

Interpreting and Reflecting the White "Other": The Cultural Work of William Wells Brown's Clotel: or, the President's Daughter

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William Wells Brown's Clotel: or, The President's Daughter has long been examined as a text that accomplishes much cultural work as the first African American novel. First published in 1853, Clotel tells the story of former President Thomas Jefferson's slave mistress and children, effectively printing what had before then been merely rumor. Various critics have written about the significance of Clotel, some attributing its place in the African American and American canon to its fictive voice or Brown's ability to authenticate many of the stories within the novel (Andrews, Schweninger). It is known that Brown inspired, was inspired by, and reacted to Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) and its immense popularity. In recent years, much critical work has been done on "whiteness" studies, and specifically, the image of whiteness in African American literature, giving the reader a new way to read Clotel. Given the paradigm of white privilege and the ever-present white gaze, it is incredibly important to study how African American literature examines the white image. Jane Davis argues that "if race, as Mark Twain remarked in Pudd'nhead Wilson, is a 'fiction of law and custom,' it is a fiction that is lived and operationalized, and many writers have called for its unmasking" (xiii). William Wells Brown is one such author; more so, he is perhaps the first to "unpack" whiteness fictionally.

I will examine Clotel as a novel that does cultural work by representing whites fictionally, specifically in response to Uncle Tom's Cabin by critiquing Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel and illuminating the hypocrisy of Christian slaveowners. Using Davis' "types," I will argue that Clotel is made more powerful when read as fiction because Brown seizes the same power that Stowe seized for abolitionists and other whites: to see and experience the "other," internalize and interpret it, and present that image to society. Stowe's work was so successful in defining "types" of African Americans that "Uncle Tom" remains a negative stereotype. Although she may have intended it as a positive one, the staying power of the characters renders her vision more powerful. Brown could not have known that Uncle Tom's Cabin would be resurrected by Jane Tompkins for critical study, but he was well aware of the popularity of the novel. Writing fictionally is thus not a cover for Brown, but the clearest way to appropriate white writers' power of interpretation. I also assert that Brown's slave characters perform the power of critiquing the white "other." In these varied ways Brown's Clotel becomes revolutionary, by redefining the paradigm of the fictional slave narrative.

Jane Davis outlines four white "types" of whom African American authors have written: the white supremacist, the hypocrite, the good-hearted

weakling, and liberals (4). The “‘good white’ exists to such a small degree that it does not merit discussion” according to Davis (4).

Reverend Peck is the consummate hypocrite as described by Jane Davis. She writes that “these internally...flaming racists project a façade of being interested in morality and justice. If conscious, their hypocrisy may be a way of gaining the fruits of acting on others’ racism without risking the taint of being perceived as the first type [white supremacists]. If unconscious, they try to convince themselves that they do not have dirty hands in promoting bigotry”(3). Reverend Peck considers himself a moral person. He owns seventy slaves, and as the reader is introduced to him, desires that “the sons of Ham should have the gospel” (76). An overseer, Huckelby, deals with the slaves in their daily lives, and Reverend Peck is thus removed from seeing the day-to-day life of the slaves. He and Mr. Carlton, a visitor from the North, begin a debate about natural rights in which Reverend Peck argues that if man had any “natural” rights, they existed before the fall of man. When Carlton brings up the Declaration of Independence, Reverend Peck reminds him that the Bible is older, and the nation’s guide in moral matters. Brown, like other African American writers writing before the Civil War, is especially concerned with the hypocrisy of the devotion to Christianity of some slaveowners. Consider his final chapter, in which he catalogs the number of slaves owned by Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, etc. (222-23). As Reverend Peck’s character is developed, one can see the trajectory which Brown has employed, especially if each “type” according to Davis has perhaps been written for the reader who is of that very “type.” Upon introduction, Peck seems genuinely (if one doesn’t read Brown as sarcastic) concerned with his slaves’ welfare: “Why, is it not better that Christian men should hold slaves than unbelievers?” (78). In this exchange, Carlton is seen as a student of philosophy, and while perhaps more widely read than Peck, he is religion-less and therefore soulless. Perhaps Brown wanted slaveowning Christians to identify with Peck, in order to more completely devastate them with Peck’s true character later.

