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Assimilation in Charles W. Chesnutt's Works

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ABSTRACT

Charles W. Chesnutt captures the essence of the Post Civil War period and gives examples of the assimilation process for African Americans into dominant white culture. In doing so, he shows the resistance of the dominant culture as well as the resilience of the African American culture. It is his belief that through literature he could encourage moral reform and eliminate racial discrimination. As an African American author who could pass for white, he is able to share his own experiences and to develop black characters who are ambitious and intelligent. As a result, he leaves behind a legacy of great works that are both informative and entertaining.

Assimilation, Amalgamation, Post Reconstruction, Integration, Jim Crow, Antebellum South

Introduction

Charles Chesnutt expressed his concerns of assimilation of African Americans into dominant white culture in his short stories, novels, and essays during the post Reconstruction period. He was challenged as a black author to express his concerns of the injustice of racial discrimination considering that his white audiences were mostly white supremacist. Chesnutt told his stories from perspectives that would not offend, but rather inform his white readers of the plight of African Americans trying to define or redefine their cultural identity in America. His approach to the subject of racial identity has often been mistaken as passive, or ineffective in regards to solving race problems. However, a careful analysis of his works and considering his life's commitment to the black community would suggest otherwise. It is hard to imagine that scholars such as Sally Ann Ferguson would believe Chesnutt was a hindrance to the progress of African Americans, and Dean McWilliams would believe his works to be flawed and inconsistent. Keith Byerman and Donald Gibson offer a more logical reading of Chesnutt's work in which they both agree that the ambiguity in his writings reflected the unpredictable future for African Americans, and his determination to make a difference for his community.

The question of identity becomes a focal point for African Americans because much of their culture was stripped away during slavery. Through forced migration, the Africans lost their native language and much of their customs. This is an example of cultural assimilation where the subordinate race loses much of their cultural identity by being forced to adopt the language, customs, and values of the dominant culture. African Americans adapting to these customs found themselves in inferior positions because dominant culture encouraged white supremacy and regarded blacks as non citizens. Therefore, those who wished to fully assimilate would have to relinquish their ties to the black community and adopt white supremacist beliefs as their own. Full assimilation would require an amalgamation process that would involve interbreeding of the two races where the off springs would become indistinguishable from the dominant white race. The term used in the 1800's was

miscegenation which referred to the intermingling of the white race with a non white race, particularly blacks.

In his works such as “The Wife of His Youth,” *Mandy Oxendine*, and “The Future American,” Chesnutt addresses the issue of blacks emulating the dominant culture in order to gain a higher position in society. These three works illustrate the assimilation process and explain the struggle of African Americans trying to find their identity in America. In both “The Wife of His Youth” and *Mandy Oxendine* the mixed race characters try to reestablish an identity or to reinvent themselves in order to gain acceptance from the dominant white society. In doing so, they adapt to the customs and values of a culture that is in favor of white supremacy. Chesnutt illustrates through these stories that those African Americans who could pass or those who wished for full assimilation would have to discriminate against their own race. Not only must they discriminate against those who identify with the African American community, but they must also judge them according to dominant culture standards. These standards would include the white cultures perception of beauty which required pale skin, intelligence which required formal education, and success which requires middle to upper class status. Such standards would have been difficult or impossible to achieve for most African Americans during the Post Reconstruction Period.

In the short story “The Wife of His Youth” and the novel *Mandy Oxendine*, Chesnutt expresses his ideas of full assimilation through love stories. He makes the comparison of the commitment one has in a relationship to that of the commitment one has to their race. Those characters such as Mr. Ryder and Mandy Oxendine who chooses to divorce themselves from their past and to reject their former black lovers are held accountable for their actions. Their morals are brought into question and both characters must acknowledge their black origins. Also, they must reestablish a relationship with their former black partners. In The Future American, Chesnutt does not make the comparison of full assimilation to adultery or betrayal, but he gives reasons why full assimilation will not be the solution to

the racial problems in America. In this essay, he mostly addresses his white audiences in hopes that they would recognize their own hypocrisy and question their morals just as Mr. Ryder and Mandy Oxendine does in his fictional works.

Chapter 1

Assimilation in "The Wife of His Youth"

Through his novels, short stories, and essays, Charles W. Chesnutt expresses his concerns of African Americans losing their cultural identity, pride in their black heritage, and their moral consciousness. One of the stories that exemplifies this best is "The Wife of His Youth," which depicts a mixed race man who transforms from a field hand from the antebellum South into a prominent black man in the post bellum North. Chesnutt demonstrates a gradual assimilation process as Mr. Ryder adapts to values of the dominant culture that further discriminates against African Americans. "The Wife of His Youth" was published in 1898 during the post Civil War period when blacks were prohibited from integrating into the white culture. In fact, laws were enforced to keep the two races separate and to ensure white supremacy. Black code laws that were enforced in the early 1800's which limited the rights of African Americans especially in the South, and Jim Crow laws in 1876 which prohibited blacks from integrating into dominant culture by requiring separate use of public facilities as whites. Both laws stemmed directly from slave codes that regarded the enslaved as property rather than human beings. Careful analysis of Chesnutt's work will reveal that he was not a proponent of full assimilation of African Americans, but that he did advocate moral reform for the white supremacist society.

The first evaluation of assimilation in this novel will involve the change of perception, and cultural values of the main character, Mr. Ryder, who is previously known as Sam Taylor. In the process of his transformation, he adapts to negative traits of the dominant culture in hopes of fully assimilating. Then, a careful analysis of Liza, the wife he leaves behind 25 years prior, will illustrate that Chesnutt is not in favor of Mr. Ryder's actions. In fact, Liza brings about redemption for him. She causes Mr. Ryder to self-reflect and to remember who he once was. The outcome of this story disproves arguments made by scholars such as Sally Ann Ferguson, who refers to Chesnutt as "a social and literary accomodationist who pointedly and repeatedly confines his reformist impulses to the 'colored people' –a term that he

almost always applies either to color-line blacks or those of mixed races" (109). Acknowledging the accomplishments Chesnutt made as a black man, and the efforts he made in improving conditions for all black Americans will help to dispute these arguments as well. In fact, it will become apparent that his intentions were to raise awareness of the plight of African Americans and to emphasize the moral obligation America had to grant them equality. Considering these facts, it would be an act of hypocrisy for him to promote intraracial discrimination among the very community he wished to uplift.

One way that Chesnutt reveals his thoughts on the assimilation process is through the transformation of Sam into Mr. Ryder. In his youth, Mr. Ryder is known as Sam Taylor who is a free-born mulatto in the South. The reader gains knowledge of his former life through Liza's perspective, and this knowledge is presented after Mr. Ryder has already been introduced. By Chesnutt juxtaposing the two personalities, one can better understand the motivation behind Mr. Ryder's desire to gain acceptance from the white race. He seems to be content with his position as a field hand before his forced migration to the North. Chesnutt shows the effect that oppression has on individuals and how they become accustomed to their situations. In fact, it is Liza who encourages him to run away after learning that he would be sold into slavery. It appears that he was content with her and depended upon her for protection. Liza reveals that he "wuz n' much good ter nobody e'se, fer he wuz one er de triflin'es' han's on de plantation" (108). This is very different from the Mr. Ryder who works hard to advance in the North.

