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Social and moral forces in Charles W. Chesnutt's fiction

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Abstract
In his fiction Charles W. Chesnutt is a realist who recognizes that literature is a strong social and moral force in society and that his fiction could affect positive changes in a society. Chesnutt senses that the central issues of life tend to be ethical, that is, issues of conduct and practice in society. He has a strong belief that many Americans were morally ready to hear a black author's realistic voice on racial matters. His goal, then, is a moral revolution based on the elevation of the whites. For this reason he wrote novel such as *The Marrow of Tradition*.
Consequently Chesnutt's literary focus is on social and moral issues of the post-Civil War era as well as on the injustices of the pre-Civil War era. His technique is to create character stereotypes and predictable plots which fit his purpose. He uses his characters to convey social truths concerning the South.
His fiction also portrays interpersonal relationships existing between persons of mixed-race and other blacks, blacks toward other blacks, and blacks and persons of mixed-race toward Southern and Northern white people. This chapter will also present, through the novel *The Marrow of Tradition* his perspective on social and moral issues facing blacks and persons of mixed-race in the South.

Keywords: Social, moral forces, literature

1. Introduction
Charles W. Chesnutt, America's first great Black novelist, lived in the distinct political, social and cultural environment that found expression in his literary works. By analyzing the works of a writer, the general insights of the author's contemporary environment can be gained - the world he grows up in and the world he later writes to. Charles W. Chesnutt is not an exception, and his novels reveal the harsh world of prejudice and social indifference in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He addressed a culture dominated by the myth of white superiority and black inferiority.
Chesnutt's purpose in his fiction is to present a perspective of racial tensions and social issues confronting Southern whites and blacks that differed from the perspective presented by writers of the plantation tradition fiction. Since black authors from 1853 to the 1890s basically reflected the themes of plantation tradition fiction and thus ignored social and political issues facing blacks in the 1890s, this analysis of Chesnutt's fiction is made to determine whether he did present a differing perspective of slavery and of white-black issues in the South.
In his fiction Chesnutt, as a realist who recognizes that literature is a strong social and moral force in society and that his fiction could affect positive changes in a society, senses that the central issues of life tend to be ethical. He has a strong belief that many Americans were morally ready to hear a black author's realistic voice on racial matters. His goal, then, is a moral revolution based on the elevation of the whites.

1.1 The Marrow of Tradition
In *The Marrow of Tradition* Major Carteret serves as the spokesman for the white population. He is troubled by the results of the last state election. As a staunch advocate for white supremacy, Carteret drafts an editorial concerning the election results. His theme is that the black is unfit to participate in government due to his limited education, his lack of experience, his criminal tendencies, and his "hopeless mental and physical inferiority to the white race." His position negates any possibility for equality. Furthermore, he argues that "the white and black races could never attain social and political harmony by commingling their blood."He believes that "no two inassimilable races could ever live together except in the relation of superior and inferior."
The issue of racial superiority in Carteret's thinking is put to a practical test in his own household. When his son faces possible surgery, Carteret does not permit Dr. William Miller, a person of mixed-race by racial definition and a noted surgeon, to enter his house to assist Dr. Burns. Carteret's certain principles are certain inflexible rules of conduct by which he regulates his life. One of these ". . . forbids the recognition of the Negro as a social equal."
Two additional proponents of white supremacy join Major Carteret in the effort to limit the social and political rights of blacks: General Belmont and Captain McBane. Belmont, a lawyer by profession and a former owner of slaves, is actively involved in state and local politics. Belmont believes in the "divine right of white men and gentlemen . . . he permitted no fine scruples to stand in the way of success." Captain McBane had held a contract with the State for its convict labor, but he lost that contract when the Fusion government abolished the system of convict labor. McBane sees blacks as a "scrub race, an affliction to the country." Thus both men have personal and economic reasons to limit the power of blacks. Their belief in white supremacy prompts this trio-Carteret, Belrnont, and McBane--to set as their goals the repeal of the Fifteenth Amendment on the national level. Their goal on the

state level is "to confine the negro to an inferior condition for which nature had evidently designed for him" through changes in the state constitution. Franchise for blacks must be terminated for the welfare of the state.

Chesnutt develops stereotyped characters such as General Belmont, and George McBane, Major Carteret to represent traditional concepts of white supremacy and superiority. Their beliefs and actions provide support for Chesnutt's theme of man's inhumanity to man. The practices of George McBane demonstrate Chesnutt belief is that practices of racial inequality and racial injustice are still much in evidence in the South.

Chesnutt notes, however, that historically the people of North Carolina were content with the status quo: "The anti-Negro legislation in more southern states, with large negro majorities, had awakened scarcely an echo in this state." Due to this situation Carteret vows to arouse the white citizenry to action.

