BLACKAMERICAN LITERATURE

1760-PRESENT

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with a Foreword by
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FOREWORD

White Americans were primarily responsible for developing the view that black Americans had no culture of their own or, if they did, it was both different from and inferior to theirs. Whites began early and worked hard to promote this view, especially during the height of the anti-slavery controversy. They succeeded in convincing themselves of the barrenness of the souls of black folk and of the hopelessness of their ever being able to rise above their generally degraded position. They spent a remarkable amount of time and energy arguing that persons of African descent had no intellect, no capacity to assimilate any knowledge except the most rudimentary kind, and surely no talent for expressing themselves clearly, to say nothing of felicitously. Thus, the Calhouns, Cartwrights, Notts, Hammonds, and a host of others, created for themselves—and for white America in general—a character that they desperately needed: a black man who was physically unattractive, intellectually incompetent, and spiritually degraded. This image would somehow justify slavery and their barbarous exploitation of the slaves themselves.

This was most unfortunate, even tragic. It made for specious reasoning and inaccurate conclusions wherever Negroes were concerned. It also deprived whites of any opportunity whatever to understand how and in what ways their "darker brother" was a part of the

swinging his legs and smoking. "Why, there isn't even a girl worth getting up a respectable flirtation with," he growled. Just then his eye caught a tall, willowy figure hurrying toward him on the narrow path. He looked with interest at first, and then burst into a laugh as he said, "Well, I declare, if it isn't Jennie, the little brown kitchen-maid! Why, I never noticed before what a trim little body she is. Hello, Jennie! Why, you haven't kissed me since I came home," he said gaily. The young girl stared at him in surprise and confusion,—faltered something inarticulate, and attempted to pass. But a willful mood had seized the young idler, and he caught at her arm. Frightened, she slipped by; and half mischievously he turned and ran after her through the tall pines.

Yonder, toward the sea, at the end of the path, came John slowly, with his head down. He had turned wearily homeward from the schoolhouse; then, thinking to shield his mother from the blow, started to meet his sister as she came from work and break the news of his dismissal to her. "I'll go away," he said slowly; "I'll go away and find work, and send for them. I cannot live here longer." And then the fierce, buried anger surged up into his throat. He waved his arms and hurried wildly up the path.

The great brown sea lay silent. The air scarce breathed. The dying day bathed the twisted oaks and mighty pines in black and gold. There came from the wind no warning, not a whisper from the cloudless sky. There was only a black man hurrying on with an ache in his heart, seeing neither sun nor sea, but starting as from a dream at the frightened cry that woke the pines, to see his dark sister struggling in the arms of a tall and fair-haired man.

He said not a word, but, seizing a fallen limb, struck him with all the pent-up hatred of his great black arm; and the body lay white and still beneath the pines, all bathed in sunshine and in blood. John looked at it dreamily, then walked back to the house briskly, and said in a soft voice, "Mammy, I'm going away, —I'm going to be free."

She gazed at him dimly and faltered, "No'th, honey, is yo' gwine No'th agin?"

He looked out where the North Star glistened pale above the waters, and said, "Yes, mammy, I'm going—North."

Then, without another word, he went out into the narrow lane, up by the straight pines to the same winding path and seated himself on the great black stump, looking at the blood

where the body had lain. Yonder in the gray past he had played with that dead boy, romping together under the solemn trees. The night deepened; he thought of the boys at Johnstown. He wondered how Brown had turned out, and Carey? And Jones,—Jones? Why, *he* was Jones, and he wondered what they would all say when they knew, when they knew, in that great long dining-room with its hundreds of merry eyes. Then as the sheen of the starlight stole over him, he thought of the gilded ceiling of that vast concert hall, and heard stealing toward him the faint sweet music of the swan. Hark! was it music, or the hurry and shouting of men? Yes, surely! Clear and high the faint sweet melody rose and fluttered like a living thing, so that the very earth trembled as with the tramp of horses and murmur of angry men.

He leaned back and smiled toward the sea, whence rose the strange melody, away from the dark shadows where lay the noise of horses galloping, galloping on. With an effort he roused himself, bent forward, and looked steadily down the pathway, softly humming the "Song of the Bride,"—

"Freudig gefuhrt, ziehet dahin."

Amid the trees in the dim morning twilight he watched their shadows dancing and heard their horses thundering toward him, until at last they came sweeping like a storm, and he saw in front that haggard white-haired man, whose eyes flashed red with fury. Oh, how he pitied him,—pitied him,—and wondered if he had the coiling twisted rope. Then, as the storm burst round him, he rose slowly to his feet and turned his closed eyes toward the Sea.

And the world whistled in his ears.

