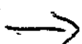
manhood as a teacher in North Carolina, and his daughters have fitted themselves for the work of teaching. Mr. Chesnutt's works have a deserved popularity, it seems to me, from the strength and delicacy with which they treat certain phases of the race question which are often avoided or neglected by other writers from lack of knowledge or want of courage. He writes frankly, and at the same time in a manner which commands attention and respect. He represents a new field in fiction. From his special knowledge, sympathy, and personal interest in his subjects, he is perhaps better qualified to discuss them than any other writer now before the American public.

THE ART OF *THE CONJURE WOMAN*

Richard E. Baldwin



In *The Conjure Woman* Charles Chesnutt analyzes with balance and subtlety the paradoxes and tensions of American racial life. The penetrating insights of these stories he never matched in his realistic fiction. Here Chesnutt avoids stifling stereotypes while criticizing the myths of white supremacy and demonstrating the range and quality of black experience. Other early black writers sought to do the same, but not until *Uncle Tom's Children* did any succeed as fully as did Chesnutt, for in *The Conjure Woman* he developed and exploited a finely balanced technique which solved the major artistic problems faced by early black writers.

The central problem was the audience. The reading public was predominantly white, and the audience that most early black writers cared most to reach was white, for it was to whites that they needed to tell the truth about the black experience in America. The need and the difficulty were one, for the problem of the black in America arose from the refusal of whites to perceive black experience accurately, and the artist's task was not simply to present the truth to white minds but to change those minds so that they could perceive the humanity of the black and the inhumanities which he suffered in America. The sentiments of white Americans could easily enough be touched, but the important and difficult task was changing their perceptions. Whites had to be trained to perceive black experience from the black point of view, for until the white man was so

American Literature, November 1971.

changed no serious black literature could receive a hearing because it would not be understood. The situation held dangers for the artist, since the task of reeducating America could not be completed quickly and the pressure of circumstances easily led writers to hasten the process by recourse to the melodramatic moral simplicity of propaganda.

Chesnutt began his career with a clear understanding of the problem and of the necessary response of the artist. In 1880, before he began writing fiction, he noted in his journal that "if I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose. . . . The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites." A little later in the same entry, in an observation basic to the strategy of *The Conjure Woman,* he noted that in the struggle of the Negro to win "recognition and equality" it was "the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea [of Negro equality]; to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling" [1] toward Negroes.

Chesnutt aimed to modify white minds to feel the equality of the black man, and with the conjure tales he developed a perfect vehicle for his artistic needs. Chesnutt's genius shows in the certainty of touch involved in the choice of Uncle Julius as his central character. Choosing a character so close to widely current pejorative stereotypes was a stroke as significant as Wright's choice of Bigger Thomas, for only by confronting and thus destroying the stereotypes could the black artist hope to alter the public mind. Further, Uncle Julius resolves for Chesnutt the black artist's problem of creating a black character in a situation in which significant dramatic incident is possible. To demonstrate the equality of blacks and whites, a black character must be presented in dramatic conflict with whites in a situation which allows the black not only to survive but to succeed with dignity. The difficulty of imagining such situations was clearly formulated by William Couch, Jr., in an essay on "The Problem of Negro Character and Dramatic Incident": "Serious dramatic situation necessitates consequential action committed by a protagonist with whom we can sympathize and admire. The assumptions of American culture, on the other hand, are not congenial to emphatic and uncompromising action on the part of a Negro. This is especially true when white interests are involved. Therefore, a dramatic situation, capable of producing a powerful effect, will usually suffer a distortion of that effect when the agent of action is a Negro character." [2]

[1] Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1954), p. 21. [Baldwin's note.]
[2] *Phylon,* XI (Second Quar., 1950), p. 128. [Baldwin's note.]

In the face of this dilemma black artists have frequently relied on a conflict of virtuous blacks against vicious whites, thus accentuating the dilemma rather than resolving it.