In Mr. Ryder, Chesnutt creates a character who has lived the black experience in the 1800s and who is treated unfairly by a white slave master. At the same time, he shows his transformation into a skillful businessman who is capable of improving his conditions through hard work and determination. Chesnutt proves that education could make a difference through his own accomplishments as a black man who could pass if he so desired. Instead, as Ernest Williams Pickens points out, "Chesnutt became a self-made man, with the influence of literate parents, a limited formal education, a few tutors and his

own perseverance" (42). The difference between Chesnutt and Mr. Ryder is that Chesnutt was proud to be a successful black man, and Mr. Ryder wished to join the white race. Chesnutt emphasizes the importance of having positive role models for the African American communities. This is the reason he chose to embrace his black heritage. In fact, this point has already been argued by Pickens, who points out that "when Chesnutt left Fayetteville in 1883, he did not leave with the intention of passing for white" (2).

Though Chesnutt and Mr. Ryder are both hardworking individuals, their methods of assimilation are quite different. It is important to analyze the achievements of Mr. Ryder and to consider Chesnutt's motives for depicting him as a self-made man. It is no coincidence that Mr. Ryder shares characteristics of Chesnutt. They are both fair-skinned, and they both are employed by railroad companies in the north. Mr. Ryder manages to acquire a decent job with the railroad company, and he is also "economical, and ha[s] saved money; he own[s] and occupie[s] a very comfortable house on a respectable street" (102). Not only does Mr. Ryder acquire skills that would help him to advance, but his education also helps to distinguish him. Though Mr. Ryder "lack[s] early training" he manages to "repeat whole pages of the great English poets; and if his pronunciation was sometimes faulty, his eye, his voice, his gesture would respond to the changing sentiment with a precision that revealed a poetic soul and disarm criticism" (102). Chesnutt highlights the achievements Mr. Ryder has made as a black man, which proves one did not have to pass in order to advance. However, Mr. Ryder made these changes to gain acceptance from the white community. Hope Landry and Elizabeth A. Klonoff explain that this type of social comparison happens when "people compare themselves to others in a situation to evaluate the extent to which their behaviors and responses are acceptable, where acceptable means that responses and behaviors will be reinforced (with smiles, praise, liking, money, job offers) or punished (through ignoring, distancing, excluding)" (60).

Evidence of social comparison can be found in Mr. Ryder's theory in regards to social uplift for black Americans. This theory incorporates discriminatory actions against African Americans who cannot pass. He, unlike Chesnutt, makes the deliberate transformation in order to better his chances of social uplift and to align more closely to white culture. Mr. Ryder claims to have "no race prejudice," yet he feels that "people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and the nether millstone" (104). He also believes that "[their] fate lie between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black" (104). Clearly his desire is to fully assimilate into the white culture, and to deny his black origins which are directly linked to slavery. He has become class and color conscious, and he realizes that there is not much room for advancement as a black man. As a result, he excludes darker skinned, working class African Americans from his social group, and surrounds himself with fair-skinned, formally educated individuals. William Andrews acknowledges that "Chesnutt had known enough frustrations both directly and indirectly, to realize that Afro-American upward mobility and assimilation into the mainstream of American life was fraught with pitfalls and obstacles, many of them attributable to color consciousness and caste lines" (75). His personal experiences enable him to create realistic situations for his characters and to express his concerns about racial discrimination in America.

When the reader is introduced to Mr. Ryder, he has already changed his name, social status, and his attitude toward his race. Immediately, we are told that Mr. Ryder is dean of the Blue Veins Society whose purpose is "to establish and maintain correct social standards among people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement" (101). However, the society has been accused of discriminating against members of its own race. Chesnutt leaves it to the audience to decide if such discrimination really occurs, or if it is by chance that most of the members are "more white than black" (101). Not only does Mr. Ryder adhere to these principles, but he has also "speedily become its recognized adviser and head, the custodian of its standards, and preserver of its traditions" (102). Such traditions discriminate against those who are born into slavery, are of darker complexion, and who lacks

"character" and "culture." Chesnutt was also involved in organizations such as The National Negro Committee, The Niagara movement, and The National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, but according to Pickens, "Chesnutt protested any activities which he thought were injurious to the social welfare of blacks in Ohio and in the nation" (21). This assessment of Chesnutt is in contrast with the intentions of Mr. Ryder who promotes advancement for only mixed race middle class individuals.

Another way Chesnutt illustrates the damaging effects of full assimilation of African Americans into dominate white culture in "The Wife of His Youth" is through Mr. Ryder's lack of black pride. Chesnutt shows how according to dominant culture's perception, pale skin is viewed as more desirable than dark skin and white skin is considered most attractive. In order for Mr. Ryder to make the transformation into the dominant culture, he would have to accept dominant cultural values as well. Though he has been mistreated by a white slave master and rejected by the white community, it is his desire to join forces with the oppressor. What is ironic is that Mr. Ryder was once married to a woman who was older than he, darker than he, and less educated. According to Liza, "he sot a heap er sto' by [her], Sam did" (107). However, once exposed to a different environment he disassociates himself with her and embrace the idea that white is better.

Once he moves north, his perception of beauty changes and he becomes more attracted to pale skin. For example, Mr. Ryder's desire is to marry the widow Mrs. Dixon, who "would help further the upward process of absorption he had been wishing and waiting for" (104). Mr. Ryder is not indistinguishable from white Americans, but it is his desire to gain acceptance from them. We learn from the narrator that his hair is "almost straight" and he is "not as white as some of the Blue Veins" (102). He chooses Mrs. Dixon because she "[is] much younger than he," and "she [is] whiter than he, and better educated" (103). Molly is young enough to procreate and fair enough to insure that his off springs will have a better chance at gaining acceptance than he. This process of selective breeding, or

as he puts it, “self preservation,” would completely rule out a companion such as Liza who is opposite the description of Mrs. Dixon. The reader sees evidence of this in the poem he selects in honor of Mrs. Dixon. The poem, written by Tennyson, his favorite poet, is entitled “A Dream of Fair Women,” and the lines that stand out are:

“At length I saw a lady within call,

Stiller than chisell’d marble standing there,

A daughter of the gods, divinely tall,

And most divinely fair . . .” (104).

Tennyson idealizes Helen of Troy who according to Greek mythology was the most beautiful woman of her time. He pays homage to her beauty which is attributed to her pale skin, and this is the reason this poem attracts Mr. Ryder. However it is the adultery in this story that makes the poem relevant to Chesnutt’s ideas concerning commitments. Helen is married to Menelaus of Sparta and she falls in love with Paris who is from Troy. Paris abducts her and this leads to the 10 year Trojan War. In addition to this poem, Mr. Ryder reads a tribute to Queen Guinevere who is also an idealized beauty who is married to King Author, but has an affair with Sir Lancelot who is King Author’s chief knight. This betrayal causes the downfall of the Kingdom. What these two females have in common is that they both commit adultery and cause the fall of their Kingdoms. Chesnutt alludes to these two stories for the purpose of making the comparison of relationship commitments and commitments to one’s own race.

