novel without punishment, Wain remains a cardboard figure, a fake vision of race in the white minds of nineteenth century readers of plantation romances.

A more complex figure and a possible choice for Rena is Frank Fowler. Born into a slave family, Frank is honest, hardworking, loyal and truly in love with Rena. For many of the novel's readers at the time of its publication, the choice of Frank would have been more valid than a union with Tryon, as Rena would remain faithful to her own race. The last reference to her, at the end of the novel, is: "a young cullud 'oman" who just died (Chesnutt, *The House* 114), suggesting that this is her real (social) image. On the other hand, though, Chesnutt does not allow this interracial relationship to be fulfilled, though Frank definitely was her most devoted lover. The color of the skin, the writer seems to suggest, is just a biological "fact" that does not define Rena as a person and so, there is no reason why she should choose the black race over the white.

Just as in the case of Jeff Wain, critics found fault in the creation of Frank. Trudier Harris considers that Frank is close to the plantation romance stereotype of the "happy darky" in his loyalty, benevolence and docility: "it is just this loyalty, this goodness, this faithfulness, which, while viewed in a positive light for certain actions of the novel, condemns and eliminates Frank from Chesnutt's criteria for equality. The quest for equality suggests an awareness of and pride in self that Frank simply does not have" (222). Thus, Harris accuses Chesnutt of racism, arguing that he "has not been able to lift himself far enough above his own prejudices to convincingly make the case that all blacks are to be included in the grand adventure" (228). Similarly, Sally Ann Ferguson suggests that the platonic relationship between Rena and Frank supports Chesnutt's theory of race "which opposes black intraracial breeding and promotes miscegenation as the answer to America's racial problem" since only the light-skinned children can be physically and culturally assimilable (47).

On the other hand, though, we should not read either Frank, or Wain as failures. It is much too evident that, up to a certain extent, all the choices given to Rena: Tryon, Wain and Frank, and even her brother, are stereotypical and common to passing novels. It does not necessarily mean that it is a fault. This particular choice was carefully conceived, since Chesnutt consciously used the conventions of the sentimental melodrama and of the novel of passing in order to prove a point, namely, to highlight racial injustices. He does not offer solutions because the America of his time does not have legal or moral solutions to the racial problem. Separated by race, law and custom, all of these characters, white, black or mixed-race, suffer the consequences of centuries of racism, discrimination and intolerance. An assertion of humanity, virtue, moral choices is laudable, but inefficient in a segregated America where individuals are required to choose a racial identity, either white, or black, as the only measure of their worth in the world. In fact, Chesnutt constructs race through various markers: color of the skin, speech, behavior, laws, medical documents (like the ones found in Dr. Green office), but all these elements are external, shifting, adjustable and changing: "Chesnutt's protagonists' black identities are not a set of inherent tendencies that need to be viewed scientifically and accommodated for in the race progress" (Boeckmann 160). As external markers, they can be manipulated, changed, just as one can change the name, the relationships, the place where he lives. Identity becomes a fictional construct, and Chesnutt ironically appeals to Sir Walter Scott, whose historical romances form the basis of the Southern aristocratic ideology, when he presents Rena, crowned "Queen of Love and Beauty", in a tournament reenactment where she chooses to embody Rowena, Scott's heroine. Thus, in a specific context, Rena can be the epitome of white beauty, the exquisite

Southern belle, while, in another, she is just a colored girl. The reality, though, is much more frightful, symbolized by the swamp and the storm where she loses her life, running away from both Tryon and Wain – a dangerous, liminal, blurry space of loss, shadows, fear and lack of identity. She dies in her childhood home behind the cedars, hidden from view, an illegitimate child coming out of an interracial union and unable to find a viable place in America of her time.

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