Charles Chesnutt 1858–1932

THE WIFE OF HIS YOUTH*

Charles Chesnutt was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and spent his boyhood and youth in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Not progressing beyond grade school, he nevertheless prepared himself to teach in the country schools there, and at twenty-three years of age became a principal of the State Normal School in Fayetteville. Wanting more out of his life, he returned North, first

*The text is from *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, Boston, 1899.

to New York, then to settle in Cleveland. He studied law and passed the bar, taught himself stenography, and fused these activities into a prosperous business of law stenography, which he maintained until his death. His wife and children followed him North and the family began to move in the best circles of Cleveland society. Two of his daughters received their degrees from Smith College and one son was enrolled at Harvard.

Chesnutt's literary career began modestly with a few sketches and stories printed in newspapers and periodicals. In 1887 *The Atlantic Monthly* accepted one of his simulated folktales, "The Goophered Grapevine" and within the year "Po' Sandy" received national attention. His race was not made known until he began to negotiate with the publishing house of Houghton Mifflin & Company to gather his "conjure" stories into a single volume:

> There is one fact which would give this volume distinction—though I must confess that I do not know whether it would help or hurt its reception by critics or the public. It is the first contribution by an American of acknowledged African descent to purely imaginative literature.
>
> In this case, the infusion of African blood is very small—is not in fact a visible admixture—but it is enough, combined with the fact that the writer was practically brought up in the South, to give him a knowledge of the people whose description is attempted. . . .
>
> I should not want this fact to be stated in the book, nor advertised, unless the publisher advised it; first, because I do not know whether it would affect its reception favorably or unfavorably, or at all; secondly, because I would not have the book judged by any standard lower than that set for other writers.*

The book, *The Conjure Woman,* was printed in 1899 and Chesnutt was accorded the kind of welcome that led him immediately to compile a second volume of tales, *The Wife of His Youth, and Other Stories of the Color-Line.* The two books taken together represent Chesnutt's own shift from Fayetteville to Cleveland. In the second collection of stories he depicts the conflicts that beset people of color as they strive to live decently in urban society. Swamps and groves give way to streets and fine houses, witchcraft to midnight suppers, superstitious uneducated field hands and house servants to light-skinned women in brocades and gentlemen who have acquired their fortunes in professions and trades; efforts to outwit the master give way to efforts to rise in society, and finally the sense of the comic—the wistful, the

*Helen M. Chestnutt, *Charles Waddell Chestnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, 1952), pp. 68-69.

amiable buffoonery of the "conjure" stories—gives way before an increasingly bitter awareness of the color barrier.

For Chesnutt was now thinking less of being judged on his craftsmanship and more of the need to prod Black and white America to abandon the practice of caste discrimination. A new seriousness directed his efforts in three subsequent novels. His protest sharpened, his narrative resolutions became less facile. As he reached toward the sardonic, ultimately the tragic, his success dwindled until he recognized that fiction could not effect social change. He published no more fiction in the remaining twenty-seven years of his life.

I

Mr. Ryder was going to give a ball. There were several reasons why this was an opportune time for such an event.

Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins. The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a certain Northern city shortly after the war. Its purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement. By accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were generally speaking, more white than black. Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins. The suggestion was readily adopted by those who were not of the favored few, and since that time the society, though possessing a longer and more pretentious name, had been known far and wide as the "Blue Vein Society," and its members as the "Blue Veins."

The Blue Veins did not allow that any such requirement existed for admission to their circle, but, on the contrary, declared that character and culture were the only things considered; and that if most of their members were light-colored, it was because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership. Opinions differed, too, as to the usefulness of the society. There were those who had been known to assail it violently as a glaring example of the very prejudice from which the colored race had suffered most; and later, when such critics had succeeded in getting on the inside they had been heard to maintain with zeal and earnestness that the society was a lifeboat, an anchor, a bulwark and a shield,

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larger picture of American life and culture. Under such circumstances they could not understand that Negroes had anticipated whites in some approaches to their problems. They had even developed literary forms peculiar to their needs before such forms were understood or appreciated by whites. What was perhaps even worse was that it became impossible for whites to understand that in very significant ways blacks and whites together, even if not in conscious cooperation with each other, formed important features of the literary and cultural traditions that would survive the ignorance as well as the persistent denials that such a joint enterprise ever existed.