As Mr. Ryder read the poems aloud, Liza enters the picture and is described opposite of Helen and Guinevere. She is dressed in an old fashion garments, and she is described as a “little woman” who is “quite old.” This is in contrast with the description of Helen who is “divinely tall” and “divinely fair.” In fact, Liza is “very black,--so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue” (105). According to Mr. Ryder’s new perception of beauty, Liza would not be considered desirable. She would have clearly been rejected by the Blue Vein Society and by Mr.

Ryder as well. Liza holds Mr. Ryder to his commitment even though he suggests their marriage is not legal after the civil war because they did not live together. Liza believes that Mr. Ryder would not abandon her or disregard his commitment to her. It is her loyalty to Mr. Ryder, whom she has not seen in 25 years that makes her a heroin in the novel. Helen of Troy and Queen Guinevere are admired for their outer "beauty" but they are both portrayed as disloyal adulteresses. Liza may not measure up to Tennyson's and white cultures standards of beauty, but Helen nor Queen Guinevere measures up to Liza in morality and loyalty.

Another indication that Chesnutt is not in favor of full assimilation for African Americans is the moral purpose behind the story. Chesnutt holds Mr. Ryder responsible for his actions, and he forces him to self-reflect. Mr. Ryder has to make a moral decision that will determine his fate. He is torn between acknowledgement of Liza, who represents his past, and acceptance of Mrs. Dixon, who represents his future. If Mr. Ryder chooses to deny Liza, he rejects a part the part of his heritage that links him to the black community. In order to completely adapt to the dominant culture, he will have to continue to discriminate against those African Americans who could not pass by denying them access into this new society. Not only would it be the wrong choice according to Chesnutt, but it would also be an immoral decision.

*"*The Wife of His Youth*"* was written with a moral purpose that was suggested in the title alone. The reference to "wife of youth" is present in several Bible verses, for example, Isaiah 54:6, and Malachi 2:14 and 2:15, each of which referred to the importance of commitments. Isaiah 54:6 states: "For the Lord called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou was refused saith thy God." This describes Liza being called back into Mr. Ryder's life as a reminder of his commitment to her and the black community. Another verse that pertains to this story is Malachi 2: 14, which states, "Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy

covenant." This verse deals with Gentiles divorcing their wives to marry pagan women. Chesnutt makes the comparison to black men who divorce their black wives to marry white or half white women. Finally, Malachi 2:15 followed up with, "Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth." Mr. Ryder abandons Liza in the beginning, and he rejects all who are in her likeness. It is only after her return that he realizes he cannot divorce himself for the past. "The Wife of His Youth" demonstrates Chesnutt's purpose for writing literature. In fact, he express his intent in the May 29 entry of his journal when he writes, "if I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort" (139). This would explain Liza's purpose in the story, which is to bring about redemption for Mr. Ryder, and to gain sympathy from white audiences. Her misfortunes are no fault of her own but of those who esteem themselves above her. Liza is a product of her environment and a reminder of the dehumanization of slavery.

Finally, Mr. Ryder's morals come into question because he has not dealt justly with Liza. This is why he cannot continue his upward struggle without including her. She represents the many African Americans who could not pass, and she would be what Ferguson considers a "genuine Negro." Ferguson argues that "for Chesnutt however, free citizenship for 'genuine Negros' is apparently unworthy of argument" (110). Ferguson's reference to dark African Americans as genuine Negros suggests that mixed race individuals are non genuine. The inclusion of Liza into Mr. Ryder's social group suggests that Chesnutt wished to include all shades of black into his ideal assimilation process. It is apparent that it is not Chesnutt's desire to divide the Africa American race, but to unite all races.

Ryan Simmons gives his explanation of Chesnutt's use of mixed race characters throughout his works. He argues that Chesnutt's reason for concentrating on mixed race individuals is "first because his primary interest is in deconstructing racial categories, and if possible altering their significance; and second because the figure of the mulatto or mullata offer[s] an excellent analogue of the disruption between "signifier" (i.e. one's visual appearance) and "signified" (What that appearance is taken to

mean)" (63). Simmons offers a different perspective than Ferguson, and he is on target with what Chesnutt is eager to accomplish. The mulatto is symbolic of the two races coming together as one. Chesnutt does not wish to erase the color line literally, but only to dismantle deeply embedded traditions that separated the two races and assigned hierarchy of differences.

Mr. Ryder is a perfect blend of the two races because he has the determination of Liza and is as ambitious as white Americans. He does not consider himself a member of either race; therefore, he could be viewed as something other than black or white. Mr. Ryder wishes to be white and to be accepted by a society that would give him access to a better way of life. He is aware that there are more opportunities available to white individuals. His wish to be absorbed by the white race only proves that he has no faith that white leaders would give black Americans equality. It is Chesnutt's hope that if the white readers could find similarities between themselves and Mr. Ryder, maybe they would come to realize that skin color does not determine a person's potential. Moreover, if his black readers would realize that they could achieve greatness without becoming the oppressors, then they would continue to fight for justice for all. Chesnutt expresses this fact in the May 29 1880 entry of his journal when he writes, "the object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the white . . ." (140). It was his wish to change the traditions and cultural values that promote racial discrimination.

It is not the transformation of black individuals into white individuals that Chesnutt desires, but a change in society in regards to racial discrimination. Mr. Ryder does not become a better person through social uplift, but he becomes better equipped to survive in a society that rejects him. We witness Mr. Ryder self-reflecting when he looks in the mirror. The photo of Sam helps him to regain the memory of a time he wishes to forget. He knows he has become "as different from the ignorant boy who ran away from fear of slavery as day is from night" (111). Mr. Ryder's acknowledges his slave origins before the members of the Blue Vein Society as they also self-reflects and feels sympathy for

Liza. They could relate because "there were some present who had seen, and others who had heard their fathers and grandfathers tell, the wrongs and sufferings of this past generation . . ." (110). They all agree, including Mrs. Dixon, that "he should have acknowledged her" (112). This is the response Chesnutt wishes to receive from his audience as well. It is Chesnutt's wish for improvement of all under privileged and especially those who experienced slavery.

Chesnutt's story does not advocate for blacks to be absorbed by the white race, and the end of this story provides proof of that. Liza is acknowledged by the society and is allowed entry into their establishment. Chesnutt is aware that his white audiences will not welcome the idea of blacks joining their race. In order to prevent blacks from wanting to join the white race, they would have to be offered means to improve their social status. He suggests that if the only way to achieve greatness in America is to become white, then those who could pass would be enticed to do so. Chesnutt's reason for writing this story is not to promote the idea of passing or intra-racial discrimination, but to demand that black people are acknowledged as full citizens of the United States.

Chapter 2

Crossing the Color line in *Mandy Oxendine*

The outcome of "The Wife of His Youth" in regards to the assimilation process is not the only proof that Chesnutt was against full assimilation of African Americans into dominant culture. The novel *Mandy Oxendine* gives a broader view of his concerns and ideas pertaining to this subject. Chesnutt wrote this novel at the same time he published "The Wife of His Youth." However, *Mandy Oxendine* was not published until 1997. This essay will focus on the assimilation process of the African American characters or lack thereof. The characters of interest are Mandy Oxendine, who chooses to pass for white, Tom Lowery, who chooses education and hard work instead of passing, and Rose Amelia, who conforms to traditional values that condition her to be inferior. By juxtaposing these scenarios, Chesnutt shows hard work and education are better options than passing or conformity. Also, he deals with the misfortune of the African Americans who are excluded from the middle and upper class status. Through a close analysis of Mandy's transformation, Tom's desire to uplift, and Rose Amelia's hopelessness, it will become apparent that Chesnutt promotes equality rather than amalgamation. He proves that blacks are not content with being inferior, and their desires to achieve greatness are hindered by the dominant white society.