In the chapter “The Parson Poet,” the reader finds Peck calmly describing how slaves are used for medical experiments: “Oh, the doctors are licensed to commit murder, you know; and what’s the difference, whether one dies owing to loss of blood, or taking too many pills?” (109). He also offers Carlton a poem, entitled “My Little Nig,” in which he compares a slave to a pig (110). Finally, if this were not enough to turn readers against Peck, in the chapter “A Slave Hunting Parson” (an oxymoronic title) the narrator speaks directly to the reader: “Although Mr. Peck fed and clothed his house servants well, and treated them with a degree of kindness, he was, nevertheless, a most cruel master. He encouraged his driver to work the field-hands from early dawn till late at night; and the good appearance of the house-servants, and the preaching of Snyder to the field Negroes, was to cause himself to be regarded as a Christian master” (122). Here, in no uncertain terms, Brown characterizes Peck as an evil man who believes he is a true Christian. Although Brown may certainly have known such a person, when he wrote Peck fictionally he was

able to conflate all of the characteristics of a hypocritical slave-owning Christian into one character. While this may make the characterization untrue, it also makes it more powerful. Who could dismiss the blatant wrongness of Reverend Peck? As a final blow, Brown offers ten words for the “parson’s” death: “in less than five hours, John Peck was a corpse” (131).

Reverend Peck’s colleague from the North, Mr. Carlton, fits well with Jane Davis’ definition of “the good-hearted weakling:”

These individuals often think that they are genuinely sympathetic to blacks’ plight, but at the moment of truth, when they must act on this self-proclaimed enlightenment, they are unable to stand up adequately for these sentiments either because of their loyalty to the dominant group or their inability to risk the condemnation of fellow whites by aligning themselves with blacks. Too often, as they have been morally castrated from years of fence-straddling, their concern for blacks is also castrated—ultimately, they fail to act on it. (3-4)

Mr. Carlton is willing to debate with Reverend Peck, but doesn’t take any action and seems to be studying the South and its “peculiar institution” with no purpose in mind. Mr. Carlton is also the impetus for Georgiana’s monologues; without his soul to save she may not have so dedicatedly delivered her sermons, knowing that she cannot change her father’s mind. Importantly, before Georgiana converts Carlton into believing that the Bible does not sanction slavery, he is an advocate of natural rights. As Carlton mentions Rousseau, Voltaire, and Locke, the reader is forced to acknowledge that the author must be familiar with these philosophers as well—enough to invoke them in a debate (76). All of Carlton’s actions however, are precipitated by Georgiana’s impassioned speeches. She encourages him to meet with the slaves and witness the institution himself. While Carlton is not a hero, I wouldn’t go as far to say that Brown uses him to “morally castrate” white abolitionist males, because of his emphasis on action: “If I act rightly to mankind, I shall fear nothing” (78). Although Carlton is never moved to action, he still understands the difference between acting and merely feeling. I believe by using these specific words, Brown critiques of the Harriet Beecher Stowe, who admonishes readers to “feel right:” “There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily, and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then to your sympathies in this manner!” (438). Brown shows that “feeling right” changes nothing—Mr. Peck, the overseer, and even Snyder, the missionary who exhorts slaves to obey their masters believe that they “feel right” and nonetheless contribute to the institution of slavery. It is obvious that Carlton is afraid of Peck’s status and power, “(w)hen Mr. Peck had left the room, Carlton spoke more freely of what he had seen, and spoke more pointedly against slavery; for he well knew that

Miss Peck sympathised with him in all he felt and said" (121). Even after his conversion, Carlton still "respects" Mr. Peck (131). In some ways it seems that Carlton's conversion to belief that the Bible does not condone slavery makes him less a "friend" to the slaves. Upon Peck's death, Carlton feels the slaves are "ungrateful" but is convinced otherwise by Georgiana (132). Brown writes Carlton not as malicious, but certainly as impotent.

Writing the character of Georgiana is the biggest departure for Brown from himself, just as writing Uncle Tom is the biggest departure for Harriet Beecher Stowe. When he says "he may be asked" whether the stories related in the novel are true, he means that his writing is questionable to whites (222). Georgiana has often been read against Little Eva of Uncle Tom's Cabin, a physically weak but morally strong character who values the lives of her slaves. I read Georgiana instead as another of Jane Davis' types: the liberal. "Liberals think that they truly care for blacks and have their best interests at heart. However, they often have an attitude of guardianship of blacks as if they are trustees of them...[they] dictate (however 'kindly') to blacks how they should act and think to gain advancement—on white people's terms" (Davis 4). I contend that Brown undoubtedly sees Georgiana as the "Liberator" but that he critiques her and through her character, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Georgiana, upon her father's death, decides to emancipate her slaves incrementally, by paying them for their work, but keeping it, so that they have savings for when they are free. This action exemplifies the definition that Jane Davis gives for "liberals" who attempt to act as guardians of African Americans. On her deathbed, Georgiana decides to emancipate her slaves to ensure their freedom (an act that Henry Morton fails to do with his own daughters). Surely, it is a "good" thing that Georgiana is freeing her slaves, and she is undoubtedly the "Liberator" in Brown's eyes. This characterization does not prevent her from being a critique as well.