Chesnutt's conjure stories, on the other hand, resolve this basic problem. The tales which Uncle Julius tells stand in the tradition of subterfuge, indirection, and subtle manipulation of whites developed by the slaves as a strategy for surviving in the face of oppression. Chesnutt's conjure stories turn the strategy of "puttin' on ol' massa" into effective dramatic action through parallels and tensions between the frames established by the white narrator and the tales told by Uncle Julius. In "The Goophered Grapevine," Chesnutt's first conjure story, Julius's attempt to use the tale of the goophered grapevine to place a new "goopher" on the vineyard in order to keep the white man from depriving him of his livelihood provides the most obvious parallel between frame and tale. Julius emerges from this dramatic conflict with a qualified success, for while he loses the vineyard he gains a more stable livelihood in the white man's employment.

The limitations of his success are illuminated by another parallel between frame and tale, however. An important part of the tale centers on the experiences of Henry, a slave of Dugald McAdoo, antebellum owner of the vineyard. McAdoo purchased Henry after the success of the fatal conjure Aunt Peggy had placed on his vineyards had so increased his crop that he needed more help. Henry ate some of the grapes before he could be warned of the conjure, and his life was saved by an antidote which involved his anointing himself with sap from one of the vines. From that time on Henry's life followed the rhythms of the growing season; he became strong and supple in the spring and summer, then withered up during the winter months. McAdoo made a great deal of money exploiting Henry by selling him when he was strong and buying him back cheap when he weakened in the fall. During the winter months McAdoo coddled Henry to protect the valuable chattel. Although Henry enjoyed this comfortable life, he was more than ever at McAdoo's mercy, for his life depended on the life of the vineyards. When McAdoo's greed led him to follow foolish advice which killed the vines, Henry paid with his life for his master's folly.

Henry was about Uncle Julius's age when McAdoo purchased him, and the narrator's hiring of Julius ominously parallels that transaction. Julius had been a free entrepreneur, and although his new job may pay more than the vineyard could yield to him, it represents a new form of slavery in which Julius loses a significant measure of his freedom in return for security; Julius's love of grapes, like Henry's, places him in the power of the white man. Yet this judgment must in turn be qualified by the implied parallel between the narrator and McAdoo, for it is obvious that the narrator is in some ways a wiser man than his slave-owning predecessor, a fact which mutes the threatening potential of his hiring of Julius while the mutual service of each to the other emphasizes the ways in which the story demonstrates the inescapable connections between the lives of black and white, a central theme in much of Chesnutt's work.

"The Goophered Grapevine" gains additional richness through the complicated nature of Julius's motivation. While he wants very much to preserve his vineyard, he simultaneously wants to strike out at the racial superiority assumed by the narrator. The tale which he tells consistently presents white men bested by blacks or acting in ways whose folly is clearly perceived by the blacks. Both in the broad outline of his tale of the goophered grapevine and in numerous minor points, such as the inability of the best white doctors to cure the goopher that Aunt Peggy has placed on Henry, Uncle Julius asserts the humanity of the black and his equality with, or superiority to, whites. Julius thus has the pleasure of effectively calling the white man a fool to his face, yet he fails to make any impression because the narrator is too blinded by racism to be able to perceive what Julius is up to. Ironically, that failure, while it underscores the truth in Julius's point, is vital to his success at preserving his livelihood, since the narrator would not likely have hired Julius had he perceived the insults. The concluding frame thus generates multiple ironies which illuminate the complex tension between the black's need to deny and attack white supremacy and the hard fact that while whites are not superior beings they nevertheless have very real power.