Both Tom and Mandy are able to pass for white, but only Mandy chooses to do so. As a result, she suffers major consequences. What they both have in common is their ambition and their determination to rise above their circumstances. Even though they choose different paths to achieve their goals, both characters decide to seek formal education. Tom goes North to enroll in a black school, and Mandy attends a white school in the South. Chesnutt develops these characters to show them as human beings who are not content with being treated unjustly. They have choices because they could both pass for white if they desired, but for Rose Amelia this is not an option. Rose is too dark to pass, and she attends a free public school for blacks in the South that is run down and below the standards of

white schools. Chesnutt seems to be in favor of education as a means of social uplift for African Americans because this is the message that this story delivers. At the same time, he familiarizes his white audiences with the black community in the South and reveals the hopelessness of their situations without proper tools to advance.

Tom goes North where conditions are better for blacks and there are more opportunities. He could not have attended a white school because there were laws that prohibited integration. He searches for a way to advance without having to change his identity. Tom is exposed to a different type of culture in the North and is able to explore different options. As a black man in both the North and the South, his options are limited. However, with education he has a better understanding of the world in which he lives and is better equipped to make a difference for himself and his community. This was true of Chesnutt as well because he too moved North and attended the Normal School for blacks, and he managed to maintain middle class status as a black man. He also became a teacher and gave back to his community. Chesnutt seems to approve of Tom's actions, and he becomes the character by which others are judged.

Tom shows pride in his heritage, and he gives back to his community by returning South to teach. It appears that Tom Lowery is the example which Chesnutt wishes his black audience to follow. He is a self-made man with ambition, patience, and perseverance. What is most attractive about Tom is that he is a moral character, and he does not compromise his virtues. We are told that Tom never wanted to pass, but when someone did mistake him for white they would express "their opinion of colored people, which were often the reverse of complimentary" (46). In fact, Tom "had never felt the inclination to give up his people, and cast in his lot with the ruling caste" (46).

Though Chesnutt did explore the idea of passing as a teenager, he did not pursue it any further. In his journal entry of July 31 1875, Chesnutt admits: "twice to-day, or oftener I have been taken for 'white.' At the pond this morning one fellow said 'he'd be damned' if there was any nigger blood in me.

At Coleman's I passed" (78). These lines are similar to the comment Mr. Pate makes to Tom when he meets him at the station. Mr. Pate says; "nobody wouldn't never b'lieve you wuz colored, ef somebody didn' tell 'em" (4). Although Chesnutt admits he is tempted as a teen, he gives Tom the resilience to resist such temptation. As Charles Hackenberry points out in the introduction to *Mandy Oxendine*, "Chesnutt use[s] his journals . . . taking the details of his daily life, his experiences, but casting them in ways that reflect, even if they do not mirror precisely, the world in which he lived" (xvii). Tom is not a replica of Chesnutt but he adheres to the same principles that Chesnutt lived by.

When Tom returns south as a teacher, he is met with many challenges and is reminded that he is not accepted by the white community, nor embraced by the black community. Immediately Tom is reminded of the importance of skin color in the South. He reads a sign that states; "This Waiting-Room for White People Only" (3). Tom is compelled to enter because he knows that he could; however, he "flushed angrily, hesitated a moment, and then kept on toward the waiting room, but paused before he reached it . . ." (3). Chesnutt foreshadows events to come and shows Tom's refusal to pass despite the color of his skin. He takes the same stance that Chesnutt takes, which is to remain a black man even though there were many disadvantages of being black in the 1800's.

Tom not only takes pride in his black heritage, but he esteems himself higher than the white characters. When invited to go to the church among the white community, Tom was reluctant because "he knew he was as white as they, he believed he was superior of many of them, in intellect, in culture, in energy; and he tried to look down, with a fine philosophic scorn, upon the unworthy prejudice that condemned him to hopeless social inferiority" (46). The only obstacle that prevents him from having full access to the American Dream is the "black blood" inside of him. Chesnutt shows that if blacks are properly trained and educated, they too could achieve much success in America. More importantly, if color was not a determining factor, they could be equally successful as whites. Tom has all of the qualifications to be successful, but he knows he would never reach the level of success that Bob Utley,

his white rival, has. However, he "believed in himself, he hoped to make a man of himself, [and] he even dreamed of fame, this low caste boy, in the backwoods…" (46).

In comparison to Bob Utley, who represents the power and wealth in America, Tom is by far the more honorable and moral character. What Bob and Tom have in common is their desire for Mandy and their wish to improve their economical statuses. Tom's desire for Mandy is genuine, and she is his motive to uplift. It is his love for her that causes him to move north to receive education so that he and Mandy could be successful as black people. Bob, on the other hand, is not sincere about his desire for her. He is sexually attracted to her and tries to manipulate her. Also, he takes advantage of her naiveté and pretends to want to marry her. Mandy is attracted to Bob because he represents white America's ideas of success and power. Unfortunately, Tom would not have had access to this type of lifestyle as an African American. It is Tom's dedication and faithfulness to Mandy that makes him a heroic character. He keeps his promise to Mandy and he acknowledges his black origins, but it is Mandy who rejects him.

In the novel, Bob is depicted as the villain. He rides a black horse named Satan, and he is described as "tall, dark, with clean cut, aristocratic features, and a reckless, devil-may-care-expression in his black eyes . . ." (40). Through the characters we learn that he spends his time "drinking', gamblin' an' rakin'" (7). He is not trustworthy and he does not pay off his debts. Bob does not have to work hard or worry about education because his wealth comes from inheritance, and by marrying his cousin Florence who has more than he. Bob is not worthy of the respect that comes along with being white and wealthy. Chesnutt does not portray him as a southern gentleman. This description of Bob is opposite everything the reader knows about Tom, and based on merits alone, Tom would have been a more favorable character. However, Chesnutt's white audience might have been offended by the negative portrayal of Bob. Chesnutt makes this comparison to show that a person must have morals and virtues to be considered a good person, and that skin color and class does not determine morality.

In order to make a comparison between the black and white lives in America Chesnutt gives his audience a glimpse into the southern black communities. In these impoverished neighborhoods, no one tries to better themselves and blacks live a life of conformity. They adopt traditions that are developed around white society's perception of blacks and negative stereotypes. These very traditions are a hindrance to their personal growth. Chesnutt shows the consequences of slavery and the effect it has on blacks in the South. He reveals how they are conditioned to accept inferior positions. Their expectations in life are not very high because they do not witness anyone in their community rising above his or her situation.

