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WRITING FOR A “HIGH PURPOSE”: EXAMINING CHARLES CHESNUTT’S  
ANTIRACIST MANIPULATION OF GENRE AND LANGUAGE IN *THE CONJURE*  
*WOMAN*

An Essay Submitted to the  
Graduate School of  
John Carroll University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

By  
Sheniah M. Lanier  
2023

## Introduction

*If I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort.* – Charles Chesnutt, 1880

The quote above, taken from an entry in his journal, reveals Charles W. Chesnutt's belief in the power of purposeful writing and discloses the motivation behind one of his most well-known works, *The Conjure Woman, and Other Conjure Tales*<sup>1</sup>. For Chesnutt, authorship was not simply a means of creative self-expression and personal advancement but a vehicle for redirecting what he perceived as a deeply flawed society marred by the injustices of racism. The author's specific objective was to inspire a "Moral revolution" (140) that would address America's race problem – the "unjust spirit of caste," which he argued was "a barrier to the moral progress" of the nation (139). In the service of this tremendous undertaking, he employed his creative powers, creating a sophisticated mixture of exceptional fictional structuring and the careful treatment of social issues like racism and white supremacy with the aim of uplifting America from its position of moral bankruptcy. In *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt expertly manipulates language and subverts generic conventions and cultural beliefs to expose the prejudices of both his characters and audience and reveal the injustice of American racism (primarily via his treatment of slavery), encouraging through his literary sleight-of-hand a reconsideration of those prejudices and a recognition of the humanity of his subjects.

This paper aims to interrogate Chesnutt's manipulation and subversion of textual, cultural, and generic elements to achieve his didactic purposes. The first part of this essay provides a brief overview of Chesnutt's work's historical and literary context, which is necessary given how heavily this text relies on historical data and popular literature conventions. The

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to as *The Conjure Woman* for the remainder of this paper.

second part includes an in-depth analysis of a selection of Chesnutt's short stories from *The Conjure Woman* that best encompass the thematic underpinnings of the collection. This analysis interrogates the author's modification and appropriation of conventions of the popular plantation fiction genre in a manner that forces mainstream audiences to confront issues like slavery and racism. Finally, the conclusion reasserts the trailblazing nature of Chesnutt's role in American and African American literature and his continued cultural and literary relevance.

### **Autobiographical and Historical Context**

Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858 to "free blacks descended from the group called old order free Negroes" (Brodhead 2). Chesnutt, his parents, and much of his extended family were of mixed heritage and "resembled whites more than they did blacks" (Flusche 3). The ambiguousness of their racial background, however, did little to shield the couple from "growing hostility toward free Negroes" in the South (3). In response, they migrated from their native Fayetteville, North Carolina, to the Midwest about two years before Chesnutt's birth.

In 1866, a young Chesnutt returned with his family to North Carolina. He attended the Howard School, established by the Freedman's Bureau during Reconstruction, where the principal encouraged him to pursue academia. In 1875, Chesnutt published his first short story in an African American newspaper. In 1880, he wrote in his journal, "I think I must write a book" (139). Although the fledgling author worried that he may not have been "as well prepared as other writers" for the endeavor, he explained that he nevertheless felt an irresistible "calling" (139). He would eventually write not one book but six.

During his life, Chesnutt published several essays and short stories, three novels, and a biography of African American abolitionist author Frederick Douglass. One of his most successful publications was a collection of short stories known as *The Conjure Woman* (1899),

which contains “The Goophered Grapevine,” “Po’ Sandy,” “The Conjuror’s Revenge,” and others. Other notable short stories, “The Wife of His Youth,” “The Passing of Grandison,” and “Sherriff’s Children,” were collected under the title *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories from the Color Line* (1899). His first two novels, *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, were published in 1900 and 1901, respectively. His final novel, *The Colonel’s Dream*, was published in 1905. He continued publishing minor works for the rest of his life, but he abandoned the project of full-time authorship in favor of “social and political activities that drew his attention and energy away from literature” (Brodhead 30).

Chesnutt was born fewer than three years before the start of the American Civil War and came of age during the Reconstruction. This span of years was a tenuous period in American history, especially for African Americans trying to establish a space for themselves in a society that for upwards of three hundred years had subjugated and abused them via the institution of slavery. Readers can observe how the sociopolitical transition experienced by minorities post-Civil War influenced Chesnutt’s work, focusing heavily on race and its nuances. John Wideman elaborates on the historical context of Chesnutt’s writing:

The period in which the main body of his work was published (1899-1905) was a time when North and South had reconciled their differences over the Negro problem and cemented a prosperous, commercial partnership, an epoch that saw the European nations in a mad rush for the resources and cheap labor of the nonwhite world, when the doctrine of white supremacy was the essential ingredient harmonizing the economic, social and political philosophies that justified the thrust of European industrialized societies toward global control and domination. (Wideman, “Charles W. Chesnutt: *The Marrow of Tradition*” 128)

Wideman explains that the administration of Rutherford B. Hayes “rapidly abdicated responsibility for the newly freed Negro slaves” (128), adding that this “political abandonment of Negro to the good judgment of the reconstructed slavocracy” facilitated “the ascendancy of white, Southern writers (the plantation school) who attempted to sustain through their portrayal of black characters that myth of Negro inferiority that had long served apologists of slavery” (128). Chesnut, he argues, aimed not simply to respond to the stereotypes promoted by these authors but to represent the South as “a comprehensive overview that includes all classes, both races, and a variety of perspectives – social, economic and political” (128).

Although Wideman positions Chesnut’s novel *The Marrow of Tradition* as the cite of this attempt at a more all-encompassing portrayal of the South, the author’s representation of various demographics and “perspectives” (128) is reflected elsewhere as well. *The Conjure Woman*, for instance, features white, black, and mixed-race characters of various ages who carry with them different attitudes toward slavery and its effects. By providing readers with a diverse cast of characters, Chesnut brings nuance to an otherwise polarizing genre. This nuanced portrayal does nothing to obscure the overarching message of his work; instead, it allows the reader to recognize how slavery and racism are degrading on a mass scale.

Wideman’s argument that the novel “requires the reader to remember that history is not simply progressive but cyclical” (132) also applies to *The Conjure Woman*. In the collection, the interwovenness of the framed and framing narratives reflects the “cyclical” relationship between the past and present, emphasizing the lasting impact of enslavement, the slow pace of progress, and the need for an alternative solution to the problem of race relations in the American South.

## **Literary, Generic, and Cultural Influences**

One cannot engage with Chesnut's work without considering its literary and cultural influences. Generic conventions are especially relevant to examining literary influences. The author's work incorporates and adapts elements from the contemporary popular traditions of plantation and local color fiction in addition to dialect storytelling. Additionally, Chesnut's reliance on aspects of African American culture like folklore, superstition, and spirituality also warrants a proper review.

### **Plantation Fiction**

Plantation fiction is deeply embedded in America's colonial past, emerging, perhaps, as far back as the beginning of the seventeenth century through, as scholar Charles Reagan Wilson writes, "John Smith's writings on Native Americans in early Virginia" (81). Smith's work, Wilson argues, aimed to manage interactions between the encroaching European settlers and the indigenous peoples they wanted to displace, establishing a narrative to justify these endeavors. After the Europeans deemed the Native Americans effectively managed, the aim to create a narrative that maintained European supremacy was reconfigured to address the enslaved population and the growing abolitionist cause. Wilson writes, "Southern writers would have to labor to invent images of an idyllic, innocent community that was built on an exploitative slave system resting ultimately on violence" (82). In other words, the primary objectives of this narrative form became the concealment of this culture of "violence" (82) in the slaveholding South and the preservation of its primary economic engine.