Chesnutt's success in dealing with this tension in *The Conjure Woman* depends not only on the complex motivation of Uncle Julius but also on the two white characters of the frame, the Northern narrator and his wife Annie. The two white people are crucial to Chesnutt's rhetorical strategy for leading white America "imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling" toward blacks. The narrator, a basically decent sort of man, takes a typical paternalistic attitude towards Uncle Julius and his tales. He accepts Julius's attempts at manipulating him yet remains blinded by his own sense of superiority. His understanding of black life has been molded more by Uncle Remus and the plantation school than by Uncle Julius. As Julius begins the tale of the goophered grapevine, for instance, the narrator observes that "As he became more and more absorbed in the narrative, his eyes assumed a dreamy expression, and he seemed to lose sight of his auditors, and to be living over again in monologue his life on the old plantation."[3] This evocation of the plantation tradition reveals the

[3] Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969), pp. 12–13 [page 121 of this volume]. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

narrator's blindness to Julius's revelations about slavery, for life on the McAdoo plantation had nothing of the dreamy quality of the idyls of Harris. The statement becomes richly ironic when the conclusion shows that Uncle Julius has had his eyes very much on his auditors and the demands of the present moment. It is the narrator whose eyes are closed, and in an adumbration of the Invisible Man motif he is "beaten" by a man he never sees.

The narrator's posture has immense rhetorical value for Chesnutt, for it enables him to present his stories with detachment from the point of view of any of his characters. The framing narrative voice is that of a typical white American liberal, an unconscious racist who seems free of bigotry. In his reactions to Julius's tale the narrator is not so dull as to miss all that the black is up to, yet he misses enough that he can report the tale of slavery with no sense of the range of its meaning, especially those portions directed against him. The narrator thus appears as a mixture of sensitivity and callousness, and he can be treated sympathetically while his blindness to Uncle Julius's character and to the implications of his tales provides ironic commentary on his own character and on America's racial absurdities.

Chesnutt's technique relies heavily on irony, and like any ironic technique it runs the risk that readers will miss the point. Annie, the narrator's wife, is developed as a contrasting character in order to reduce this danger. Her permanent convalescent state underscores the feminine sensibility which leads her to respond more deeply to Uncle Julius than does her husband. When Julius announces that the vineyard is goophered, for instance, the narrator observes that "He imparted this information with such solemn earnestness, and with such an air of confidential mystery, that I felt somewhat interested, while Annie was evidently much impressed, and drew closer to me" (pp. 11–12 [p. 121]). The narrator's attitude toward his wife frequently is as condescending as his attitude toward Julius, and after the tale is finished he notes that she "doubtfully, but seriously" asked, "'Is that story true?'" (p. 33 [p. 127]). His own reaction to the tale appears only in his assertion that he bought the vineyard in spite of the purported goopher. Annie's question, however, allows Chesnutt to imply the presence of metaphoric meanings through the absurd literalness of Uncle Julius's response that he can prove its truth by showing her Henry's grave. At such levels the tale obviously is not true, but the nature of the question and answer implies that other levels of meaning can be discovered by any who care to look for them.

[Baldwin's note. Baldwin's parenthetical references to *The Conjure Woman* will be immediately followed by bracketed references to the present volume.]

Chesnutt seems not to have fully grasped the value of his white characters when he first wrote "The Goophered Grapevine," for his second conjure story openly exploits the contrast, and when he prepared the first story for book publication he added to the opening frame several long sections which develop the narrator more fully. The opening frame of the second story, "Po' Sandy," points out the difference between the narrator and Annie. When she rises eagerly to Julius's hint of a story, her husband comments that "some of these stories are quaintly humorous; others wildly extravagant, revealing the Oriental cast of the negro's imagination; while others, poured freely into the sympathetic ear of a Northern-bred woman, disclose many a tragic incident of the darker side of slavery" (pp. 40–41 [pp. 129–30]). While the narrator has sufficient curiosity to listen to the tales with pleasure he has no patience for discovering meanings in them; rather than revelations about American life he sees only an "Oriental cast of the negro's imagination." Annie, on the other hand, instinctively leaps to at least some meanings. The resulting contrast helps Chesnutt bring a white audience to perceive events from the black point of view, for while the narrator reacts with a typical white obtuseness, Annie, by seeing through the surface of fantastic and supernatural machinery, points the reader to the vital human life behind.