This is true of the black male figures in the novel who take on leadership roles. They feel that they have to teach Tom how to be black. The preacher tries to teach Tom their customs, and expect him to carry on their traditions. For instance, Mr. Pate invites him to dinner and tells him that God made blacks "po an' black, but he give 'em religion an' chickens, de two things dey' preciates mos'" (9). He goes on to explain that "religion [is] fer de soul, chicken [is] fer de body, and larnin' [is] fer ter prokyo' 'em bofe wid" (10). Donald Gibson, argues that "the self-mockery, relying as it does on the ubiquitous stereotype of the chicken-stealing slave, is apparently intended for the amusement of Chesnutt's white readers" (95). These lines could also serve as mockery of the society that forces blacks to devalue themselves. The concept of being happy with chicken and religion is the same concept of the "happy slave." It lessens the degree of guilt on the part of whites to believe that blacks want to be inferior. However, Chesnutt gives his white audience a glimpse into the black community and shows that their inferiority is no fault of their own. Oppression has caused them to devalue themselves, and they feel their situations hopeless. Years of deeply embedded social values has restricted this community and isolated them among one another so that no one would desire to leave.

Tom is also met with challenges in the school in which he is employed. In fact, Mr. Pate says to Tom that "larnin; aftuh all, is jes' sump'n ter git sump'n e'se wid—a kin' of a hook ter go fishin' wid."

(10). He is aware that the schools in the South would not improve their chances of uplift because they are not properly equipped. Mr. Pate feels that education only helps blacks to read the Bible and accept their fate as the under privileged. Through Tom, Chesnutt is able to expose the deplorable conditions of black schools in the South. The school is described as having "cracks in the floor, and the planks rattled under foot when stepped upon" (13). Also, "there were cracks in the wall, where the mud that had filled the spaces between the unhewn logs had fallen out" (13).

Most of the students cannot read nor do math, which makes Tom's job challenging. What is interesting here is that the students' parents and authorities in the community are satisfied with these conditions. The preachers are the enforcers of these traditions, and they take on a slave master's role. They teach corporal punishment as a fear tactic and to condition the blacks to think that they need it to be better. They do not consider Tom a good teacher because he does not beat the children. It is Elder Larkin, the preacher, who tells Tom to remember the Bible says "'spar' the rod an'spile the chile'" (11). Religion is one way to instill conformity in the mind of blacks. Tom, however, does not give in to such negative stereotypes. He is optimistic and he believes he is capable of being someone successful in America despite the laws that discouraged it.

The next scenario is of Rose Amelia who has given in to conformity by accepting traditions that have been influenced by white dominant culture, and she conceptualizes them as part of her cultural identity. As a result, she lives in poverty and receives poor education. Rose has been conditioned to accept inferiority and to view whites as superior beings. Conformity for Chesnutt is not an option, and he does not wish it for his fellow African Americans. Rose represents the blacks who could not pass, and she is a product of tradition and social values that discriminate against them. In Tom, she sees hope and she wants him to save her. This is why she looks at him with "her black, bead-like eyes fixed intently upon him with an expression of mingled curiosity and admiration" (14). In fact, she questions whether or not he was "a rale black man" (15).

Tom gives Rose Amelia a sense of hope, and he provides a different representation of a black man. He is a middle class black man who speaks proper English and is distinguished among the blacks in the community because of his appearance and his manners. The black male role models for Rose are a preacher who preaches conformity, a teacher who punishes instead of teaching, and a father who is in and out of jail. Rose looks up to the black men in her community, and she considers her father to be a "smaht man" (18). His being in jail is due to "bad luck" and not his own shortcomings. She is happy to be beaten because her dad says "a teacher who doesn't whip his students is not a good teacher" (18). Moreover, Rose is proud that she "useter git mo' lammin's 'n any gal in school" (18).

Even though she has been conditioned, she is aware of the privileges associated with being white and the disadvantages of being black in the South. This knowledge leads her to self-hatred and causes her to view being black as a curse. When she finds Tom with Mandy who appears to be white, she is heartbroken. She loves Tom because he represents everything she is not, and she hates Mandy because Tom loves her. Mandy becomes a threat, and she devises a plan to get rid of her. Dean McWilliams explains that Rose Amelia's "'love' is a form of socially induced self-hatred, an internalization of the loathing her dark presence incites in others in the racist community" (123). As a result of this self-hatred, she frames Mandy for the murder of Bob Utley. However, Tom confesses to the murder in order to save Mandy, and Roses' dreams are shattered.

The reference to blacks being poor and ugly can be found throughout the novel. In fact, Rose is described as ugly and disfigured. Chesnutt describes her in such a way to emphasize the fact that society has conditioned her to believe that black is bad and white is good. Her ugliness is also symbolic of the ugliness of racial discrimination, and her deformity could be attributed to her confinement and oppression. By the standards of dominant culture, she has no characteristic of "ideal beauty." Those standards would require her to have pale skin. Unfortunately, Rose could not live up to those standards, and she could not change anything about herself to fit the criteria. She is described with "her shoulder

thrown back at such an angle as to suggest a malfunction of the spine" (15). We are told that "she might have been a precocious child of ten or an older girl of stunned growth" (14). Rose's condition is no fault of her own and it is not caused by being black. It is due to man-made laws and customs that force black individuals into inferior positions.

When she believes Tom has been lynched because of her scheme to frame Mandy, she has no reason to live, and Rose does not want to go back to the hopelessness she felt before him. Her death is briefly mentioned in the novel and Tom "dropped a tear" at her funeral (112). Chesnutt purposely down plays her death to show the lack of concern about blacks in America. Rose goes unnoticed like so many African Americans who are excluded from the privileges enjoyed by whites. Roses' death is tragic because she is not given an alternative to a life of poverty. She sees no way out of her situation, and she cannot escape her conditions. This would have been a reality for many African Americans in the South who were illiterate and unskilled. Chesnutt becomes to his black readers what Tom has become to Rose. Through his literature, Chesnutt becomes the voice for the African Americans, and as a black author, he becomes their role model.

The third scenario is of Mandy, who actually assimilates into the dominant culture. Mandy realizes the disadvantage of being a black female in the South. She does not want to rely on education to help her advance because "she feels that it is not learning or wealth, or even aspiration—but opportunity that would get her ahead" (31). Her desire to fully assimilate into the white culture begins with her belief in Tom. He inspires her with his optimistic views of a better future for the both of them. However, she fears he would abandon her, and she devises another plan. She chooses to go to school, but to an all-white school rather than a black one. According to Matthew Wilson, "Mandy's desire for opportunity include attending a white school, but it is clear that she is not going to rise in the world, as Tom Lowery hopes to, through education" (47). Rather than relying on education she chooses to marry a rich white man and have all the benefits of being white. What makes Mandy's character problematic is

that she disassociates herself with the black community, and she accepts values of a white supremacist culture. In order to pass, she must deny a connection to blacks and to redefine herself as a white individual. In claiming whiteness, she adapts racist views against blacks.

Mandy's perception of blacks has to change if she chooses to be white. She no longer desires to be with Tom, and he becomes a hindrance to her plan of crossing over. In the process of becoming white, Mandy disassociates with the black community and views them negatively. She is willing to lose her original culture all together and to adapt to the customs and ways of white society. Mandy's attitude toward her people becomes that of shame and disgust. She dislikes them because they are poor and hopeless even though it is no fault of their own. In fact, Mandy's attitude towards blacks is harsher than her white peers'. Evidence of this is when she denies that she knows Tom and when her classmates says he looks white Mandy says; "niggers is niggers and looks don't make 'em white" (36). What is ironic is that before she decides to identify with the white community she lives as a black woman. If she believes her own statement, then she accepts the fact that she will never be white. At the same time, Chesnutt plays on the idea of race being a social construction, and that it cannot be determined by appearances.