An opposing spokesman in Wellington is Barber, the editor of the Record, a black newspaper. In his editorial he maintains that the lynching of blacks occurred, not for crimes committed, but for voluntary acts which might naturally be expected to follow from the miscegenation laws by which it was sought, in all the Southern states, to destroy liberty of contract, and, for the purpose of maintaining a fanciful purity of race, to make crimes of marriages to which neither nature nor religion nor the laws of other states interposed an insurmountable his editorial, then, is an indictment of the laws and social system of the South as they relate to racial intermarriage.

Carteret later uses this editorial to inflame the emotions of the white population of Wellington. The doctrine of white supremacy also influences the entire legal system in Wellington. When Mrs. Ochiltree is murdered in her bedroom, whites immediately direct suspicion toward the black community. Chesnutt states, "The mere suggestion that the crime had been committed by a negro was equivalent to proof against any negro that might be suspected and could not prove his innocence."

For example, when Sandy Campbell, a loyal servant of Mr. Delamere, is arrested for the murder, McBane calls for immediate action, "Burn the nigger; we seem to have the right nigger but whether we have or not, burn nigger. It is an assault upon the white race . . . committed by the black race.... we shall hold the whole race responsible for the misdeeds of each individual." Chesnutt directly criticizes this Southern method of justice that immediately pins the guilt on any available black.

Carteret illogically sees the murder of Mrs. Ochiltree, "the logical and inevitable result of the conditions that have prevailed in this town." He immediately prints an extra edition of the Morning Chronicle to state that "the drastic efforts were necessary to protect the white women of the south against brutal, lascivious, and murderous assault at the hands of negro men." When Watson, a black attorney, pleads with Judge Everton for his help to halt plans to lynch Sandy, the judge states that, although lynching was, "as a rule unjustifiable, . . . there were exceptions to all rules . . . the sovereign people might assert itself and take the law into its own hands. . .."He adds that the burden of proof for Sandy's innocence rests on the black community: "If he is innocent, then produce the real criminal."

Sandy is freed only after Mr. Delamere tells Carteret that he has the evidence to prove that his grandson, Tom Delamere, is the murderer. Tom Delamere, a gambler, a cheat at cards, and a murderer, typifiesan erosion of the Southern aristocratic family. Tom is a direct contrast to Mr. Delamere who is morally upright, honest, and typifies the highest form of Southern aristocratic idealism in plantation tradition fiction.

The doctrine of white supremacy advocated in the editorial column of the Morning Chronicle resulted in new efforts to discourage blacks for voting on election-day in 1898. Watson informs Dr.Miller that armed white men "disarmed the colored people, killing half' a dozen in the process. . . They have formed a provisional city government. . . and have ordered me and half a dozen other fellows to leave town in forty-eight hours."

Carteret realizes that efforts to "keep the Negroes in their places" have led to rioting, bloodshed, and arson. He states with regret to Ellis, "They are burning houses and killing women and children. . . .I did not intend wholesale murder and arson."

Although he desired power and control in Wellington, he is powerless to check the excesses. The mob is in control. Chesnutt states, "Their (the mob's) present course was but the logical outcome of the crusade which the Morning Chronicle had preached . . . for many months." During the day's events a stray bullet kills Dr. Miller's son, the mob burns Dr. Miller's hospital, and Josh Green's group of armed blacks dies in a battle with armed whites.

Chesnutt's portrayal of Wellington as a "seething cauldron of unrestrained passions," leads him to dramatize four possible avenues of actions to be taken by blacks in Wellington in particular and in the South in general.

The first course of action is exemplified by Jerry Letlow's assuming the attitude of humility and his relationships with whites where he accepts his role as a servant to resist it. "If we made any trouble, it would merely delay your journey and imperil a life. . . I'll go into the other car. "Thus he conforms to the laws of the state in order to assist Dr. Burns further more. When Josh Green asks Dr. Miller to be the leader of his radical band, Miller pleads for them to adopt a position of accommodation:

> "Listen men . . . we would only be throwing our lives away. Suppose we . . . won a temporary victory. By morning every train . . . every road leading into Wellington, would be crowded with white men . . . with arms in their hands, curses on their lips, and vengeance in their hearts . . .They would kill us in the fight, or they would hang us afterwards . .. Our time will come,--the time when we can command respect for our rights; but it is not yet in sight."

The principle of accommodation is put to the test when Carteret requests Dr. Miller to come to his home to attend to his critically ill son after the riot. Miller, grief-stricken due to the accidental shooting of his only son by the mob refuses to come. He States, ".there he lies dead . . . because you and a handful of your friends thought you must override the laws and this town at any cost! My duty is here, by the side of my dead child and my suffering wife! I cannot go with you."

However, when Mrs. Carteret pleads with him and then with his wife, who is Mrs. Carteret's half-sister, he agrees to go,

but only after his wife, Janet, gives her permission. He bases his action upon the principle of accommodation. Even though Mrs. Carteret "had and slighted and ignored the existence of his wife for all her life,"he now accompanies Mrs. Carteret to her residence.

