

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

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Chapter 6: Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932)

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Primary Works

"The Goophered Grapevine" ([E-Text](#)), 1887; "Po' Sandy" ([E-Text](#)), 1888; *The Cojure Woman*, 1899; *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* ([E-Text](#)), 1899; "The Bouquet" ([E-Text](#)), 1899; "Dave's Neckliss" ([E-Text](#)), 1899; "Hot-Foot Hannibal" ([E-Text](#)), 1899; *The House Behind the Cedars* ([E-Text](#)), 1900; *The Marrow of Tradition*, 1901; *The Colonel's Dream*, 1905.

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| [Top](#) | Charles Waddell Chesnutt (1858-1932): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Bethany Kirk

Charles Waddell Chesnutt was the first child of six born to Andrew Jackson Chesnutt and Anne Maria Sampson in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858. They were free blacks who had been forced to move north due to mounting racial tensions over slavery. They remained in Ohio until the end of the civil war in 1865, after which they returned to North Carolina, their home state.

As both of Chesnutt's parents were products of mixed racial relations, he had "features that barely distinguished him from whites" (Browner).

His separation from his fellow Blacks . . . was forced upon the young Chesnutt by his light color and the fact that he did not really fit into any group in the South . . . it is clear that he recognized and deeply felt this social cleavage which was forced upon him. This led him to lament directly in his Journal at age twenty-three how he was "neither fish, flesh, nor fowl"; we can feel the sense of estrangement which the position placed upon him (Heermance 67).

It's no wonder that he became an advocate for equality between the races and by this ambition became "recognized as a pioneer in treating racial themes" (NC Writer). He was the "first to speak out uncompromisingly, but artistically, on the problems facing his people (McElrath 139). The increased prejudice and "violence against African-Americans at the turn of the century thus went hand in hand with a national narrative of union and reconciliation" (Kawash 92).

His naturalist writing style springs from this background and he "demonstrates that the Afro-Americans respond in like manner to the stimuli which, under similar conditions, motivate all other human beings" (Render 83). The characters are unrefined and manipulated by their surroundings, yet their struggle for life sheds light on the admirable individual worth of human beings (PAL). Using this philosophy of naturalism, he exposes the color lines through literature and addresses the "hopeless situation of blacks in a white society" (Gray).

J. Saunders Redding praised Chesnutt for being a "transitional figure" and said, "He drew together the various post-Civil War tendencies in Negro creative literature and translated them into the most worthy prose fiction that the Negro had produced" (Wonham 117).

Charles had to work to help support the family and even as young as eight years of age he worked part-time in the family grocery store. He had very little formal education in school, but taught himself and received some tutoring (Andrews). By the age of fifteen he started teaching in Charlotte, North Carolina, and soon after began to write for magazines and newspapers. "His success in both professions [teaching and writing] was due largely to his lifelong passion for books and reading" (Render 19).

| [Top](#) | At the age of nineteen, he met Susan Perry, a colleague at the Fayetteville State Normal School for Negroes, and a year later they married (Wonham 155). By age twenty-two, he became the school's principal, receiving a large salary which allowed them to join exclusive social circles, purchase a house and hire a housekeeper (Heermance 45). His strong drive for economic and literary success caused him to keep a rigorous work schedule throughout his life (Heermance 49).

In 1884, he moved his family of two girls and a baby boy back to Cleveland, Ohio. He passed the state bar examination and established his own court reporting firm (Andrews). His literary skills continued to develop as he devoted his spare time to writing. "The Goophered Grapevine" written in 1887, became the first work written by a black author to be published in the magazine, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and subsequently was his first nationally recognized work of fiction (Andrews, Hall). In these stories he depicts slave culture and black voodoo beliefs, yet incorporates irony and humor so as not to prevent the white audience of his day from enjoying them (Browner).

Two collections of his short stories were published in 1899, which had topics that "ranged over a broader area of southern and northern racial experience than any previous writer on black American life had attempted" (Andrews). The first book, *The Conjure Woman*, describes the strife between callous slaveholders and bright, quick-witted slaves. In a glowing review of this book in the *Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells commented: "Character, the most precious thing in fiction, is . . . faithfully portrayed against the poetic background" and also stated it was Chesnutt's "most important work" (Wonham 115). The second collection, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*, met more criticism for its "excessive concentration on issues such as segregation and miscegenation [interracial marriage]" (Browner).

The popularity of the two collections was enough to convince Houghton, Mifflin to publish his first novel in 1900. *The House Behind the Cedars*, in which two blacks pass for white in the South after the civil war, deals with the psychological and social challenges of those of mixed race, which mirrors Chesnutt's own frustration with the color line.

Chesnutt was convinced that race was merely a surface aspect of a man's character and worth . . . he noted that "Indeed, my race was never mentioned by the publishers in announcing or advertising the book. From my own viewpoint it was a personal matter. It never occurred to me to claim any merit because of it, and I have always resented the denial of anything on account of it" (Heermance 72).

The Marrow of Tradition, published in 1901, is based on the 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina riot. "At the novel's time of publication, the sharp view of the realities of white supremacy presented in it brought down the wrath of the white Southern literati" (Kawash 88).

In 1905, Chesnutt attended Mark Twain's 70th birthday party in New York City (Wonham 157) and published his final novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, (1905) which received criticism for its pessimistic and unpleasant mood (Browner). At this point Chesnutt realized that the public interest did not correspond with his own and he attempted other genres, such as a play in 1906, "Mrs. Darcy's Daughter," which also failed to produce financially (Browner).

"Chesnutt's fiction, though often controversial, commanded public attention internationally and won widespread critical approval for its artistry" (Render 140). He had received recognition in the North as an important literary figure, but turned his attention to writing occasional fiction and politics (Andrews). He began defending his race in articles and speeches, as well as working with prominent black activists, such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois (Browner). He was an early member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and received the Spingarn Medal in 1928 for promoting awareness of the struggle and treatment of the blacks (Heermance 80-81).

Chesnutt left behind a rich legacy of literature when he died on November 15, 1932, in his home. Academic interest in his works has recently been renewed and many previously unpublished works have been printed, including *Mandy Oxendine* (1997), *Paul Marchand*, *F.M.C.* (1998), and *The Quarry* (1999) (Hall).

Today Chesnutt is recognized as a major innovator in the tradition of Afro American fiction, an important contributor to the deromanticizing trend in post-Civil war southern literature and a singular voice among turn-of-the-century realists who treated the color line in American life (Andrews).

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Study Questions

1. Explore the way in which Chesnutt manipulates point of view in *The Goophered Grapevine* and the effect this has on the story's ending.
2. Read the anthologized "Uncle Remus" stories by Joel Chandler Harris. Compare and contrast Chesnutt's use of the folk tale and the folk narrator with that of Harris.
3. Compare and contrast Irving's use of folk materials early in the nineteenth century with Chesnutt's use of folk materials in *The Goophered Grapevine*.
4. While almost all of the writers in the genre of regionalism were women, Charles Chesnutt uses elements of regionalism in *The Goophered Grapevine*. With references to anthologized works by Stowe, Jewett, Freeman, Chopin, Austin, Oskison, and Bonnin, analyze Chesnutt as a regionalist writer.

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