Plantation fiction, Lawrence Rodgers writes, "was in general a diverse body of writing" and "varied as much in regional sensibility as it did in thematic emphasis" (45). Despite this diversity, most contributions to the genre share a few commonalities. As previously noted, pieces

of plantation fiction often depicted a romanticized version of the South. This romanticized vision, Clukey and Wells write, featured “iconography of white columned big houses, fluttering hoop skirts, and contented slaves moving through softly glowing fields of cotton” and was peopled by “kind and careful” masters and “docile...grateful and agentless slaves” (5). After abolition, Wilson explains, plantation fiction continued to be a popular literary genre:

Writings about the plantation and its racial patterns continued after the Civil War, its pastoral images now overlapping with a stress on picturesque elements, which appealed to the growing audience for local-color writing in the late 19th century. (Wilson 83)

As Wilson states, contributions to the plantation fiction genre often presented a romanticized portrait of life for enslaved African Americans to dissuade the dissolution of the South’s primary economic engine.

One of the most popular authors of plantation fiction was Joel Chandler Harris, who, Daniel Stein writes, is often credited as having written “the most popular plantation fictions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (22). His fictions feature the iconic Uncle Remus, an ex-slave who maintains a sentimental perception of the past and “continues to live on the postbellum plantation with his former masters” (23). The archetypal character, foremost a storyteller, is “the custodian of the animal fables that the slaves had related to each other and that he now tells to his master’s seven-year-old son after the Civil War” (23). These tales, Stein writes, “have been interpreted as allegories of the slaves’ hatred for their master” by “pointing toward the cruelties of the slave system” (23). The inclusion of such tales may suggest subversive intentions on Harris’ part; however, Michael Flusche argues that this is not the case:

[I]n Harris’s version, the humour that was always present became predominant, for the author heightened the appearance of cordiality among the animals with their elaborate



colloquies, and disguised their hostility. Convinced that the stories revealed the character of the contented slave, Harris backed away from his original intuition that the tales provided a significant statement about the slaves and all but dismissed their significance. (Flusche 355)

Uncle Remus is often received with as much controversy as the fables he relays, embodying for some the stereotype of the contented slave advanced by traditional plantation fiction. For Stein, “Remus is a vanishing Negro – part of a literary tradition that seeks to freeze the image of the black storyteller into plantation scenes and offer a sense of stability in times of social change” (30). Because of this apparent function, critics have often labeled Harris’ characterization as problematic, arguing it promotes stereotypes about black Americans and disseminates falsehoods about the true nature of slavery.

Despite this pervasive pattern of undermining slavery’s ramifications, writers could and did manipulate and subvert the genre’s conventions to counter the racial stereotypes they traditionally promoted. Such was the case with Chesnutt, Richard Baldwin argues in “The Art of *The Conjure Woman*.” The author, Baldwin writes, “aimed to modify white minds to feel the equality of the black man, and with the conjure tales he developed a perfect vehicle for his artistic needs” (386). Using plantation fiction, dialect, and elements of African American folklore, he became, Baldwin argues, “the ultimate conjure man, hoping that by ‘wuk- king de roots’ of black culture he might be able to work a powerful goopher on white America and lead it to accept the equality of the black” (397).

Many critics have compared Harris’ character to Chesnutt’s Uncle Julius, who plays an integral role in the collected stories of *The Conjure Woman* and several other uncollected tales since both characters comment upon the antebellum South from the perspective of the formerly

enslaved. In this sense, the two characters appear incredibly similar. However, although Remus tends to romanticize slave life, Uncle Julius issues a more realistic version of the narrative. The differences in how the authors developed these characters were probably influenced by differences in background, which likely informed their respective approaches to characterization. Harris, Stein argues, “was a segregationist, a white supremacist, a solid son of the New South” who wanted to use Uncle Remus “to symbolize the happy slave of the Old South” (51). On the other hand, Chesnut was a “nonwhite author who took as his dominant theme the dehumanizing, destructive consequences of racial prejudice was ignored by the reading public” (Wideman 128). These contrasting identities and motivations resulted in their respective characters having very different effects, with Uncle Julius challenging the myths Uncle Remus promotes.

### **Dialect Fiction**

Dialect storytelling might be considered both a genre and a subgenre of plantation fiction, conveying, as one would expect, a narrative through the region-specific speech patterns of a particular character. Gilligan explains that dialect stories generally address the same subject matter as plantation fiction, responding to America’s past, present, and potential future during the turbulent era of Reconstruction (197). Like writers of plantation fiction, authors of these tales, Gilligan explains, also tended to render a sentimental and idealized portrait of the antebellum South, using dialect to convey their political positions (197). She adds that these positions were often negative, with authors like Sherwood Bonner writing “dialect tales...[that] directly belittle the reparative potential of Reconstruction” (197).

Gilligan argues that, alongside plantation literature, dialect stories “were offered, with all of the ugly political entanglements that we find distasteful, for the serious consideration of nineteenth-century literary audiences” (198). Elsa Nettels expands on the pervasiveness of

dialect fiction and the expectations that accompanied it in “Realism and Dialect.” In the article, she argues that to realist writers like William Dean Howells, dialect as a literary device was a means of conveying truth: “If fiction is justified by its truth to the reality of everyday life, then language that reflects those conditions must be rendered with fidelity” (63). Nettles adds, “[i]f language is created by and is expressive of the environment that shapes the characters, then the representation of their language becomes important in establishing the connection between characters and their circumstances” (63).

On African American dialect stories set in the South, Edgar G. Billups’ “Some Principles for the Representation of Negro Dialect in Fiction” provides helpful insight. In the essay, Billups acknowledges the legitimacy of dialect as a literary device, arguing that it is “admissible and praiseworthy when used with discrimination and artistic restraint” (99). He also argues that “[i]n the South and in Southern literature,” African American dialect “has an important place” as it reflects the cultural dynamic of the nation:

True literature of any country pictures and preserves for posterity the manners, customs, and ideals of that country with all the concomitants of local color - and the linguistic medium is always an element in delineating these customs, manners, and ideals and in gaining local color. (Billups 99)

Billups elaborates on the stipulation that writers should not use dialect as a superficial and disingenuous trope, urging them to represent the speech patterns of their “negro” characters honestly and with intention.

In the representation of negro dialect, the most important thing to remember is that there is a vast difference between a story written just for the sake of the dialect, and the use of dialect for the sake of the story. The use of dialect is permissible not as an end in itself,

but only as a means to an end, namely, the portrayal of the character of the negro. This should always be the main purpose in view in writing a dialect story or poem. Unless the true spirit of the negro is caught by the writer, the story is no more than a pretense and a forgery. (100)

Chesnutt's successful capturing of "the true spirit of the Negro" is certainly debatable, as the author himself admitted that "there is no such thing as Negro dialect" (qtd. in Wideman, "Defining the Black Voice" 79). He suggests, instead, that the term represents an "attempt to express, with such a degree of phonetic correctness as to suggest the sound, English as an ignorant old southern Negro would be supposed to speak it" (79). Chesnutt was probably aware of the double bind that using dialect would produce, being simultaneously problematic in seemingly affirming the stereotype of the "ignorant southern Negro" while attempting to produce an authentic representation of what he perceived as the common speech patterns in African American culture. Chesnutt also articulated an interest in "preserv[ing] a sufficient approximation to the correct spelling to make it easy reading" (79), implying that he took creative liberties in formulating these speeches to avoid alienating his audience by using language that they might find incomprehensible. With this information in mind, readers should not interpret Chesnutt's dialect as more or less faithful to reality.