She plans to marry Bob because he is "a gentleman, he is white, he is rich, he rides on horseback, [and] he lives in a big house." (24). Unlike Tom, Mandy judges Bob based on color rather than character. From her perspective, white is equivalent to success and wealth, and black is associated with failure and poverty. Tom cannot give her the life she desires with Bob, and she is determined to achieve her dream. In fact, she is angry with Tom because he leaves her "in the woods, 'mongs' niggers, and tu'pentine trees, an' snakes an' screech-owls" (22). Mandy expresses that "[she] wouldn' be a nigger, fer God made [her] white" (23). To Tom's surprise she also says that God made black people "black, an' ugly an' pore" (23).

Mandy crosses over in to the white world, but does not achieve the happiness she desires. Once she becomes white, she realizes that she is not treated like an upper class white woman because she is not rich enough or white enough. Mandy believes that being white guarantees her success, but she does not anticipate being considered a lower class white woman who is isolated from the white community. Tom is aware that Bob would not marry Mandy, and he tries to warn her. This is why he asks what "fine man on horseback [would] marry a Sand-Hill poor white girl." (24). Unless Mandy marries Bob, she cannot reach the status of Florence, her rich white rivalry. Her dilemma is that Bob is already engaged to Florence.

Mandy's inexperience with the world places her in a compromising position. She is objectified by Bob Utley and he desires her sexually. Fortunately, she is spared such a tragedy as rape, but Bob is murdered in the process. Though Mandy desires to pass, she is not willing to become a sex object in exchange for being white. She is uncomfortable when she is alone with Bob even though she wishes to marry him. She also feels this awkwardness when Gadson, the preacher, first notices her. Her resisting both white males suggests an unnatural union between them. Mandy feels uncomfortable and she is repulsed by Gadson's lust for her. Though she desires to crossover and marry rich, she rejects both of her white potential suitors. She realizes she is being objectified and she reconsiders Tom's offer.

Mandy, like Mr. Ryder, is forced to rethink her position and to realize her self-worth as a black woman. Her morals are also brought into question as she self-reflects, and questions her decision to pass for white. She feels that she is being punished for her behavior and she is ashamed. Also, she realizes the danger that she has caused for both her and Tom. Chesnutt's voice comes through the narrator when he asks, "Was she not guilty before God? Had not this tragedy been the outcome of her own folly, her own lightness, her own wickedness?" (85). She is placed on trial by those in the novel as well as by the readers. When she is jailed for Bob's murder, she is given a second chance to pass, but this time she does not take it. She refuses Gadson's proposal, and she confesses to the murder. Mandy

is not aware that the murderer is Elder Gadson. Mandy tells reverend Gadson that she "was too proud to be what God made [her], too vain to be content with [her] own lot" (89). For this reason, she believes she is responsible for the murder.

Mandy avoids being raped and avoids a prison sentence, but she does not avoid being black. Chesnutt gives Mandy a chance to redeem herself and to come back to her community. She is willing to sacrifice herself for Tom whom she believes murdered Bob, and Tom is willing to sacrifice himself for Mandy who he also believes is responsible for Bob's murder. In the end, Mandy is forced to reveal her racial identity. However, admitting that she is black would have also been "regarded as an almost unpardonable social crime—the breaking of caste and the intrusion of one tainted by base blood into the ranks of the white people" (111). This would have been the view of dominant culture.

Chesnutt left the ending to the audience to decide whether "they went to the North, where there was larger opportunity . . .," or "whether they chose to sink their past in the gulf of oblivion, and sought the great white world . . ."(112). However, based on the outcome of Mandy's situation, it seems that they would not have passed. Donald Gibson writes that they did not pass because "the magnitude of their characters and seriousness and importance of their recent experiences dictate the near impossibility of their willingly passing" (108). If Mandy and Tom chose to pass in the end, it would go against the entire purpose of the novel. This story provides enough evidence that Chesnutt's intent was to have Mandy realize her mistake and to redeem herself. It would make sense that they would make the same choice that Chesnutt and his wife makes, which is to live as a middle class black couple.

Mandy Oxendine is much more than a love story or a murder mystery; it is a glimpse into the lives of African Americans during the Post Civil War period. Chesnutt shows their desires and dreams of one day having full access to the country in which they lived. The characters are courageous, ambitious, and clever. Tom is determined to improve his economic status regardless to obstacles he may have to face, and though Mandy is ambitions are selfishly motivated she has the courage to acknowledge her

black identity in the end. As an African American author, Chesnutt is able to portray his characters with respect and dignity. Also, he is able to demand that they are recognized as real people with real passions. It is not sympathy that Chesnutt wants, but results. He wants to move his white audience to eliminate barriers that separate the two races and to give each an equal chance to advance. He leaves it to the audience to consider that the laws that enforce racial discrimination of African Americans are the very reason that blacks are forced to feel inferior.

Chapter 3

Satire in "The Future American"

One of Chesnutt's most controversial essays was "The Future American," and it was this essay that led many to believe that Chesnutt was in favor of full assimilation of African Americans into the dominant culture. Chesnutt wrote "The Future American" in three series, the last being published September 1900. During the 1900's there was much debate about the future American race due to the larger amount of immigration from other countries such as Europe and Asia. The main topic was whether or not America could maintain a pure white race despite of the massive amounts of immigrants who were residing in America. Dean Mc Williams explains in his essay that, "these important demographic shifts naturally elicited speculation about the American society that would emerge in the new century" (44). Many predictions were made about the future race in America, but African Americans were not considered in these predictions. Chesnutt enters the debate with a different perspective of the future American, and what he offers is that Americans will evolve into white African Americans due to interbreeding between the two races. This was opposite of the popular prediction, and it would have caused great concern for his white audiences who promoted white supremacy and who envisioned a nation of a pure white race.

These articles were written after the failed Reconstruction Period, and during the time that Jim Crow laws were mandated. Many scholars believed that he lost hope in those in power who could make a difference in black communities. Among these scholars are Sally Ann Ferguson and Dean Mc Williams, who view the essay as problematic. In their opinion, it may appear that Chesnutt is promoting amalgamation as a solution to the racial divide in America, especially in the South. However, a different approach to consider when reading this essay is that Chesnutt seems to be actually mocking the society in which he lived and challenging his audience to redefine race in America. After careful analysis of the essay, there is no doubt that it is written as satire rather than literally promoting amalgamation. It

contains sarcasm, irony, and it attacks social vices. It is written to shame society into improvement and to encourage social reform in favor of African Americans. At the same time, Chesnutt reveals the hypocrisy of white America and the plight of African Americans in the 1800's. He does so by incorporating historical facts and reminding his white audiences of the many injustices impose upon blacks in America.

