

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 5: George Washington Cable (1844-1925)

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Source: [American Lit Chronology](#)

In his early novels and stories, George Washington Cable gave us perhaps our most memorable view of the drama of multicultural Louisiana in the nineteenth century, especially of New Orleans Creole life. Born in New Orleans in 1844,

Cable was of New England Puritan background on his mother's side and of a Virginia slaveholding family of German descent on his father's side. Upon the death of his father, Cable had to leave school at age fourteen to take a job at the New Orleans customhouse. At nineteen, during the Civil War, Cable enlisted in the Fourth Mississippi Cavalry, little knowing that he was providing himself with an experience that would form the basis of one of his most popular novels.

After the war Cable obtained a position as a surveyor of the Atchafalaya River levees, contracted malaria, and was incapacitated for two years. Taking advantage of the enforced "leisure," he began writing and started to contribute a column to the New Orleans Picayune. In 1869 Cable married Louise Bartlett, with whom he was to have five children. As he established a home in New Orleans, he worked as bookkeeper for a cotton firm after a brief stint as a newspaper reporter. - James Robert Payne, [Heath Anthology Introduction](#)

Primary Works

Old Creole Days, 1879; *The Grandissimes*, 1880, rev. 1883; *Madame Delphine*, 1881; *Dr. Sevier*, 1884; *John March, Southerner*, 1894; *The Negro Question*, ed. Arlin Turner, 1955.

Achievement

"... when it comes down to moral honesty, limpid honesty, and utterly blameless piety, the Apostles were mere policemen (compared) to Cable." - Mark Twain

In his writings, George W. Cable sketched life of his native Louisiana and New Orleans. In a time of Howellsian "smiling aspects" as representative of American society, Cable wrote of violence and death, of racial intermarriage, and of contradictions and complexities. Recognized today as one the South's most acute social critics, Cable attacked political corruption and advocated civil rights for the Blacks. He wrote of a vanishing Creole culture, of social classes, and of the baggage of the past and its consequences on the present.

Selected Bibliography 1980-Present

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Disheroon-Green, S. and Lisa Abney. eds. *Songs of Reconstructing South: Building Literary Louisiana, 1865-1945*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2002.

Elfenbein, Anna S. *Women on the Color Line: Evolving Stereotypes and the Writings of George Washington Cable, Grace King, Kate Chopin*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1994.

Kilcup, Karen L. ed. *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1999.

Ladd, Barbara. *Nationalism and the Color Line in George W. Cable, Mark Twain, and William Faulkner*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1996.

Petry, Alice H. *A Genius in His Way: The Art of Cable's Old Creole Days*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1988.

Roberson, William H. *George W. Cable: An Annotated Bibliography*. 1982.

Turner, Arlin. *George W. Cable, a biography*. Durham: Duke UP, 1956. PS1246 .T8

Turner, Arlin. ed. *Critical Essays on George W. Cable*. Boston: Hall, 1980.

Study Questions

1. (a) Consider and discuss how mob violence as represented in the charivari scene in "Jean-ah Poquelin" prefigures lynch mob and other violence in the South of Cable's day and in later periods.

(b) Consider how the critical realist Cable undercuts romantic myths of the "noble aristocracy" of the "Old South."

2. (a) In an essay, discuss the significance of Cable's method of representing American language in relation to his themes. Hint: Remember that American language does not always mean English. Consider his representation of communication in French and, depending on which of Cable's works are being studied, other languages.

(b) Consider residual romantic tendencies in the fiction of the southern realist George Washington Cable.

(c) In an essay, discuss and demonstrate--with specific references to passages of Cable's fiction--how Cable undercuts ethnic stereotyping in his work.

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