However accurate or inaccurate and problematic Chesnutt's representation may have been, his use of dialect serves both narrative and didactic purposes. Wideman suggests that dialect supplies the narrative framework of Chesnutt's tales, writing, "the dialect stories of Chesnutt's Uncle Julius are tales within tales, seemingly subordinate to the voice of John, a narrator who speaks literary English" (81). Wideman also argues that, to challenge stereotypes, Chesnutt "juxtaposed the dialect voice with standard literary discourse...dramatizing the

inadequacy of the assumptions...which locked the black voice and black character into conventionalized, formulaic molds” (81). In other words, Wideman implies that Chesnutt uses these faulty notions of African American speech patterns to prove his point about recognizing the validity of black experience and communication styles to progress as a society.

### **Local Color Fiction**

Both dialect fiction and plantation literature are considered extensions of local color fiction. In “Notes on Local Color and its Relation to Realism,” Donald A. Dike defines this genre as “writing that insists upon the special context of the events and characters with which it deals, that insists upon the primary importance of that special context to its mean” (82). Dike adds that “the context is fixed by...coordinates,” which include “place...time; cultural tradition; national, racial, or religious inheritance; mode of self-support; and remoteness, whether spatial or cultural, from other communities” (82). He argues that local color fiction’s authenticity rests with the faithful depiction of these integral components and would falter if changed (82).

Dike also posits that local color fiction can be divided into two categories based on the writer’s status within the community they aimed to represent. The first category involves works composed by authors who were “visitors to a local community, struck by its singularity, its differences from the norm of their own social group” (82). These works, Dike adds, typically emphasized “the eccentric and picturesque” and attempted to represent them as “facts” (82). Writers of this category also tried to “direct the response” of the reader “by mediating between their incredulity and the yarn he is spinning, by interposing a point of view which they can immediately recognize and share” (82).

The second category outlined by Dike is that of the writer who “identified themselves with the community which was their subject matter” (82). These writers, he argues, were just as

interested as visiting writers in affirming “cultural differences” but differed in that they refused to represent these differences as “curiosities” (82). Additionally, they “rejected altogether the assumption of a standard social experience which finds provincial life to be a necessary aberration” and “that the task of literature is to express rather than describe the particular” (82). Still, Dike adds, like the “tourist” writers, they struggled to “mak[e] their audience feel that what it read about was real” (82).

Chesnutt seems to fall between the two categories of local color writers that Dike proposes. Like the visiting local color writer, he emphasizes the “eccentric” (82) aspects of the community, primarily the black population’s apparent penchant for the supernatural and exaggerative storytelling practices and the general severity of the Southern sociopolitical state. Like the native, he attempts to express the community’s nuances – the situations in which racial, social, and political boundaries are insignificant or surmountable – to destabilize racist ideologies and inspire the development of a new racial consciousness.

### **Superstition, Religion, and Conjuring**

At the heart of this collection is what Chesnutt refers to as “conjunction” or “goopher” (1401). This mystical element propels the narrative forward by creating and resolving conflict. In his 1901 essay, “Superstition and Folklore of the South,” Chesnutt explains that the rituals depicted in the tales are based not on objective anthropological evidence but on memories from his childhood in North Carolina. Although he admits that he does not know where the term “goopher” came from, he insists that it is used frequently in the South and implies that his anecdotal experience is sufficient for his purposes. On “the origin of this curious superstition” specifically, he surmises that “[i]t probably grew...out of African fetichism which was brought

over from the dark continent along with the dark people” (1401). Voodoo tradition, Chesnutt suspects, is also reflected and adapted in the “goopher” myths:

Certain features, too, suggest a distant affinity with Voodooism, or snake worship, a cult which seems to have been indigenous to tropical America. These beliefs, which in the place of their origin had all the sanctions of religion and social custom, became, in the shadow of the white man’s civilization, a pale reflection of their former selves. In time, too, they were mingled and confused with the witchcraft and ghost lore of the white man, and the tricks and delusions of the Indian conjurer. (Chesnutt 1401)

Although Chesnutt admits that his understanding of the supernatural material he employs in his writing is based primarily on hearsay and childhood experience, the existing scholarship can fill his knowledge gaps.

John Roberts discusses the religious belief systems carried over and adapted from Africa in “African American Belief Narratives and the African Cultural Tradition.” In the text, Roberts argues that, despite early simplifications which categorized these systems as mere “superstition,” scholars now understand that “traditional religions of Africans enslaved in America...constituted coherent belief systems that reflected some of the most important values of African people” (116). The Africans who were captured and transported to the Americas during the slave trade, he adds, came from “various religious backgrounds and possessed diverse religious practices, [which] they were not able to reconstitute in their pristine form under the conditions imposed on them in the United States” (117). Because enslaved Africans could not preserve their religious practices in their original form, they merged and transformed in ways that allowed them “to continue to serve important needs under the conditions imposed on them by [the] slaver” (117).

The result of this merging of religious ideologies, Roberts writes, was “the creation of a system of spiritual that came to be known by various names such as hoodoo, rootwork, and conjuration” (117). He adds that a common element of this multi-named system was “a powerful individual who was believed to possess extraordinary abilities to affect the lives of individuals in the natural world” (117). This individual’s power was generally believed to be derived from nature, expressed through the “spoken word,” and could be used for positive or negative purposes (117). However, whether used for good or bad, the “ultimate goal of conjuration,” Roberts argues, “was to restore equilibrium and harmony to the community” (117).

On the methods undertaken by conjurers to secure this “equilibrium and harmony,” Roberts also provides insight:

The most common means of conjuring an individual was through surreptitious contamination of or using some object that came into bodily contact with the intended victim. In this practice, discarded bodily parts such as hair and finger nails were used extensively as well as clothing that had been worn by the intended victim. As a result, individuals often went to great lengths to protect themselves by carefully discarding such objects as well as protecting food and drink that entered the body from potential contamination by those of ill intent. (Roberts 117)

These details contextualize the rituals depicted in *The Conjure Woman* and lend a sense of credibility to Chesnut’s “childish recollections” (1401). The result is a sense of realism that counters the implausibility of the tales’ more outlandish elements. It encourages the reader to suspend their disbelief and consider the underlying meaning of each conjuring act that Uncle Julius describes.



Regarding genre association, the conjuring acts of Chesnut's tales often reflect the animal-centered storytelling of plantation fiction characters like Uncle Remus. The actions depicted in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," "The Conjuror's Revenge," and "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" prominently feature wolves, mules, and birds, thus nodding to the animal fables relayed in Harris' collections. However, they diverge from these fables in transforming human characters into animals rather than anthropomorphizing them from the beginning. In using these acts of conjuring to obliterate the boundary between animal and human – Uncle Remus' tales maintain that boundary but afford animals human tendencies and behaviors – Chesnut more directly underscores the dehumanizing effects of slavery by literalizing that degeneration.

Finally, Chesnut's use of conjuring – a novelty for Chesnut's predominantly white audience – recalls local colorists' interest in eccentricities. Like the native writer of local color fiction, Chesnut contextualizes these instances of mysticism rather than presenting them as entertaining oddities at which his reader can gawk unreflectively. Each conjuring act is rooted in the thematic interests of the story and reflects the problems Chesnut hopes to expose. For example, the transformation in "Po' Sandy" is a meditation on slavery's violation of familial ties and appeals to the reader's sense of empathy by emphasizing the extremes to which enslaved persons would go to preserve those bonds.

The conjuring act is inextricably linked with the tale's dialect fiction influence. Uncle Julius' dialectic narration communicates the conjuring event, creating a working dynamic between those two components. The usually tragic consequences of these acts of conjuring counteract the entertaining novelty of Uncle Julius' speech patterns, establishing the tale as a profound reflection of critical social issues rather than a simple run-of-the-mill dialect story and encouraging his audience to pay attention to his antiracist message.