Chesnutt uses this contrast most effectively in "Po' Sandy." Uncle Julius's tale tells of Sandy, a young slave devoted to his wife Tenie, a conjure woman. Mars Marrabo continually sends Sandy, an exceptionally good worker, to help out relatives on distant plantations, and when Sandy tires of this Tenie turns him into a tree to keep him near her. When Sandy disappears, the dogs track him to the tree, where they lose the trail. After the excitement of his disappearance passes, Tenie nightly returns Sandy to human form. But then Marrabo sends Tenie to nurse his daughter-in-law, and during her absence Sandy is cut down, and Tenie returns just in time to watch her husband sawn into lumber to build a new kitchen on the plantation. The kitchen remains haunted by Sandy's ghost, so it is eventually torn down and the lumber used to build a schoolhouse. The narrator now plans to tear down the school and use the lumber to build Annie a new kitchen.

After Julius finishes his tale, the following exchange between Annie and the narrator occurs:

> "What a system it was," she exclaimed, when Julius had finished, "under which such things were possible!"
>
> "What things?" I asked, in amazement. "Are you seriously considering the possibility of a man's being turned into a tree?"

favorite Negro type—the old and faithful retainer, the black adjunct to a white aristocracy.

Charles Chesnutt's first conjure story offered an alternative to the preoccupation of Southern regional writing with the faithful retainer stereotype as the major black figure of interest and significance on the old plantation. "The Goophered Grapevine" introduced a strange, new figure, Aunt Peggy, an enterprising black voodooist, whose powers and influence in the story opened up an untouched area of Southern custom and folk belief to a curious readership. The story also described the fate of Henry, an ordinary black field hand representative of the black laborer whose life and lot had been excluded from the pages of plantation fiction up to that time. The focus of "The Goophered Grapevine" on the experience of the slave who did the work rather than on the aristocrat who enjoyed the benefits of that work signaled Chesnutt's crucial reorientation of point of view in his stories of ante-bellum plantation life. The businessman narrator of "Dave's Neckliss," the second Chesnutt story in which Julius appears, defines this reorientation when he remarks that Julius "never indulged in any regrets for the Arcadian joyousness and irresponsibility which was a somewhat popular conception of slavery; his had not been the lot of the houseservant, but that of the toiling field hand."[30] By locating the point of view of his conjure stories in Julius, a field hand, Chesnutt was able to take a new look at the whites and blacks who were committed to the South's "peculiar institution," a look unbiased by the sort of affection and nostalgia Uncle Remus and Page's uncles displayed for their erstwhile masters and their former positions. The possibility lay open to examine the mundane, everyday life of the slave, the relationship of the master to the ordinary slave, and the attitudes of such a slave to both his daily experience and his seldom-seen master.

The slave-master relationship in Chesnutt's conjure stories differs markedly from the typical relationship of benevolent aristocrat and loyal retainer which dominated Southern plantation fiction at the time. Accurate depiction of ante-bellum life in the sandhills region of North Carolina demanded a departure from the plantation norm. The conventional picture of plantation life, epitomized in the writings of Page, the descendant of the Virginia aristocracy, held little in common with the realities of life in central North Carolina before the war. This region possessed neither the rich soil which supported vast plantations in the Deep South nor the old established families who maintained great holdings of land and slaves in the

[30] "Dave's Neckliss," p. 501. [Andrews's note, page 189 in this volume.]

Virginia Tidewater region. Thus the predominant class in central North Carolina was the middle class, chiefly represented by the small farmer who often worked in the fields beside the few slaves he owned, trying by "thrift and energy" to "get ahead in life."[31]

The desire to "get ahead" is what distinguishes the Mars Dugals, Mars Marrabos, and other slaveholders of Julius's tales from the stereotypical aristocrats of Page and Smith and Edwards. While the aristocrats in Page's stories duel and dance, court and politic and go off to war, the parsimonious Scots in Chesnutt's stories cheat each other, indulge their gambling vices, hunt down their runaways, argue with their wives, curse their slaves, and worry over their bankbooks. The salient characteristics of most of the masters Julius remembers are not cruelty and inhumanity but meanness and selfishness.[32] For these are the descendants of those hard-bitten small farmers, merchants, and ruffians who enliven the work of early Southwestern humorists like Johnson Jones Hooper and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet. They have become a bit more genteel; they can afford some of the vices of a gentleman. But they are still money-hungry, and their treatment of their slaves displays a fundamental regard for profit at the expense of the physical and emotional welfare of the slave. Even when these whites exhibit a qualified liberality toward their slaves,[33] their kindness is engendered by hard-headed business sense, not humanitarianism.