Georgiana, on her deathbed, gives instructions to her slaves on how to live their free lives: "If you are temperate, industrious, peaceable and pious, you will show to the world that slaves can be emancipated without danger" (167). Brown has Georgiana make many mistakes here: she implies that slaves' behavior has something to do with their treatment, makes her slaves a metonym for four million others, and gives away white fear about the "danger" of emancipating the slaves. Other critics have noted this inconsistency. In his article "'Whiskey, Blacking, and All': Temperance and Race in William Wells Brown's Clotel," Robert S. Levine rightly points out that due to the Ohio "Black Codes" of the time, Georgiana's desire to free her slaves before her death and set them up with land will most likely not be possible for legal reasons. Another criticism is that "Georgiana's experiment implicitly suggests that the more industrious are the black workers, the more those with power and capital will want to exploit them"(101). Brown perhaps here depicts Georgiana as naïve if she believes that newly freed African Americans will be able to compete in a free labor economy in the North. Even as her character is useful as a device to

allow white female readers of the time to see themselves as abolitionist heroines, perhaps Brown does not paint her as perfect.

Stephen P. Knadler argues that Brown's 1864 version of *Clotel* is able to attack *Uncle Tom's Cabin* more clearly, due to the ongoing conflict of the Civil War, Brown is no longer prophesying that slavery will bring down the U.S.; it has already happened. I argue, however, that Brown's work in the 1853 version, though subtle, still gets at the work that Knadler suggests the later version accomplished. Knadler writes that Brown, "throughout his writing career,... speaks back specifically to a white femininity that would try to erase blackness's constitutive presence within the domestic family" (17). Brown makes it clear that Georgiana (and thus Stowe) does not have all the answers for slaves. I contend here that as Brown writes Georgiana he revolutionizes African American writing by assuming the power of fictionally representing that which is most foreign, the white female "other." As Davis writes, "...giving the evaluative power to the overlooked person, the outsider, the other, is central in raising the importance of an examination of the images of whites in blacks' minds"(xv).

Brown gives the "evaluative power" to other "overlooked person[s]" by writing scenes in which the slave characters critique whites. After Snyder, the missionary, gives a sermon in which the sole directive is "servants obey yer masters" the slaves talk about the underhanded nature of the message. " 'Dees white fokes is de very dibble,' said Dick; 'and all dey whole study is to try to fool de black people'" (87, 86). Rather than allow the narrator to critique the hollow sermon, Brown shows the reader that slaves critique whites. Brown often uses song or rhyme to show the slaves critiquing whites, for example when Reverend Peck asks Jack to "give us a toast on cotton" for his visitors from the free states, Jack offers this: " 'The big bee flies high,/ The little bee makes the honey;/ The black folks makes the cotton,/ And the white folks get the money" (123). Jack gives Reverend Peck exactly what he wanted—a display of his slave's intelligence, although Peck did not bargain on Jack being able to so quickly and completely sum up the economics of slavery. It's important here that Brown doesn't add that Jack was punished or that the visitors were aghast—Brown ends with the rhyme, leaving the reader as Peck is left, with a display of Jack's intelligence. Again, after Reverend Peck's death, Uncle Sam leads the slaves in a song in which they celebrate their owner's death, which Carlton and Georgiana overhear: "Old master has died, and lying in his grave/ And our blood will awhile cease to flow;/ He will no more trample on the neck of the slave;/ For he's gone where the slaveholders go" (133). Although Carlton wants to spare Georgiana from hearing her father impugned, Georgiana wants to "hear them out. It is from these unguarded expressions of the feelings of the Negroes, that we should learn a lesson" (135). Carlton then is surprised at Uncle Sam's duplicity; "I could not have believed that that fellow was capable of so much deception," but Georgiana contends that Sam is merely a product of a deceptive institution, that "if we would have them be more honest, we should give them their liberty"(135). Again, Georgiana, like Stowe and Davis' "liberal,"

demonstrates guardianship over slaves lives, “if we, [then]...they.” Each instance of the slave characters critiquing the white characters is a powerful narrative device that also does cultural work: Brown gives his slave characters the ability to internalize and interpret the white “other,” and in so doing, demonstrates to white readers that they are being interpreted as well.

Although I argue that Clotel is as powerful read as fiction as fact, it is imperative to discuss the relation between fact and fiction that Brown uses so deftly in his novel. In his article “De-Authorizing Slavery: Realism in Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Brown’s Clotel,” Peter Dorsey pays particular attention to the conflict in antebellum fiction between “authorial prose and rhetorical strategy” (257). That unnamed strategy is to convert readers to abolitionism. Dorsey examines “how the reception of Stowe’s work influenced the composition of Brown’s” by establishing intertextualities, reading attacks on Uncle Tom’s Cabin as compelling Stowe to create an “ethics of fiction,” and claiming that these same cultural pressures resulted in the birth of the African American novel (258). It is important to note here that Dorsey does not call Clotel a rewrite of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, but insists that “Brown did not accept the influence of [Stowe’s novel] uncritically” (262).