## **Folklore and Oral Tradition**

*The Conjure Woman* is also heavily influenced by elements of African American folklore. Folklore, as Tolagbe Ogunleye writes, is comprised of “myths, storytelling, recollections, ballads, songs, rap, and other orally transmitted lore” (435). Deeply entrenched in African American culture, folklore, and oral tradition, Ogunleye argues, is “evidence of the ancient African life force and past that Africans forcibly brought to America, maintained through an expressive sense” (435). He adds that through folklore and oral storytelling, displaced Africans could maintain a degree of autonomy and make sense of their new circumstances:

Folklore represents a line to a vast, interconnected network of meanings, values, and cognitions. Folklore contains seeds of wisdom, problem-solving, and prophecy through tales of rebellion, triumph, reasoning, moralizing, and satire. All that African American people value, including the agony enslaved and freed Africans were forced to endure, as well as strategies they used to resist servitude and flee their captors, is discernible in this folk literature. (Ogunleye 436)

The embeddedness of folklore and oral tradition in African American culture is reflected in its literature. For Chesnut, these tropes could be used to explore racial topics and encourage social reform in a manner that would be palatable for white audiences. This palatability would be essential for Chesnut’s objective of changing hearts and minds while allowing his work to maintain a sense of novelty and distinctiveness.

Like plantation fiction, African American folklore is diverse, with “subject matter rang[ing] from animal fable to the romantic fairy tale” (Green ix). The former conception is more widely recognized, with Uncle Remus’ Br’er Rabbit tales being some of the most well-known. These fables often characterize animals as trickster figures; however, Ogunleye argues that,

while they do use “trickery at times to gain an advantage,” they more often use it “in their dealings with other animals who have traditionally preyed on and taken advantage of others” (448). Thus, much like those who carried on these tales, these figures used wit to maintain control in situations where they were disadvantaged. Additionally, Ogunleye writes that animals “serve moralizing function” and help convey the “point” of the tale (448).

Roger Abrahams affirms the “moralizing function” proposed by Ogunleye in the preface to *African American Folktales: Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*. Abrahams argues that most African American folktales teach “lessons that black children needed to learn in their dealings” with the white world (7). He adds that these lessons often take the form of “how-to-behave” and “how-not-to-behave” stories (32), showing by example what behaviors were and were not conducive to black existence then.

Abrahams adds that many African American folktales frequently employ unconventional endings. He writes that, although these stories may sometimes begin like a traditional fairy tale, “the action takes off in quite a different direction” (20). This change in direction, he implies, may be the result of a difference in thematic interests. Unlike European fairy tales, Abrahams argues, African American folktales focus more on marginalization and the tenuous threshold between nature and civilization. As a result of these interests, he adds, the tales “dramatiz[e] the disordering of society that opens up to life itself” (23).

### ***The Conjure Woman***

*The Conjure Woman*, published in the spring of 1899, is a collection of seven short stories<sup>2</sup>, including “The Goophered Grapevine.” Initially featured in *Atlantic Magazine*, “The

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<sup>2</sup> For the sake of brevity, this paper examines only five of the seven short stories in *The Conjure Woman*. The two stories not examined in this essay, “The Conjuror’s Revenge” and “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” are, of course, worthy of interrogation; however, their similarity to other tales in terms of theme or content make them dispensable for this project.

Goophered Grapevine” received a positive reception from his predominantly white audience, who were delighted primarily with the figure of Uncle Julius, an elderly formerly enslaved person who relays outlandish tales of pre-Civil War plantation life (Andrews 14). This reception and the urging of Chesnutt’s publishing partners helped encourage him to continue working with the characters established in those two works (14).

Each story features the same three central figures: John and Annie, white Northerners living on a Southern plantation in the post-Civil War era, and Uncle Julius, whom they ultimately employ as a coachman. Few secondary characters appear in the text’s framed section except Julius’ grandson Tom in “Mars’ Jeems’s Nightmare” and Annie’s younger sister and her fiancé in “Hot Foot Hannibal.” Because the frame is arguably of less consequence than what is framed, the reduced number of characters is appropriate and balances the complexity of Uncle Julius’ tales with a sense of simplicity.

In Uncle Julius’ tales, many characters appear, but only Aunt Peggy – the conjure woman to which the collection’s title refers – appears most frequently. Her recurrence is essential, given that each story focuses on an act of conjuring that determines the plot’s trajectory and the characters’ fate. Additionally, her ambiguous characterization – she engages in both helpful and harmful activity in the stories in which she appears – echoes the common understanding that conjurers were not necessarily bad nor good and utilized whatever means were available to them to navigate a social space constructed against their interests.

### **Narrative Structure**

The stories collected in *The Conjure Woman* follow a general structural pattern framed by John’s narration, which, as Wideman points out, follows the conventions of “standard” English (81). Each tale begins with John and Annie during an innocuous moment of domestic

leisure, followed by one of two slightly different plot points that instigate Uncle Julius' storytelling, which distinguishes itself from John's narration primarily through dialect. The first direction the tale might take is that one or both characters become desirous of outside amusement that Uncle Julius, having appeared on the scene, willingly provides via a context-appropriate story. The alternative is that John consults Uncle Julius on a minor change to the plantation, which the latter attempts to discourage with a fable. In both cases, each tale concludes with varying degrees of skepticism, but rarely outright dismissal, from his counterparts. This apparent willingness to believe there is at least a shred of truth in Uncle Julius' tale suggests that the two are malleable enough to be reformed, making them symbolic of Chesnut's ideal impressionable reader.

### **“The Goophered Grapevine”**

“The Goophered Grapevine” is the first of seven short stories in *The Conjure Woman*. This first story, establishing a connective tissue between tales, introduces the three principal characters and establishes the relationship that develops between them. Chesnut's thematic interests are also shown in this introductory tale, informing the reader that the collection will examine America's problem with race and racism, interrogate its past and present effects on the nation's moral condition, and encourage reflection and reform.

At the beginning of the tale, John and Annie, having relocated recently to North Carolina, are surveying the abandoned McAdoo plantation to potentially revitalize an old vineyard when they encounter a “venerable-looking colored man” (3), revealed to be Uncle Julius. When John explains that he is considering purchasing the property, Uncle Julius advises against it, citing a curse left by Aunt Peggy, a local conjurer, at the behest of Mars' Dugal McAdoo. This statement

prompts his telling of the framed story, which reveals that McAdoo solicited the conjurer woman to discourage stealing his grapes.

After cursing the vineyard, Aunt Peggy warns McAdoo's slaves that anyone who consumed its grapes would "die inside'n twel' mont's" (7). A new slave named Henry arrives on the plantation and, not knowing of the "goopher," steals and eats some of the grapes. When the curse seemingly takes effect, and Henry begins to fall ill, he seeks Aunt Peggy's assistance. She gives him a bitter-tasting whiskey to temporarily relieve his symptoms but advises him to return in the spring. He returns in the spring, gifting the conjure woman a ham for her continued assistance. Again, he is temporarily saved. However, Henry dies during autumn when the leaves on the grape vines begin to fall. The outbreak of the war then prompts McAdoo to abandon the vineyard, leaving it to decay. Julius argues that the land is still cursed and advises John not to purchase it. He does not heed Julius' suggestion, surmising that Julius wants to keep the vineyard to himself.

One of the main conventions of plantation fiction challenged in "The Goophered Grapevine" is the romanticized version of plantation life. In Mars McAdoo, the benevolent master of what Clukey and Wells refer to as an "idyllic vision" of the antebellum South becomes one who is more concerned with preserving his vineyard and turning a profit than the well-being of his slaves. The contented slave archetype is also subverted via Henry, whose sufferings and eventual demise (for which his master is at least partially responsible) highlight the injustice and inhumanity of his position.