Nevertheless, the slaveowners of Chesnutt's conjure tales, though only sketched in the recollections of Uncle Julius, do offer a more balanced, untinted portrait of the representative slaveowner in the South than the picturesque or eccentric aristocrats of Page, Allen, Smith, and Edwards. Through the bland commentary of an old ex-slave, Chesnutt joined early local color depicters of the Southern middle and lower classes like Joel Chandler Harris and Richard Malcolm Johnston[34] in their efforts to render an accurate impression of those regions of the South which did not

[31] Guion G. Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1973), p. 59. [Andrews's note.]

[32] See, for example, Mars Dugal' McAdoo in "The Goophered Grapevine," a man who cheats his fellow slaveowners in order to make a quick buck off a peculiar slave who can work tirelessly in the spring but almost dies in the winter. [Andrews's note.]

[33] In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" a previously cruel white man changes his treatment of his slaves, with the result that he earns more from his plantation than ever before. [Andrews's note.]

[34] Though often similar in tone and subject to the plantation writers, Harris in books like *Mingo and Other Sketches in Black and White* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1884) did achieve a certain distinction as a depictor of lower and more representative classes of

support the kind of social and economic system exemplified in most plantation writing. Chesnutt did not focus on the Southern middle and lower classes with the thoroughness and breadth of a Harris or a Johnston, but his efforts do represent an introduction to a seldom-discussed people in a region largely ignored by the best writers of his day.

If Julius's tales derive some historical significance from the fact that they introduce a new class of slaveholder, they deserve even greater attention for their treatment of a class of slave unfamiliar to readers of Southern local color. Within the confines of the local color tradition, Chesnutt depicted the situation of the average slave on an average plantation with greater care and sympathy than any of his white fiction-writing contemporaries. This does not mean that Chesnutt created rounded, complex black characters in his conjure stories; the brevity of his genre prevented this. Nor does it claim for Chesnutt an early realistic examination of the everyday experience of those who suffered most under slavery. The pervasive use of conjuration and supernatural events in the tales of Uncle Julius removes Chesnutt's characters from the mundane world and places them at varying distances from the reader's powers of sympathetic identification.[35] But the reason for resorting to conjuration by the slave heroes and heroines in Julius's stories points back to the chief distinction of these tales vis-á-vis the slave.

If the central black characters of Julius's tales do not possess a complex human identity, they usually evidence rather early in their stories some quality or trait or obsession which motivates them and brings them eventually into conflict with the white slaveholding institutions. Tenie and Sandy in "Po' Sandy"[36] are hardly individualized at all until their marital love and devotion moves them to defy the plans of their master. Then Tenie resorts to her conjure powers as a means of preserving their relationship. In

whites in rural middle Georgia. Johnston's *Dukesborough Tales*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper's, 1883) are similarly distinctive because of their attention to the life of the middle class farmer of central Georgia. [Andrews's note.]

[35] An inordinate or capricious use of conjuring destroys the effectiveness of such stories as "Tobe's Tribulations," *The Southern Workman*, XXIX (1900), 656–64, and "A Victim of Heredity," *Self-Culture*, XI, No. 5 (1900), 404–09. Great restraint in the use of conjuring is a major factor contributing to the success of such tales as "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy." This might explain why "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy" were included in *The Conjure Woman* while "Tobe's Tribulations" and "A Victim of Heredity" were excluded. [Andrews's note.]