Chesnutt's focus then is upon the Carterets, who represent the pride and prejudices of the New South aristocracy, and upon the Millers, who represent the New Black in the South. Through accommodation the two racial groups can avoid racial violence and bloodshed; through accommodation the two racial groups can perhaps learn to live together in a measure of harmony. Miller, who had studied medicine in the North, as well as in Paris and Vienna, returned to the South to establish a medical practice. He spent part of his inheritance to build a hospital in Wellington. Chesnutt writes, "he had been strongly tempted to leave for the South, and seek a home for his family and acareer for himself in the North, where people had needed him, and he had wished to help them.… "Chesnutt's development of Dr. Miller's character portrays his belief that persons of mixed-race can achieve success as doctors in the South and do make valuable contributions as role models for black youth.

This novel also portrays Chesnutt's long-range hope that the conceptof white supremacy will diminish and that the bias toward intermarriage between races will lessen in the future. For example, through the perspective of Dr. Miller, Chesnutt expresses his view that ultimately racial prejudice will die in the South, "He liked to believe that the race antagonism which hampered his progress and that of his people was a mere temporary thing, the outcome of former conditions, and bound to disappear in time...."

Chesnutt's hope is that well-educated blacks such as Dr. Miller and Attorney Watson can make valuable contributions in medical and legal circles. These contributions to the community could change the whites' perceptions toward blacks. However, this optimism does not seem very realistic in view of the Wellington riot. Chesnutt also projects an element of hope in the scene where Carteret pleads with Dr. Millerto come to his home. Carteret had earlier realized that his editorials were responsible for the murders and arsons in Wellington. The mob's cheer for him as the champion of white supremacy, now make him ashamed of his leadership role in the town. This shift in attitude as an influential editor may result in a higher level of tolerance toward black citizens.

Chesnutt's optimism that racial prejudice will diminish in the South is seen in the reconciliation that occurs between Mrs. Olivia Carteret and Mrs. Janet Miller. Olivia is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Merkell. When Mrs. Merkell died, Merkell secretly married Julia Brown, his black maid, since marriage between white and coloured persons was forbidden by law. Janet is the daughter of Merkell and Julia. Janet, for twenty-five years, longs for Olivia's acceptance of her as her sister. She desires a kind word, a smile, or a nod that would give evidence that Olivia recognizes her as her sister. Janet realizes that Olivia had shunned her because she is a person of mixed race. Now, 25 years later, Olivia recognizes and accepts Janet as her sister.

Olivia's acceptance of Janet as her sister is a major victory of racial acceptance. This decision is a moral choice by Olivia and focuses squarely on a moral and sociological turn given by Chesnutt in this novel. This acceptance of Janet as her sister is one aspect of Chesnutt's literary campaign to revise the image of people of mixed blood.

Another element of hope concerning the lessening of racial tensions is seen in Carteret's invitation to Dr. Miller to ascend the stairs of the Carteret home to attend to the Carterets' ailing son. This is an important shift in attitude by Carteret as earlier he had refused Dr. Burns' request that Miller assist him in treating Carteret's son. Evans' statement, "There's time enough, but none to spare," reflects Chesnutt's belief that the wounds of injustice and racial bitterness can heal just as Felix Carteret may be healed of his illness. Future generations in the New South may be able to transcend the element of color and accept each other as equals. But for the present time, no real unity or reconciliation is possible.

Another indication of hope that racial tensions are lessening is seen in the fact that Dr. Miller, the son of an ex-slave, could become a respected physician in the community and that a young black woman could become a nurse is also evidence that the New Black is making that progress in the South. Chesnutt also expresses his growing concern of racial reconciliation. He notes that the era of slavery is over, but the era of Reconstruction government is also over. The revision of the Black Code laws to include black freedmen, the proliferation of Jim Crow laws, the renewed efforts to deny blacks the right to vote and hold office--these actions now trouble a new generation.

Chesnutt portrays his despair through several events in this novel: Dr. Miller's hospital to serve the black population is destroyed, mob rule is responsible for the deaths of numerous blacks, black leaders such as Attorney Watson are forced to leave Wellington, and the movement to disfranchise blacks' triumphs. His despair is also evident through his portrayal of a judge and a sheriff who waver on the issue of a prisoner's rights. Thus Chesnutt's overall theme stresses man's inhumanity to man, despair over hope, and regress over progress. Chesnutt presents no immediate solution to the racial conflicts present in Wellington.

In the early part of the 1900s, Chesnutt became increasingly concerned about economic conditions in the South that affected poor whites and blacks alike. Thus his next novel of purpose, *The Colonel's Dream*, focuses more on the economic issues than on political issues as evident in *The Marrow of Tradition*. Chesnutt's continuing concern for the welfare of the black population as well as his concern for the white laboring class in the early 1900s is evident in *The Colonel's Dream.*

2. References

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