The generic influences of local color fiction – in both forms described above by Dike – also appear and are adapted in this tale. Like the non-local colorist, Chesnutt attempts to balance his emphasis on the unique customs and beliefs of his black characters – primarily the

superstition conveyed and represented by Uncle Julius – with an attempt to present a recognizable perspective via John and Annie’s relatively normative response to the character and his outlandish narrative. Conversely, mirroring the native colorist, he does not present these customs as mere novelties but as expressions of the community’s history and values. Here, the “goopher” represents the community’s ancestral roots (the spiritual and religious beliefs carried over and adapted from Africa), its more recent history of subjugation, and the consequent desire for freedom. By establishing the multi-layered implications of these customs in this manner, Chesnutt uses the local color genre to acknowledge differences *in context* without using them as justification for injustice.

In terms of dialect and its generic counterpart, this initial tale establishes the kind of speech patterns readers can expect from Uncle Julius but fails to contextualize them in a conventionally progress-averse manner. The first sentence that the character utters, “Yas, suh. I lives des ober yander, behine de nex’ san’-hill, on de Lumberton plank-road” (4), informs us that he uses a slightly adapted version of what might be called standard English. Here, Chesnutt conveys this difference by diverging from the common spellings of words, replacing the “e” in “yes” with an “a” and substituting “uh” for the “ir” in “sir.” He also adds an unnecessary “s” to “live” and removes the “t” and “d” in “next” and “sand,” respectively. The shortening of words and replacement of letters suggests a slow and relaxed manner of speech. This characterization would follow, given the prevailing stereotypes established in previous representations of African Americans in popular literature at that time. Harris’s Uncle Remus, for instance, speaks similarly, abbreviating words and speaking informally: “[O]ne day, arter Brer Fox bin doin’ all dat he could fer ter ketch Brer Rabbit” (20).

It should be noted, however, that the dialectic patterns represented by both characters are not wholly devoid of convention. Their sentence structures are, for the most part, standard, and unusual spellings are usually interspersed with traditional ones. This dynamic – a balancing between what is considered correct and incorrect English – draws one’s attention to the African Americans’ tenuous relationship with American society and the language forced upon them due to their enslavement.

Additionally, the resemblance between Uncle Julius’ dialect and the speech patterns of characters like Uncle Remus is not used to affirm the stereotype of the dim-witted and illiterate slave, although it may appear so upon initial reading. The apparent incorrectness of the speech conceals and later reveals the character’s mental prowess, conveying his ability to manipulate language to manipulate others. Additionally, his respectful language (referring to John as “suh” (4) and “marster” (13)) upon meeting John and Annie conveys a deferential and non-threatening disposition that endears him to them. Using language on these two fronts allows him to create a social identity that suits his needs. Although, as this tale demonstrates, his efforts do not always result in what appears to be the primary objective – in this case, John’s abandonment of the vineyard project – he is generally successful in further integrating himself into the lives of his counterparts in a financially beneficial manner. At the end of the tale, for instance, John hires Uncle Julius as a driver, solidifying his connection with the couple and making John’s purchase of the property less of a loss on his part (13).

Also reflected in this tale are instructive or “moralizing” (Ogunleye 436) functions of African American folklore. However, Chesnut’s attempts to teach a lesson through his writing fall outside the simplistic “how-to-behave” and “how-not-to-behave” categories outlined by Abrahams. There is no moment where Uncle Julius directly declares the tale’s point or



articulates which type his lesson falls into, leaving readers to reach their own conclusions based on the material alone. In general, the story informs the reader about the destructive power of slavery; however, a plethora of additional lessons are embedded in this overarching one.

The superstitious element of this tale also contributes to Chesnutt's subversive purpose, with the "goopher" cast by Aunt Peggy reflecting not only the power imbalance between enslaver and slave but also the lack of solidarity among the enslaved community. Aunt Peggy's willingness to employ her conjuring powers in exchange for "ten dollars" (7) to help McAdoo suggests that self-interest supersedes all other concerns under the institution. Although the character does attempt to help Henry later in the tale, her efforts ultimately prove futile. Thus, she is also complicit – to a degree – in preserving slavery as an institution, having acted against the interests of the oppressed by assisting the oppressor. Her failed attempt at reversing the "goopher" suggests that working for the oppressor is not a crime so easily undone and that selfishness can lead to undoing an already tenuously positioned community.

### **"Po' Sandy"**

The following story in the collection, "Po' Sandy," follows a similar format as the previous tale while further developing the framing story. This tale, containing another tragic ending in the form of a premature demise, further explores the human consequences of slavery and the lengths enslaved people may go to remain united with their loved ones. The tale begins by describing a "weatherbeaten" (14) schoolhouse that John is considering demolishing to build his wife a new kitchen. Uncle Julius drives the narrator and Annie to a lumberyard to purchase supplies for the construction, where the sawing of a piece of lumber triggers an outburst. Annie asks what the matter is, and Uncle Julius explains that "dat saw, a-cuttin' en grindin' thoo dat stick er timber, en moanin', en groanin,' en sweekin', kyars my 'memb'ance back ter ole times,

en ‘min’s me er po’ Sandy” (15). Annie is intrigued by this admission and encourages Uncle Julius to tell Sandy’s story.

Uncle Julius explains that Sandy was a slave who belonged to Mars Marrabo McSwayne. A good worker, he was sought after by his McSwayne’s adult children and was often lent to them. During one of Sandy’s absences, McSwayne sold his wife, citing financial difficulties (he gifts Sandy a dollar to make up for “break[ing] up de fambly” (16)). He replaces Sandy’s wife with a woman named Tenie, and the two form a relationship. When McSwayne again promises to send Sandy away – this time to his uncle in the distant Robeson – he despairs, believing the distance assures he will never return. Tenie then reveals that she is a conjure woman and concocts a plan to prevent Sandy’s departure. She turns him into a tree but turns him back into a human regularly. The plan works for some time; however, McSwayne eventually cuts down the tree, killing Sandy. McSwayne uses the timber to create the floorboards of the kitchen. Paranormal activity ensues, leading people to believe Sandy’s ghost haunts the kitchen. The kitchen is then demolished, and the schoolhouse is placed in its stead. Moved by the story, Annie convinces an incredulous John to abandon the renovation. Later, Uncle Julius arranges for the structure to be converted into a church, arguing, according to Annie, “that ghosts never disturb religious worship, but that if Sandy’s spirit should happen to stray into meeting by mistake, no doubt the preaching would do it good” (24).

This tale echoes the corruptive powers of slavery presented in the first tale, continuing Chesnut’s rejection of the mutually satisfying dynamic presented in plantation fiction. McSwayne’s position of authority within the institution of slavery, combined with prevailing misconceptions regarding African Americans’ emotional and intellectual capacities, prevents him from recognizing the significance of his careless separation of families. His failure to

appreciate Sandy's reasonable desire for his family to remain intact causes mental anguish, a desperate preventative act, and Sandy's demise. Like McAdoo, McSwayne's treatment of his slaves speaks to the human cost of slavery and the carelessness of its participants, once again challenging the archetypes of the benevolent and wise enslaver and the contented and grateful slave promoted in traditional plantation fiction. Here, it is Annie who voices in her own words – that is, in “standard” English – the point of Julius' tale: “‘What a system it was,’ she exclaimed, when Julius had finished, ‘under which such things were possible!’” (23).

Annie's ability to paraphrase Uncle Julius' point about the horrors of slavery de-emphasizes the sense of difference so often exaggerated in dialect fiction and highlights how these differences are not so significant that they inhibit human connection. Uncle Julius' unconventional speech patterns do not at all restrict his power as a storyteller, as Annie's comprehension demonstrates, and this dynamic ultimately allows Chesnut to use the conventions of what Gilligan defines as a traditionally anti-progress genre to actually encourage progress via the development of relationships that cross the racial divide.