[36] "Po' Sandy," *The Conjure Woman*, pp. 36–63. [Andrews's note, pages 128–136 in this volume.]

the case of Becky and her child Mose,[37] mother and son lack vitality as characters until they are faced with the prospect of separation as a result of the master's decision to exchange Becky for a horse. But when the familial bond is threatened by the exigencies of the slave system, the love of child and parent manifests itself in the lengths to which both will go to circumvent the master's control. As a result Becky and Mose are vitalized and individualized in their story by the intensity of their feeling for each other.

While not every story told by Uncle Julius pits slave ingenuity and voodoo against the established power of the slaveholder,[38] almost all the stories portray conjuring as a means by which a slave expresses and attempts to preserve his most deeply felt emotions, human relationships, or identity. Lacking the space in his Uncle Julius tales to create complex human figures, Chesnutt concentrated on depicting slaves whose motives—love, hate, jealousy, envy, and pride—and pathetic or even tragic actions gave incontrovertible evidence of their humanity. By de-emphasizing physical descriptions and personal idiosyncrasies of his characters, Chesnutt avoided the dangers of local color caricature of blacks. He portrayed the slave's essential humanity beneath the accidents of his peculiar ethnic background and social status. To reveal the black man as a representative and sympathetic human figure, Chesnutt made his condition in slavery a kind of crucible which revealed authentic and profound human emotions and desires once its particularly restrictive, dehumanizing effects were applied to him specifically. Within the crucible the slave suffers from the abuses of slavery, but he or she does not become merely a victim, an object of pity. In Chesnutt's conjure stories the most disturbing aspect of slavery is not the possibilities of physical abuse, which occurs very rarely, but the likelihood of a more profound threat to the slave's dignity, his capacity to feel, his human identity. In response to this threat, Chesnutt's heroes and heroines need not perform superhuman acts of rebellion or express their superiority through a daring escape to freedom in order to confirm their human worth.[39] Neither Tenie nor Becky nor the other main characters in *The Conjure Woman* ever permanently escape her or his physical bondage, but the actions of each attest to a freedom from the enslavement

[37] "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," *The Conjure Woman*, pp. 132–161. [Andrews's note, pages 157–166 in this volume.]

[38] "The Conjurer's Revenge," a seldom discussed story in *The Conjure Woman*, describes the use of voodoo by a conjure man against another slave. In "The Goophered Grapevine" Aunt Peggy sells her conjure powers to the white slaveowner. [Andrews's note.]

[39] Only rarely is permanent flight from slavery attempted in Julius's stories; only twice is it achieved. In both cases ("Lonesome Ben" and "Tobe's Tribulations"), the slave who

of the spirit. Within the restrictions of the slave condition, each illustrates a realistic standard of heroism. It is not the dog-like loyalty of the family servants and retainers too often celebrated by plantation writers. Nor is it the open militancy and defiance of slave insurrectionists and fugitives who were special favorites of the abolitionist writers.[40] Time after time in Uncle Julius's stories the exigencies of the slave condition force a particular slave into a desperate situation which elicits from him or her some kind of action. But whether or not this action is successful is less important than the fact that the action itself confirms the slave's identity in the story as a serious figure who deserves the reader's respect, concern, and empathy. At times the slave's action may constitute a direct challenge to the authority of the master. But what is at stake in Chesnutt's conjure stories is not the black man's triumph over the institution of slavery but something even more important to his progress in post-war America—his triumph over the view of Afro-Americans that the institution and its celebrators had perpetrated.

When Charles Chesnutt first began publishing his Uncle Julius stories, the writers of the plantation tradition had largely won the sympathy of Northern reading audiences for an ideal and a social system which an earlier generation of Yankees had fought in the Civil War. The aristocratic ideal revered by Page and his followers was not merely the nostalgic memory of a confirmed reactionary; it was proposed as a viable means of leading the South out of the chaos of Reconstruction.[41] Page spoke most explicitly of the need of the erstwhile slave for the guidance and correction of the "natural" leaders of the South.[42] Viewing the black man as happiest in slavery, Page and many of his followers frequently presented in their work ex-slaves unfitted for life outside its confines because they lack either the ambition or the ability to deal maturely and intelligently with the kinds of problems faced every day by whites.[43] The existence of these characters

escapes from his master eventually returns to the plantation with ironic and tragic results. [Andrews's note.]