There are several indications that his supporting amalgamation is not meant to be taken literally. The first reason is that he claims to promote ideas that are contradictory to the personal choices he makes as a black man. Secondly, he mocks the laws and customs of the dominant culture throughout the essay and points out the hypocrisy of white Americans. Finally, he shows no indication that he believes the white race to be superior. In fact, he argues just the opposite. The fact that this essay contains irony and sarcasm, which are key components of satire, helps to strengthen the hypothesis that this "proposal" is as fictional as any of the literature he wrote. Keith Byerman also argues "that such 'flaws' are calculated acts of provocation designed to discomfort the audience rather than persuade it" (85). The essay disproves the popular theory of the future American being a pure white race, and it gives several reasons why his "proposal" will not be welcomed by white Americans. In fact, Byerman mentions in his essay "the article can be best understood, then, not as an actual proposal for social change that would occur by choice within a relatively short period of time, but rather as a hypothesis that carries science and social practice to a logical end" (86). Chesnutt's proposal to have the white race to absorb the black race goes against the white supremacist views of dominant culture. In fact, there were anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited the mixture of black blood into the white race. This "mechanical mixture" would not have been allowed by the white culture even though there was evidence that racial blending was occurring.

First, Chesnutt gives reasons why the future American will not be of a pure white race. He also, explains why a pure white race would not be a good representation for America. Chesnutt acknowledges

that there were many hypotheses about what the future American would look like, and he points out that the black race was not included in any of those predictions. He considers this a flaw and accuses the essayists of leaving out the "main elements in the problem involved in the formation of a future American race" (845). Chesnutt states that the popular theory "will consist of a harmonious fusion of the various European elements . . ." (845). This would not only create a pure white race, but it discourages assimilation of ethnic groups into the white population. One concern that he addresses is his belief that white Americans and Europeans have flaws, and that a combination of the two would not be a perfect race. This is suggested in his statement that "no good American could for a moment doubt that it will be as perfect as everything else in America" (845). By addressing the "good" Americans, he suggests that there were bad ones, and he points out that America is already imperfect. Then, he goes on to say "for every good American will admit that European races, now and then, have some undesirable traits went they first come over" (845). He mocks those in favor of white amalgamation and disproves that the race will be "infinitely superior."

Chesnutt warns his audience "if the writer has any preconceived opinions that would affect his judgment, they are at least not the hackneyed prejudices of the past . . ." (845) He also suggests that his opinions might "lead to false conclusions," but "they [would] at least furnish a new point of view" (845). Chesnutt appears to be offering a different viewpoint of race in America and to possibly change the mindset of his white audience. The irony here is that a mixed race author who identifies with the black community would encourage amalgamation. This idea would contradict everything that he stood for and tried to accomplish through his literature and his personal life. When he refers to amalgamation into the white race, he refers to it as "a beautiful, a hopeful, and to the eye of faith, a thrilling prospect" (845). However, he does not show such enthusiasm about the idea in the course of his essay.

Chesnutt is aware that many mixed race individuals would pass for white because there are more opportunities and a chance for a better quality of life in America. Chesnutt does not encourage

passing in his essay; in fact, he gives examples of prominent people who passed and suggests that they could have better served the black community had they revealed their "dark origins." One example he gives is a prominent woman of "Negro origin" who lived as white. He suggests that "if American prejudice permitted her and others to speak freely of her pedigree, what a tower of strength her name and influence would be to a despised and struggling race!" (851). Chesnutt is that example, and he presents himself as the role model that the black community so desperately needs. He addresses his black audience when he expresses that "anyone at all familiar with the hopes and aspirations of the colored race . . .must have perceived the wonderful inspiration which they have drawn from the career of a few distinguished Europeans of partial Negro ancestry" (854). Here he encourages successful blacks to be proud of their heritage and to inspire others by revealing their true origins. This is one way he believes that change will come in regards to the status of blacks in America.

Chesnutt mocks the concept of race in America because it is based on social constructions rather than scientific facts. He explains that he uses the "word 'race' here in its popular sense—that of people who look substantially alike, and are moulded by the same culture and dominated by the same ideals" (847). This, of course, is not his definition of race, but the "popular" belief which is that of the dominant culture. He shows that skin color is not always a determination of race, nor is the percentage of black blood that one has. Therefore, the definition of race varies from state to state, which proves the inconsistency of laws and customs. He mentions that "the question whether persons are colored or white, where color or feature is doubtful, is for the jury to determine by reputation, by reception into society, and by their exercises of the privileges of a white man, as well as by admixture of blood" (856). He gives examples of laws that allow mixed marriages in one state and prohibits them in a neighboring state. In doing so, he shows that race relations in America actually depend upon location as well. Chesnutt proves that there is no way of determining race based on looks, especially in America where there are a large number of mixed race individuals.

He also explains that the diversity in American culture is largely attributable to slavery. He expresses that "slavery was a rich soil for the production of a mixed race" (851). Chesnutt deals with the hypocrisy of the dominant culture by holding them accountable for mixing the two races together and then developing laws to keep them separate. According to Chesnutt, the blending was already in progress despite the laws that were in place discouraging it, and white Americans were essentially defeating themselves in the process of trying to gain wealth and power. In fact, he reminds his white audiences that "the stream of black blood has insinuated itself into the veins of the dominant" culture (851). What is ironic here is that white dominant culture is responsible for the mixture of the two races.

To further prove his point, he argues that race in other places does not mean the same as race in America. He acknowledges that in other countries assimilation is welcomed, and the mixed race individuals do quite well. He explains that there is "a long and honorable list in other lands, to disprove the theory that people of mixed blood, other things being equal, are less virile, prolific or able than those of purer strains" (848). He gives examples of Mexico and other neighboring countries where the mixing had already begin. In America during the 1800s, laws were designed to keep the two races separate, especially in the South. He shows that "this prejudice loses much of its importance, however, when it is borne in mind that it is almost purely local and does not exist in quite the same form anywhere else in the world, except among the Boers of South Africa" (858).

Not only does he mock the concept of race in America, but he also goes on to prove that whites are not naturally superior to blacks. He shows how African Americans' inferiority is based on negative stereotypes and myths that are not scientifically proven. For instance, he challenges his audience to recall the myth that cross breeding with blacks leads to sterilization, and that their skulls were a marker for their level of intelligence. Chesnutt insists that "any theory of sterility due to race crossing may well be abandoned; it is founded mainly on prejudice and cannot be proved by the facts" (847).He asserts himself as being very knowledgeable of the subject matter, and he presents himself as a product of

"race crossing." The essay itself serves as proof that African Americans could indeed become educated and are capable of becoming successful in America.

One reason he feels blacks will not be included in the makeup of the future American is due to their economic status. Chesnutt suggests that if blacks had wealth that they would be accepted by the dominant culture. However, he shows that the dominant culture has attempted to make this impossible. This is one of the inconsistencies in Chesnutt's argument that Dean Mc Williams points out. Mc Williams understood that "part of the strategy [Chesnutt] devised was the creation of an iron mask, which allowed him to intervene in the discourse of his time and still distance himself from it" (44). However, he found the essay to contain many flaws that he believed were unintentional. The problem that McWilliams takes up with Chesnutt is the idea that class could eliminate racism. In fact, he accuses Chesnutt of not addressing questions such as: "Do blacks suffer discrimination because of their impoverished economic conditions, or do they suffer impoverished economic conditions because of discrimination?" (47) These are the questions Chesnutt would have wanted his audience to ask. In this essay, Chesnutt suggests that "as [blacks] grow in knowledge and in wealth they become more self-assertive, and make it correspondingly troublesome for those who would ignore their claims" (860-861). Mc Williams suggest that "we cannot expect black economic progress until this prejudice is first removed" (47). However, Chesnutt seems to feel that education will break down the barriers of racial prejudice.