The competing interests of local color fiction are also reflected here, with Chesnut using the novelty and unbelievability of Sandy's transformation to attract readers while layering the tale with subtext and symbolism. Again, he avoids being definitively classified as a visiting colorist by presenting these unique customs in ways that serve his didactic purposes. The intrigue associated with the conjuring act is countered by the gravity of mortality and enslavement, providing a balance necessary for the reflective and instructive elements of the tale to be discernable.

Readers may also discern the morally instructive aspect of African American folklore here, although potential lessons are numerous and interwoven. One general takeaway from the

tale is that, until change occurs, white supremacy will always prevail over minorities in contests of power – no matter what extreme actions they take to mitigate its negative influence. This lesson encourages Chesnutt’s predominantly white audience to take a more active role in addressing the pervasiveness of racial injustice in American society.

Finally, as with “The Goophered Grapevine,” the supernatural aspect of this tale is integral to its subversiveness and divergent sociopolitical message. The act of conjuring portrayed in this tale via Tenie increases the outlandishness established in the previous tale by transforming a man into an inanimate object. That the thing into which Sandy is turned is a tree is noteworthy given his desire to remain on the McSwayne’s property and thereby maintain the new family he has created with Tenie. This desire to obtain stability and security is essentially a desire to put down roots, making the decision to have him turned into a tree thematically and rhetorically appropriate.

Furthermore, the fact that this magical transformation allows the character to circumvent McSwayne’s will only temporarily reflects the impossibility of escaping the restrictive influence of slavery in the long term. Tenie’s conjuring powers, however impressive, still have their limitations, and these limitations are ultimately rooted in her subjugation and lack of social control. Here, Chesnutt affirms how slavery and racism place African Americans in an unjustified state of perpetual disadvantage. By depicting the ultimate powerlessness of his enslaved characters in the face of these hostile forces, Chesnutt makes them decidedly sympathetic, thereby encouraging his audience to reflect and reform.

### **“Mars Jeems’s Nightmare”**

In “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” Chesnutt’s subversion takes on a new dimension by presenting an incident in which the oppressive slave master is forced to experience the horrors of

slavery firsthand. By transforming a white character into an African slave, Chesnutt invites his white audience, put more directly in the shoes of the tale's black characters via Mars Jeems McLean and his transformation, to consider how they might react to such a reversal. The moment also conveys slavery's lack of moral legitimacy and highlights how the institution and the sense of false racial superiority upon which it is based are harmful to whites and blacks.

At the tale's beginning, we learn that John has also employed Uncle Julius' grandson, Tom. However, John finds Tom "untrustworthy" (26) and lets him go. When informed of this decision, Uncle Julius tries to convince him to give Tom another chance, saying he knows Tom is "ign'ant," but requests "one mo' chance" for the young man (26). John refuses, seemingly ending the discussion. Later, an encounter with a neighbor named Mr. McLean prompts another one of Uncle Julius' tales.

The framed story focuses on a slaveholder named Mars Jeems, whom Uncle Julius identifies as McLean's grandfather. Uncle Julius describes Mars Jeems as a "ha'd man, en monst'us stric' wid his han's" (37). The latter prohibits courting among his slaves and frequently separates those who wish to marry, not wanting them to be distracted from their work. Solomon, a victim of this cruelty, seeks Aunt Peggy to help facilitate the return of his partner. Aunt Peggy agrees, creating a "monst'us pow'ful kin' er goopher" (30) for the master to consume. She assures Solomon that it is not poison and will only cause Mars Jeems to have nightmares. Later, Mars Jeems leaves. He returns shortly thereafter as a black man but cannot remember his identity. Assumed to be an escaped slave, he is forced to work on the plantation and experiences the hardships of slavery firsthand. By the end of the tale, he is restored to his original state. However, his attitude toward his slaves drastically alters due to his experience, and he becomes a more lenient master.

The moral of this story, Uncle Julius explains, is twofold. First, he argues, the tale shows that “ha’d en stric” white people who “make no ‘lowance fer po’ ign’ant [blacks]...[are] li’ble ter hab bad dreams” (40). Second, it demonstrates that whites who are “kin’ en good ter po’ people is sho’ ter prosper en git ’long in de worl’” (40). These statements seemingly convince Annie to give Tom another chance if “he would try to do better” (40). John disagrees with the decision but acquiesces, giving Uncle Julius another victory.

The romanticized version of plantation life, as with the previous two stories, is again subverted here. At the tale’s opening, the Mars Jeems readers encounter is a cruel and strict figure who strays far from the notion of patriarchal benevolence. Additionally, his slaves, having been stripped of companionship and being worked harshly, are anything but content. The situation eventually improves when Mars Jeems is forced to experience the life of a slave after having been goophered by Aunt Peggy. His experience causes a change of heart, and he becomes the benevolent master so often depicted in plantation fiction.

One might interpret Mars Jeems’s reformation and adoption of the benevolent master identity as a happy ending that reinforces the idyllic vision of the antebellum South and local color fiction’s nostalgia and rejection of progress. However, while this tale appears to end seemingly optimistically, readers should not view it as ideal. Jeems’s improved attitude and less restrictive treatment of his slaves are beneficial, but it does not diminish the fact that they remain under his control. Chesnutt is not suggesting that the master’s change is an end in itself; instead, it is a small step toward comprehending the detrimental effects of slavery. Mars’ Jeems’s experience allows readers to recognize the mutually harmful impact of both slavery and racism. The moment also encourages them to reflect upon their past treatment of African Americans and adapt those behaviors positively to avoid learning the hard way, like Mars Jeems.

On its dialectic properties, this tale further affirms the sustainability of a tale told in non-standard English and the audience's ability to understand its thematic interests despite disparities in language use. As Annie's decision to be lenient toward Uncle Julius' grandson – a likely objective motivating his narrative presentation – demonstrates, nothing substantial is lost in affording Uncle Julius ample room to speak. This lack of reduction allows Chesnutt to, once more, highlight how communication, understanding, and, perhaps, progress can be achieved despite what may initially appear to be insurmountable differences. Thus, Chesnutt uses dialect to reject the negative assessments of progress frequently reinforced by traditional pieces of dialect fiction.

The influence of African American folklore and oral tradition tale is again reflected in the closing dialogue between John and Uncle Julius, wherein the narrator asks Julius if he “made up” the story by himself. Uncle Julius, seemingly offended, replies, “No, suh, I heared dat tale befo’ you er Mis’ Annie dere wuz bawn, suh. My mammy tol’ me dat tale w’en I wa’ n’t mo’ d’n knee-high ter a hopper-grass” (40). This response is telling in two critical ways. First, his reaction to the question of having “made up” the story alone emphasizes how these tales are products of continual collaboration. They cannot be attributed to one source, as each storyteller contributes something unique to the narrative. Second, Uncle Julius' claim that he heard the tale from his mother recalls how the preservation of these tales hinges on their being passed from one generation to the next. These details reveal to Chesnutt's audience the richness of African American culture and invite them to appreciate the similarities and differences between its storytelling practices and those of the dominant demographic.