[40] See Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937), pp. 45–46. [Andrews's note.]

[41] The response of the Southern aristocrat to the problems of the post-war South is a central theme in two Page novels, *Red Rock* (1899) and *Gordon Keith* (1903). [Andrews's note.]

[42] Theodore L. Gross, *Thomas Nelson Page* (New York: Twayne, 1967), pp. 105–12. [Andrews's note.]

[43] Examples of this type of ex-slave are plentiful in the fiction of Thomas Nelson Page. Free Joe in Harris's "Free Joe and the Rest of the World," *Free Joe and Other Georgian Sketches* (New York: Scribner's, 1898), pp. 1–20 also illustrated the failure of the freed black to provide for himself. Such sentimental pairs as Isam and Major Washington in Edwards's fiction, Chad and Colonel Carter in Smith's popular novels, and Peter Cotton and Colonel Fields in Allen's "Two Gentlemen of Kentucky" indicate the bonds which many Southern writers considered basic to the black-white relationship after the Civil War. [Andrews's note.]

reinforced the idea of "The Wretched Freedman," the childlike, undeveloped, incompetent black man of the Reconstruction.[44] But Chesnutt's picture of blacks in slavery, by concentrating on their tenacity of purpose, their depth of feeling, their resourcefulness, strength of character, and practicality, denied this view of the slave's disqualification for the responsibilities of a free person. By showing slavery not as a protected, sheltered condition of existence tailored to meet an inferior race's ample needs but as a difficult and fortuitous way of life in which great determination, courage, and quick-wittedness were needed in order to survive, Chesnutt proved his essential theme in the Uncle Julius stories—that in the midst of his degradation the black man had affirmed his human dignity and purpose. Chesnutt also left little doubt that having endured the crucible of slavery, the black man and woman could overcome the problems of a free status.

To William Dean Howells and J. Saunders Redding, the objectivity with which Chesnutt treated Uncle Julius and his memories of ante-bellum days stands as Chesnutt's most noteworthy achievement in his conjure stories.[45] But the significance of the stories should be divided between their excellence as local color fiction and their value as realistic, and at times unconventional, assessments of slavery and the Afro-American who lived under its domination. Reaction to the stories during Chesnutt's day reflects this divided significance. Most reviewers, struck by the new author's original materials and technical skill, received Chesnutt as a promising new regionalist who had mined a new vein and deserved credit for the literary ore he had discovered. However, several reviewers called attention to the pathos of Julius's stories and found in the stories an unromanticized picture of "a tragic period in our national life" whose "sorrowful legacy" still remained.[46] That both kinds of response to the conjure stories are possible, and in fact are suggested by Chesnutt, is a further tribute to the art and sophistication of this writer.

By having Julius narrate his tales to two listeners, the white businessman and his wife, Chesnutt opened up the possibility of two contrasting

[44] Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," *Journal of Negro Education*, II (1933), 187. [Andrews's note.]

[45] Howells, "Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt's Stories," p. 700; Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black*, p. 69. [Andrews's note.]

[46] See the Boston *Evening Transcript*, 22 March, 1899. This review may be found in the scrapbook of press clippings on *The Conjure Woman* held in the Chesnutt Collection of the Fisk University Library. [Andrews's note.]

ways of reading the conjure stories.[47] One could join the businessman in regarding Julius's stories as "'ingenious fairy tale[s]'" and "'absurdly impossible yarn[s]'" concocted to entertain and subtly manipulate his employers.[48] Or one could respond to the stories as absorbing and moving narratives in themselves, as the businessman's wife does. At the end of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," the wife, who has been moved to "sympathy, indignation, pity" and "satisfaction" by the story, chastises her husband for his bemused skepticism in terming the story a "'fairy tale.'" "'[T]he story bears the stamp of truth, if ever one did,'" she announces. When her husband objects to the credibility of "'the humming-bird episode'" and "'the mocking-bird digression,'" she dismisses his criticism by insisting that, "'those are mere ornamental details and not at all essential. The story is true to nature, and might have happened half a hundred times, and no doubt did happen, in those horrid days before the war.'"[49]