Dorsey argues that Stowe makes an important distinction between generalized “romances” and Uncle Tom’s Cabin by using “conventions of the sentimental novel...to attack the politically and socially charged institution of slavery” (258). He argues, like Jane Tompkins before him, that Stowe asks the novel to do sociological work. The attacks on the novel from pro-slavery advocates caused Stowe to authenticate her novel, both at the end of the novel and in later supplements to the text. Dorsey writes that in the 1850s there was a cultural expectation that “abolitionist writers remain faithful to actual events and people” if they wanted their novels to do cultural work. He contends that “both Stowe and Brown sought to submerge their authorial roles as ‘fiction’ writers by presenting their work as invitations to public authentication” (258). Ultimately, though, I contend that there is a great difference between the reception of a novel written by a white woman (however political) and one written by a former slave in which he claims that Thomas Jefferson has a daughter who is sold as a slave.

Dorsey links the novels by making the claim that “before Uncle Tom’s Cabin, African Americans were not only encouraged but in some cases constrained to speak autobiographically” (263). He asserts that Brown’s authenticating passage “reveals his understanding that a white audience would expect African American writers to confine their narrative acts to personal testimony—that when moving beyond such sources, they ‘may be asked’ about the truth of their tales” (275). He contends, counter to William L. Andrews, that Brown’s goal was not to “liberate the previously denied African American fictive voice...but to submerge this voice so as to render authentic the events and characters in his text” (276). Brown writes a sort of omni-biography, rather than an autobiography. I contend, however, that Clotel as fiction is more powerful than Clotel as omni-biography because of its depiction of whites.

He further argues that *Clotel* anticipates later works in the African American tradition with its intertextuality (“the cultural and communal ownership of stories”) as well as its “rage for authenticity” (278). He does admit the problem inherent in this definition of *Clotel*—that it demands almost exactly what antebellum white society demanded of African American authors; a true, although not necessarily personal, story. It thus *constrains* African Americans to one genre—the “antifictional impulse” that “continued to shape the African American novel into the Twentieth century” (281). Dorsey concludes that the “pressures for realism are strongest when texts seek to do cultural work” and while this may be true, I argue that *Clotel*, when read as fiction, does as much cultural work as nonfiction.

William L. Andrews also pays due attention to the “pressures for realism” inherent in the nature of the ex-slave novel: “Brown knew that without a new and expanded awareness of black voice...the traditional medium of black narrative would continue to restrict, if not distort, its message. Moreover, the idea of authenticity and the relation of authority to authenticity would also remain simplistic and subservient to white myths rather than expressive of black perceptions of reality” (24). Thus Brown’s text is important not only as a fictive one, but as one that self-authenticates—while published by abolitionist whites in England, no introductory passage prefaces his novel. The fact that his own narrative prefaces it, even though this may be read as authenticating, puts the agency squarely in his own hands (or words). Andrews goes on to contend that Brown troubles the relationship between natural and fictive discourse, even saying “these novels subvert the relation of privilege that makes natural discourse the ground of fictive discourse” (27). Brown accomplishes this task by using “ambiguous authenticating documents” purposefully, to “locate the narrative in a distinctly liminal relation to the worlds of fictive and natural discourse” (31).

While I agree with Andrews in heralding the advent of the African American “fictive” voice in *Clotel*, I argue that Brown uses this voice to take the same license that Stowe does: to write fictionally about historical facts (facts that he, unlike Stowe, experienced firsthand), and perhaps more importantly, to write fictionally about the “other.” This “narrative act” is revolutionary in that Brown, with the character of Georgiana, critiques Stowe and other white “liberals” who regard themselves as strident abolitionists while assuming the role of mentor and protector of slaves. In Stephen P. Knadler’s words, it is Brown’s “subversive and satiric representation...of whiteness that restores black agency” (17). Through Reverend Peck, Brown critiques those hypocrites who claim that the *Bible* sanctions slavery and believe themselves to be good Christian slaveowners, and with Mr. Carlton, Brown critiques good-hearted weaklings who know what is right and speak to it, but do not act on it. Through some of his slave characters, such as Uncle Sam, Jack, and Dick, Brown shows white readers that they are internalized and interpreted by the African American mind just as they “type” African Americans. In this way, Brown “unpacks” whiteness—he uses his and others’ experiences of whites to

represent them fictionally. Brown not only acts as an ethnographer, but in writing whites takes the agency that Stowe claimed in writing about slave life and makes it his own.

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