This tale also reveals the philosophy Aunt Peggy applies to her conjuring endeavors, which adds a new layer to Chesnutt's employment of the trope. Her philosophy is informed

primarily by her position in the racial hierarchy, as evidenced by the statement, “En I has ter be kinder keerful ’bout cunj’in’ w’ite folks” (30). Here, Aunt Peggy expresses the seriousness of transgressing against her white counterparts. Uncle Julius also confirms her fear of being discovered and punished for her transgression concluding the tale: “Aun’ Peggy would ‘a’ ’nied it ef she had be’n ax’, fer she’d ‘a’ got in trouble sho’, ef it ‘uz knowed she’d be’n cunj’in’ de w’ite folks” (39) She engages in a kind of self-regulation, limiting the use of her powers to maintain a semi-stable space in society. This regulation speaks not only to her disadvantaged position, the need to restrict certain behaviors, and, again, her willingness to betray others to protect herself but also to how the power of the oppressive system under which she exists prevails over her own.

#### **“Sis’ Becky’s Pickaninny”**

“Sis Becky’s Pickaninny” further reflects upon the black communities’ association with superstition while further emphasizing the cruelties of slavery in a slightly different context. In Uncle Julius’ tale, Sis Becky’s master carelessly exchanges her for a horse, prompting the sympathetic intervention of Aunt Peggy. The framed tale ends with the reunion of mother and son, an achievement which would have been impossible without the conjure woman’s aid. The tale Uncle Julius tells is framed by his passing by John’s property. John notices that Uncle Julius carries a rabbit’s foot, believed by many as a token of good luck, and rebukes the older man for his superstitious ways:

[Y]our people will never rise in the world until they throw off these childish superstitions and learn to live by the light of reason and common sense. How absurd to



imagine that the fore-foot of a poor dead rabbit, with which he timorously felt his way along through a life surrounded by snares and pitfalls, beset by enemies on every hand, can promote happiness or success, or ward off failure or misfortune! (55)

In a rather humorous turn, Uncle Julius appears to agree, saying it is not the “fore-foot” that is lucky but the “hin’ foot” (55). The debate continues, with Uncle Julius maintaining that he has not experienced misfortune since he began carrying the charm. John and Annie remain unconvinced, prompting Uncle Julius to relay the tale of “Sis Becky’s Pickanniny,” which, he argues, “is a’ easy way ter prove” the charm’s legitimacy (56).

Uncle Julius explains that Sis Becky was a slave who belonged to “ole Kunnel Pen’leton” (60). She was married to another slave who lived on another plantation, but he was eventually sold after his master died, leaving her to care for their son, Mose, alone. After this loss, Sis Becky is comforted by Mose, who was “ez fon’ er his mammy ez his mammy wuz er him” (56). However, the family diminishes once more after Pendleton suffers losses at the races and decides to trade Sis Becky for a horse named Lightning Bug. Pendleton suggested that the man to whom Sis Becky has been exchanged also take Mose, citing a dislike “ter sen’ her ‘way fum her baby” (57), but he refuses.

Mose falls ill, ostensibly due to being separated from his mother, prompting his caretaker, Aunt Nancy, to request Aunt Peggy’s help. She agrees on the condition that she receives something in exchange for her services, stating, “you can’t ‘spec’ me ter was’e my time diggin’ roots en wukkin’ conj’ation fer nuffin” (60). After settling these conditions, she turns Mose into a hummingbird to allow him to visit his mother. His health improves temporarily, causing Aunt Peggy to transform the child into various avian creatures each time his condition worsens. Eventually, Aunt Nancy suggests that the conjurer use her powers to bring Sis Becky back. After

receiving a new handkerchief as payment, she causes Lightning Bug to become sick. An outraged Pendleton demands Sis Becky's return, arguing that the horse's previous owner knowingly sold him an unhealthy horse. After Sis Becky also falls ill, her new master agrees to send her back. Reunited with his mother, Mose would grow up to purchase his freedom and his mother's.

When John asks how the tale proves that a rabbit's hind foot is lucky, Uncle Julius responds that the answer is "plain 'nuff" (65) to him but allows Annie to explain. She says, "I rather suspect...that Sis' Becky had no rabbit's foot" (65). Uncle Julius confirms this, arguing that the ordeal could have been avoided if Sis Becky "had had a rabbit foot" (65). Later, Uncle Julius appears to have given the charm to Annie. Her health immediately improves, suggesting that the charm indeed possesses supernatural powers.

Again, Chesnutt dismisses in this tale the ideal vision of pre-Civil War Southern life and the mutually beneficial relationship between master and slave represented in plantation literature. Although Pendleton is somewhat sympathetic in attempting to keep Sis Becky and Mose together, represented by a few short lines of dialogue, his desire to purchase Lightning Bug and unwillingness to press the issue with the horse's owner prove more potent than his distaste for separating a family. His benevolence ends where economic necessity begins, meaning that he will always choose profit over the well-being of his slaves. Through this portrayal, Chesnutt reiterates the exploitative nature of slavery and the obscenity of treating human beings as currency.

The word "pickaninny" in this tale supplies some interesting interpretive material regarding Chesnutt's subversive employment of dialect and dialect fiction tropes. Also spelled "piccaninny," the colloquial term was used to refer, in a derogatory and offensive manner, to a

black child (“piccaninny, n. and adj.”). Uncle Julius’ use of this term initially suggests that his tale will somehow affirm the problematic caricaturing of black children; however, what follows is not a humorous and mean-spirited narrative but a poignant and thoughtful rumination on the bond between mother and child. As Uncle Julius’ tale demonstrates, Mose is not simply a grinning facade but a real child with the same need for nurturing and protection as any other infant. Thus, Chesnutt and his character use the term to bait his audience into making assumptions that they will ultimately challenge, using a dehumanizing term to initiate a humanizing narrative.

Chesnutt’s use of this term also sustains his balancing of local color interests while emphasizing a nuanced perspective of the American South. By prominently featuring that term, the author recalls the subject matter of previous contributions to the local color genre set in the uniquely situated American South. Unlike some of his less reform-minded colorists, however, Chesnutt does not reduce his characters to mere stereotypes and tropes for audience enjoyment. Instead, he uses the implications of those tropes to emphasize the gravity of African Americans’ plight in those Southern towns that his audience may find quaint.

In terms of the influence of African American folklore on the tale, Mose’s transformation into various birds is also worth noting here. As Samantha Hunsicker writes in “Fly Away Home: Tracing the Flying African Folktale from Oral Literature to Verse and Prose,” the concept of flight, represented in this tale by birds, figures into many African American folktales (4). In these tales, Hunsicker explains, “Africans transported from their homelands to the New World” escape from bondage and return to their homeland using the recently acquired ability to fly (13). Chesnutt’s tale seemingly diverges from this usual form by affording the power of flight to an American-born African character so that he may return not to his ancestral homeland but to his

mother. This change could be a metaphorical observation of the type of restoration represented in the original tales, with the child's flight to his mother symbolizing his antecedents' flight to Africa. However, it seems more likely, given Chesnut's desire to instigate moral reform and the establishment of a society that accepts African Americans as equal citizens, that he is trying to convey that the formerly enslaved and their descendants now belong not in Africa but in the United States (their new motherland due to their extensive, multi-generational presence).

As with the previous tales, Chesnut uses superstition to exploit his audience's disbelief, encouraging them to reconsider previous biases and open their minds to alternative possibilities. While John remains skeptical after hearing Uncle Julius' tale and its moral, Annie seemingly adopts his belief in the power of the rabbit's foot. Whether or not her carrying of the charm is responsible for improving her health, the correlation between her reception of the charm and her restored condition suggests that white Americans can benefit from listening to African Americans and taking their traditions and convictions seriously. This concept may seem obvious to the modern reader, but for Chesnut's audience in the late 1800s, the idea that African Americans could – and did – contribute something substantial and advantageous to mainstream society would have been relatively novel.