Few if any white Americans perceived as early as Negro Americans the problem of color as a fundamental deterrent to the realization of American democracy. During the American Revolution, Paul Cuffe, deprived of the franchise and therefore of representation, refused to pay his taxes and went to jail to underscore the problem of color in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, smarting under the criticism directed toward the conduct of Philadelphia Negroes during the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, defended their conduct, told of their sacrifices, and made it clear that it was sheer color prejudice that brought on them the undeserved strictures of white Philadelphians. In 1829 David Walker, in his *Appeal in Four Articles,* declared that the degradation of slaves was, in part, a direct consequence of their color. Thus, long before DuBois declared that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line and long before that timid muckraker, Ray Stannard Baker, sought to follow that color line, Negro Americans knew that it existed and wrote of it with a clear understanding of its nature and extent.

Slaves and ante-bellum free Negroes were in the vanguard in attacking institutions and practices that justified their enslavement and degradation. It was not the twentieth-century environmentalists but some Philadelphia blacks in 1794 who really formulated the irrefutable argument that if a black child had precisely the same environment and opportunities that a white child had, there would be no difference in their performances. When whites were busy creating the myth of the old plantation with highly cultured masters and docile, happy slaves, Frederick Douglass in 1845 and William Wells Brown in 1853 were attacking the myth and asserting that the master was not any more cultured than his slaves were really docile or truly happy. The myth of the North as the haven for the Negro was assaulted by Moses Roper, a slave escaped to New York who wrote in 1840, and by Frank Webb, a talented young black writer, who described in vivid detail the experience of the Negro in Philadelphia, in 1857.

Negroes did not invent American autobiography. There are examples of it in early colonial literature. The slave narratives were,

however, a very special kind of autobiographies that were not only apologies for their authors' existence, but also arguments against the kind of existence to which they had been subjected. Nor can it be successfully argued that white abolitionists were the originators of the slave narrative as a literary form or that they were the ghost writers of all of them. In the late eighteenth century, long before the Garrisons and the Whittiers had begun even to consider assuming an abolitionist posture, Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, the African, had written his own narrative. And it was Vassa who first effectively used the events of a slave's life as the basis for attacking slavery and the slave trade. A half-century later, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, whom no one would seriously suggest as having used ghost writers, would continue to set forth in the narratives of their own lives the philosophical and practical arguments against human bondage.

Only persons of African descent experienced slavery over a long period of time. Even if slavery degraded the enslaver, as Thomas Jefferson and Fanny Kemble insisted, only the slave knew the depths of that degradation. Thus, only they could sing what DuBois has called "The Sorrow Songs." It was a special, deeply personal and bitter experience that called forth such sorrow songs as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Steal Away to Jesus." Only the slaves themselves knew and deeply felt the double meaning of many of them. Perhaps the songs did evoke a special desire to be released from earthly toils after this life, but they also consoled the slaves and encouraged them to seek a release from earthly toils during this life. In that sense they were as incendiary and as revolutionary as the strident *Appeal* of David Walker or the defiant abolitionism of Frederick Douglass. The remarkable thing about these spirituals was that in them the slaves had achieved an art form that provided pleasure for the unsuspecting master and balm for the weary bondsman.

If some Negro Americans, slave and free, seized any available opportunity to express their own views of American life, in whatever form that seemed most appropriate, it should not be surprising that their "special status" called forth special—even unique—ways of expressing themselves. If this called for the use of hitherto unknown or rarely used modes of expression, they did it as naturally and as effortlessly as any people would do at this or any other time. Meanwhile, others found opportunities in ways and forms that were more typical of the times in which they lived. But it cannot be claimed that in doing so they were engaged in mimicry. Phillis Wheatley was a New England poet who absorbed the current literary practices and, in turn, contributed to them. Absalom Jones and Michael Fortune celebrated Christianity in sermon and song, as did their white contemporaries. A "Sermon of Thanksgiving" or a "New Year's Anthem"

become no less original or no less a part of American religious literature of the early nineteenth century merely because they were written by black men.

The folk sermon became a part of American religious liturgy after the Methodists introduced a special brand of evangelicalism in the New World in the eighteenth century. From that point on, black and white preachers alike carried "The Word" to the masses, using similar techniques and similar challenges. If some of the materials of the Negro preachers grew out of the peculiar experiences of their people, the forms as well as the objectives were a part of the religious stirrings of the times.

The writings of Negro Americans that Miss Miller has brought together in this volume illustrate not only a rich variety of talent but an unmistakable involvement of the authors in the growth and development of American literature. They were no more conscious of their involvement in the process than were their white contemporaries. Like some white writers, some black writers were among those who were out in front in the development of forms and techniques peculiar to their needs. Others, black and white, were less spectacular in their originality and used what was all around them, adapting it to their own purposes. All of them, of whatever race, added to the richness of American life and literature. Surely, as far as Negro Americans are concerned, this volume is an eloquent witness to that fact.

—John Hope Franklin

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