McWilliams is not the only Scholar who misunderstood Chesnutt's intentions. Ferguson goes even further to suggest that "Chesnutt maintains in 'The Future American' series that the race needs to dilute itself through miscegenation with apparently superior whites, and he even provides a genetic formula for fully accomplishing this over three generation" (111). Ferguson reads this essay in a very literal way despite the obvious contradictions and implications that the white race is not superior to blacks. Clearly he attributed all "deficiencies" of blacks to the dominant culture who forces them to feel

inferior. At no point in this essay, does he refer to whites as being naturally superior. In fact, he points out more flaws in the dominant culture than in the black. She goes on to say that "throughout his entire analysis, he offers no formula for peaceful and equal racial coexistence within the United States, except black genetic dilution" (116). However, Chesnutt implies throughout the essay that if blacks were given formal education which would attribute to their economic growth they would have no desire to pass. The solution is simple and obvious that if racial discrimination could be eliminated, and equality could be instated for all Americans, there would be no need for superiority or inferiority based on color. He states "If it be conceded that these are the results of environment then their cause is not far to seek, and the cure is also" (860). He points the blame to the white supremacist culture that is responsible for the inferiority of African Americans, and he suggests that white law makers could improve the social conditions by eliminating racism.

A close analysis of Chesnutt's suggestion to devise a "mechanical formula" that would turn the black race into white Americans will prove this essay to be more of a parody than a proposal. Based on Chesnutt's fictional works and his life style, it would be highly unlikely that he would encourage his black audience to become white. The mixture would begin with "the population as one-eighth Negro" and by mixing them and their generations with whites, in the end "the entire population would be composed of octoroons . . ." (849). The problem with this formula is that the white population had already enforced laws against such mingling of races; therefore, such a suggestion would cause concern for his white audience. The product of this mechanical mixture would result in blacks "who would probably call themselves white, if by this time there remained any particular advantage in being so considered" (849). What is interesting in this statement is that the end product would be blacks, and Chesnutt is not certain that they would identify themselves as whites. He also implies that if there is no emphasis placed on color that there would be no desire for any blacks to want to be white. While suggesting that "there would be no perceptible trace of blacks left," he also points out that "in three generations the pure

whites would be entirely eliminated" (850). He predicts the exact opposite of the popular prediction of the future American being pure white.

Chesnutt suggests that "the mechanical mixture would be complete; as it would probably be put, the white race would have absorbed the black" (850). It is this statement that gained much attention, and it is assumed that this is what Chesnutt desires. However, if this were true, he would be admitting to the superiority of the white race. He suggests that the white race would probably take credit for dominating the black race when in actuality the mixture would have to be voluntary on both parts. In order for this to happen, the dominant culture would have to be willing to mix black blood into their "pure race." As impossible and ridiculous as it may have appeared to Chesnutt's original readers, this is exactly what was happening on a smaller scale. As mentioned before, slavery was somewhat of a mechanical mixture, and white slave masters voluntarily mixed white blood into African Americans. Overtime this mixture had caused African American blood to enter the white race.

In absorbing the black race, the whites would lose their superiority, and the laws promoting segregation would no longer be necessary. The idea of self-hatred and loss of identity would go both ways. Blacks would lose their physical markers of differences and whites would lose their "pure" white race. His solution would more than likely have infuriated his white audience more than it would have insulted his black audiences. Chesnutt admits that this would not be a favorable solution for whites. He would hope that this thought would disturb them more than the thought of granting blacks equality. By Offering equality as an alternative to passing, would seem like a logical solution. However, his white audience would not have been willing to give up their superiority.

Chesnutt has a moral purpose for this essay just as he does for "The Wife of His Youth" and *Mandy Oxendine*. He tries to convince his audience to see that "If it is only by becoming white that colored people and their children are to enjoy the rights and dignities of citizenship, they will have every incentive to lighten the breed, to use a current phrase, that they may claim the white man's privileges as

soon as possible" (861). There was already proof that blacks were passing for white, and he gave instances of this occurring. I argue that he does not present this proposal as a benefit to blacks, but as a problem for whites. It is his belief that "the white race is still susceptible of some improvement" (863). In regards to the African American, Chesnutt feels that "his part in the future American race may well be an important and valuable one" (863).

The point he makes is that if blacks were given examples of other blacks who have achieved greatness, or were allowed the same privileges as their white peers, that they too could be beneficial to the progress of America. The essay is more about the plight of African Americans than it is about amalgamation. There is more negativity in regards to the white race than to blacks throughout the essay. What he offers is not the literal transformation and merger of the two races, but for less emphasis to be placed on color. Chesnutt attempts to enable his audience to see white and black as one race, and focus on their commonalities rather than their differences. Also, if the white race were truly superior, then equality for blacks should have been no threat to the dominant culture. Furthermore, this "mechanical mixture" is not something that Chesnutt believes will happen. He acknowledges the many reasons why it would be rejected by his white audiences as well as the blacks.

Chesnutt is known for finding clever ways in his literature to address racial problems in America. He engages his audiences in hopes of causing them to question their own behavior. We witness this in "The Wife of his Youth" when Mr. Ryder asks his audience whether or not he should acknowledge Liza, and we witness this in *Mandy Oxendine* when he leaves the ending ambiguous. However, in both instances he gives an indication throughout the story what he feels is the moral choice. This article is no different as he poses many questions, and he at times suggests the obvious solutions. In each of the works, I submit that he suggests blacks and whites should be given the same opportunities and allowed to compete fairly in America.

Conclusion

Charles Chesnutt began his writing career with the intent to make a difference in the society in which he lived during the post Civil War period. It was his hope that his writings would reach the masses and social reform would occur, especially in the South where racial discrimination was at its height. His choice to write as a black author enabled him to be the spokesman for many African Americans who were denied equal rights. It was his wish as well as his mission to encourage both his black and white audiences to see beyond color. Through his works and endeavors, he continued to fight for justice for all African Americans. His literature along with his business ventures helped him to live a middle class lifestyle as a black man and to become the example for others to follow. At the same, time he provided his white audiences with a more positive view of blacks, and he suggested that they were worthy of receiving education and being allowed to compete in the industry. Chesnutt's literature sets the tone for many African Americans to follow, and his work is still of value today. He gave a different perspective of race in America, and he used satire in his works in hope of changing the mindset of an audience that was deeply immersed in cultural values that discriminated against blacks.

Studies of African American assimilation are still valuable in today's society. In order to measure America's progress in regards to race relations, one would have to look back to the past. Works like Chesnutt's give audiences both present and past a glimpse into his reality and provide historical evidence of the injustice African Americans suffered. In comparing our current society to that of Chesnutt's time, we can appreciate the many accomplishments blacks have achieved in America. At the same time, we can also be reminded of the deeply embedded traditions that shaped America during the Post Reconstruction period.

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