### **“Hot Foot Hannibal”**

The final story in *The Conjure Woman*, “Hot Foot Hannibal,” returns to the corruptive influence of slavery on the enslaved community. In its depiction of romantic rivalry, sabotage, and revenge, the tale highlights – like “The Goophered Grapevine” – how the institution encourages a lack of solidarity and demonstrates how this deficiency leads to tragedy and destruction.

The tale begins with a lover's quarrel involving Annie's younger sister Mabel and her suitor Malcolm Murchison. The conflict seems to have been severe enough to warrant Annie's speculation that it is "all over between them," claiming to have heard "things said that no woman of any spirit could stand" (82). John remains skeptical and hopes the relationship can be repaired so Mabel will marry and no longer be his ward. Some time passes with no reconciliation having been achieved. One evening, Uncle Julius drives the three characters to a nearby vineyard. Uncle Julius suggests taking the "big road," arguing that it makes for a more pleasant drive, but Annie insists on taking the shorter one (82). Uncle Julius relents, but along the way, the horse inexplicably stops, and he suggests that it senses the ghost of an enslaved woman named Chloe. Annie asks why Chloe haunts this part of the road, prompting the telling of the framed story, which took place approximately forty years earlier (84).

Chloe belongs to Mars Dugal McAdoo, who arranges for her to marry an enslaved man named Hannibal. However, she prefers Jeff and seeks Aunt Peggy's help in preventing the marriage. As the arranged engagement between Chloe and Hannibal is based on the master's assessment of the latter's work ethic, to which Jeff compares poorly, the conjurer decides to cast a goopher that will cause him to fall out of favor. She does this via "a baby doll, wid a body made out'n a piece er co'n-stalk, en wid splinters fer a'ms en laigs, en a head made out'n elderberry peth, en two little red peppers fer feet" (90). She explains that the doll is Hannibal and informs Jeff that if he places the doll under the floorboards of the big house, he will become "light-headed en hot-footed," and this will get " 'im inter trouble mighty soon" so that Jeff can replace him (87).

Jeff follows Aunt Peggy's instructions but fails to remove it after the plan succeeds, causing Hannibal to be sold. Hannibal learns of the scheme and seeks revenge, suggesting that

Jeff has been unfaithful to Chloe. Enraged, Chloe reveals the goopher to McAdoo, who sells Jeff in Hannibal's place. Jeff then drowns after jumping off a steamboat. Distraught by Jeff's death and the knowledge that Hannibal had lied about his infidelity, Chloe dies shortly thereafter. Mabel, seemingly moved by the tale, reconciles with and marries Murchison. The couple later employs Uncle Julius.

In this tale, Chesnutt once more subverts the conventions of plantation fiction but focuses more on deconstructing the contented slave archetype than establishing the master as a non-benevolent force. This is not to say that McAdoo positively impacts the tale's sequence of events, as the subsequent discussion will investigate. Instead, it is to say that Chesnutt appears less concerned about rejecting the benevolent master archetype after having already effectively done so in "Mars' Jeem's Nightmare"). Rather than reiterate the incorrectness of the paternalistic master, Chesnutt ends the collection by reasserting that most slaves were, in fact, not content to exist under such a repressive system. In so doing, he reminds his majority white audience that while slavery negatively impacted slaveholders, the ultimate victims were the enslaved.

As in "The Goophered Grapevine," Uncle Julius' tale demonstrates how selfishness and self-interest, encouraged by selective privileging, inhibit the cultivation of a strong community among the enslaved population. Because enslaved characters like Chloe, Hannibal, and Jeff exist in such a low state, they will desperately fight for any opportunity to elevate themselves. The betrayal and deception the three characters engage in highlight how this system morally degrades those subjugated within it and emphasizes how it breeds unnecessary pain and destruction.

Although this tale emphasizes the detrimental effect of slavery on relations within the black community, the influence of that system and its proxies still looms. Using the opportunities to work in the big house (a preferable alternative to working strenuously in the fields) and

marrying Chloe to incentivize Jeff and Hannibal to work hard, McAdoo instigates discord between the two characters. This discord borne of self-interest allows each participant to justify their deceptive behavior and ultimately facilitates the tale's tragic conclusion. Thus, while the three principal characters are more directly responsible for their misfortune, the impact of the system in which they exist remains significant.

One can also discern in this tale Chesnutt's sustained balancing between modes of local color writing while enhancing it with a sense of gravity that elevates its call for reform among his audience. This tale grounds its lighthearted, entertaining, and often unreal elements like its predecessors, with the voodoo doll and its humorous effects on Hannibal and Uncle Julius' often animated mode of delivery, being contrasted by the stark realities of death, violence, and human error. The genuine phenomena ultimately collide and collapse that previous sense of levity, demonstrating that Chesnutt is not writing merely to entertain but to persuade beneath the veneer of entertainment.

In terms of dialect, this tale further proves the effectiveness of stories told in non-standard English. Because of its unconventionality and lack of concern for linguistic propriety, Uncle Julius' liberated manner of speech can convey various layers of pathos that create an emotionally rich narrative. Readers can observe the power of Uncle Julius' speech in Annie and Mabel's passionate reactions to the tale, described by John: "I am sure I saw a tear in my wife's eye, and more than one in Mabel's" (93). This emotional reaction facilitates action from both parties, with Annie accepting Uncle Julius' recommendation to take the long road and Mabel's consequent reconciliation with Murchison. Here, Chesnutt further legitimizes his black characters' unique speech patterns and storytelling techniques by showing them fitter to convey the essence of human experience than more restrictive traditional modes of communication.

The instructive aspect of African American folktales is also reflected in this tale, although the potential lessons are numerous. As demonstrated by Mabel's decision to reconcile with Murchison, forgiveness is one likely takeaway. Another lesson – perhaps more recognizable for the reader than the characters – could be the general avoidance of deceitful or malicious acts. By the same token, the tale encourages developing an awareness of external influences to avoid manipulation. Ultimately, the overarching moral that encompasses all these lessons is the amorality and corruptibility of slavery and racism.

Finally, the specific conjuring ritual Chesnutt depicts in this tale is worth noting. Here, the author moves away from the transformative practices to feature what might be generally recognized as a “voodoo doll.” He employs this novel's magical object to convey the manipulation and lack of autonomy experienced by enslaved persons like Hannibal. The doll controls Hannibal's body, much like the institution of slavery, restricting his movement and putting him in undesirable positions that suit those who have power (sociopolitical or mystical) over him. By presenting the lack of autonomy experienced by enslaved people in this slightly veiled manner, Chesnutt emphasizes to his audience the subhuman treatment of black Americans and encourages his predominantly white audience to acknowledge their own culpability in maintaining such a dehumanizing system.

## **Conclusion**

Although Chesnutt's work did not instigate the kind of revolution he envisioned, it nevertheless left a lasting impact. His writing, Andrews argues, “established a truly African American literary tradition in the short story” (42). In so doing, he paved the way for future generations of black writers:

Because he was concerned with finding literary modes appropriate to his materials, he



left to his successors examples of the uses of ironic distance in an African American fiction of manners, a precedent for a black magical realism, a concept of tragedy for a people once regarded as merely grotesque or pitiable, and a sense of the comic potential of the trickster figure from African American folklore. (Andrews 32-33)

The author's manipulation of genre, language, and cultural customs and associations served his purposes of challenging prevailing racist stereotypes and encouraging moral progress, even if his audience was ultimately less willing to put those ideals into action than he may have hoped.

Andrews writes, "Chesnutt's achievement can be summed up succinctly: it was he who taught white America for the first time to respect a black fiction writer as a critical realist, even if it could not embrace him as a literary native son" (43). In other words, while Chesnutt seemed to have failed in his valiant attempt at creating a racially egalitarian society, he succeeded in convincing white mainstream audiences that black writers had a legitimate place in the literary marketplace and the cultural structure of America in general.

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