While the businessman-narrator has closed his literalistic mind to Julius's story because some aspects of it are frankly imaginative, his wife weighs the relative importance of the folk elements and potentially tragic theme of the story and comes to a significant conclusion. She realizes that the transformation of a child into a humming bird is fantastic, but she also understands it to be a peripheral element in the story. What is essential to the story, the misery of separation and joy of reunion as depicted in the example of the slave-mother and her son, she regards as being "'true to nature.'" She suspends her disbelief in the case of the conjure motifs so that she may receive the emotional impact of Julius's stories, which depends not on an adherence to narrow standards of literal reality but on an attention to essential, representative, universal truths of "nature" reflected in the lives of a group that had rarely been accorded such attention, black people in slavery.

By dramatizing the distinctive reactions of the businessman and his wife to Julius's tales, Charles Chesnutt suggested to his readers and critics two essentially complementary approaches to his conjure stories. The businessman views the stories as amusing and fascinating imaginative

[47] Richard E. Baldwin in "The Art of *The Conjure Woman*," *American Literature*, XLIII (1971), 385–98, has also noted the importance of the frame story and the contrast between the businessman and his wife to the message of *The Conjure Woman*. [Andrews's note.]

[48] At the conclusion to "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," the businessman's view of the story as a "fairy tale" is given. At the conclusion to "Po' Sandy" the businessman calls Julius's tale "that absurdly impossible yarn." [Andrews's note.]

[49] "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," p. 159. [Andrews's note, pages 165–166 in this volume.]

pieces enlivened by the presence of Julius's secret motives and his knowledge of Afro-American folklore. The quaintness of the ex-slave and the information in his stories that shed light on the history of the region or the way the black man's mind works are what interest the businessman. They are also what would and did interest the average reader of local color in Chesnutt's day. The businessman's repeated skepticism toward Julius's tales confirms the validity of a similar response from a local color reader who prefers verifiable reality to fantasy and speculation. For this type of reader, the white man's response to Julius's tales as "'ingenious fairy tales'" helps to pigeonhole the stories along with other popular and diverting collections of Negro humor and folk literature, headed, no doubt, by the Uncle Remus stories. The businessman's response represents and invites the traditional local color response to the stories of Uncle Julius.

But if the husband's view affirms the possibility of a traditional interpretation of Julius's stories, the view of the wife suggests the inadequacy of the traditional local color attitude toward such stories. Instead of responding to the unusual, picturesque, and highly imaginative details of slave life in North Carolina, the woman is moved by the reactions of Julius's characters to recognize their individual predicaments. Julius's adherence to or departure from the conventions of local color realism means less to her than his sometimes tragic revelations of the humanity of black people as reflected through their experiences as slaves. Through the inclusion of the wife's response, Chesnutt deepened the emotional channels of his conjure stories and transcended some of the limitations of the local color story. He called attention to the tragic or near-tragic elements of his stories, while avoiding what Saunders Redding has called "the weak pseudo-tragedy of propaganda."[50] The wife's sensitivity to the joys and sorrows of black mothers and children, black husbands and wives, argues the possibility of a new, untraditional response to blacks as representative human beings, not as "uncles" and "mammies," "pickaninnies" and "sambos." Chesnutt as author does not demand such a response from his readers; he merely dramatizes it in a few stories with a reticence that has been praised as his most significant achievement in the conjure stories. But reticence and objectivity alone do not summarize Chesnutt's achievement in the tales of Uncle Julius. The significance of these early stories by the first important black American writer of fiction lies in the objective balance that Chesnutt maintained in them between the demands of popular local color realism and the obligation of the artist to reveal "truth to nature" despite the traditions, conventions, and prejudices of the literature of his own day.

[50] Redding, p. 69. [Andrews's note.]