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ENG 3262
10/28/14

“Passing” in *The House Behind The Cedars*

William Pickens, an African-American orator, once wrote that “If passing for white will get a fellow better accommodation on a train, better seats in the theatre, immunity from insults in public places, and may even save his life from a mob, only idiots would fail to seize the advantages of passing, at least occasionally if not permanently” (3). Pickens was the son of a freed slave and would not have been able to “pass” so easily. Charles W. Chesnutt, on the other hand, was truly able to “pass” and yet spent most of his life choosing to identify himself as African-American (Glass 71). For most African-Americans in the post-Reconstruction era, passing as “white” might be considered the more logical choice than allowing yourself to suffer persecution. Chesnutt presents an argument in his novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, that passing is taking upon oneself fictional traits of a so-called “race” or “role” that was created by society. In Chesnutt’s story, the problem lies in acting in a pretended role denying one’s heritage and roots that, to society, holds less privilege and honor. We can see through Chesnutt’s characterization throughout the novel of John Warwick as well as George Tryon that “passing” is the practice of performance and acting that runs contrary to one’s roots and causes damage or harm to anyone caught up in it.

In Chesnutt’s novel, John Warwick is a self-made lawyer who sacrifices his roots (as embodied by Molly Walden) for an amoral future with a great deal of callousness. After 10 years away from that past, he returns not to visit family—but on a matter of business, to which he attended first before finally stopping by at the house behind the cedars. From the beginning, John is focused on the outward appearance rather than on the family ties. As he strolls along the street,

he sees Rena and assesses her sexual attraction without recognizing her as his sister. “This action,” Melissa Ryan says, “...establishes the appraising male gaze as the novel’s central lens” (41). The “appraising male gaze” is what Chesnutt asserts to be a major force that determines whether a person does or does not pass as white. It is the gaze that John uses to assess the superficial aspects of Rena as they walk past Liberty Point—where “slave auctions were sometimes held” before the days of the Civil War (House 4-5). As someone who embodies true “passing” into whiteness, John is shown to have ignoble rather than noble qualities.

John is obviously an authority figure in Chesnutt’s novel, having the ability to manipulate events to his own benefit. As an advocate and expert in law, he is able to act his way—through passing—into a position of higher station when he goes to South Carolina before the beginning of the novel. When he meets again with the old Judge, there is a brief conversation in which the Judge remembers the law “being in [John’s] favor” (23). This far into Chesnutt’s novel, we know that John is able to pass for white despite his black ancestral heritage as well as manipulate the law to his advantage to become a respectable lawyer. As someone who has successfully and completely left behind his roots, he returns to his home town of Patesville and begins manipulating his mother, Molly, into letting Rena leave behind her roots and become someone she is not (House 19-20).

The main attraction behind John’s offer to Rena is the opportunity of receiving an education, higher station within society, as well as greater wealth—something that would be unattainable should Rena choose to stay with her mother. To Chesnutt, this dilemma is not simply having to choose between giving up a poor life for a better one—although it appears as such on the surface. Should one make the assertion that the choice is not of moralistic import to our protagonists would be to ignore the old Judge’s words as he reflected upon John’s life

choices: “‘Right and wrong,’ he mused, ‘must be eternal verities, but our own standards for measuring them vary with our latitude and our epoch’” (House 24). These verities, or truths, to which the Judge laments are principles that can either be stretched and defined every which way depending upon our place and time. This short soliloquy is a judgment passed on the arbitrary way race is determined within the customs of different times and places. The old Judge continues his soliloquy: “‘In equity [John] would seem to be entitled to his chance in life; it might have been wiser, though, for him to seek it farther afield than South Carolina. It was too near home, even though the laws were with him’” (House 24). His very proximity to “home” is deemed to have negative consequences—but on whom? In this we see a major foreshadow for rest of Chesnutt’s story.

To aid the reader’s understanding of just how much John’s influence affected Rena as well as Molly, it is important to note the symbolic element to which Chesnutt adds within the very title of his book. In Chevalier’s *Dictionary of Symbols*, he states that within Biblical history, the cedar tree has “become the emblem of grandeur, strength and survival.” They have been used in the construction of Solomon’s temple and were seen as “the symbol of incorruptibility” as well as “immortality” (172). The knowledge of this imagery lends to the metaphysics of the story and the reader can imagine Rena and her mother Molly (or John’s roots) living behind the protection and strength of incorruptible cedar trees. The environment in which they live becomes the epitome of moral innocence and virtue. John enters through the trees and takes Rena through manipulation in which she sacrifices the protection of incorruptibility for wealth and station. Yet ignorant is what John assumes of those who live behind the hedge of cedars. Although they are “dwarf cedars” (House 7), they were still tall enough to veil his presence from them. He says, “I suspect I’ll have to go to the front door, after all. No one can see me through the trees” (House

11). While John assumes no one can see him on the outside looking in. It is this one-way *transparency* that John takes advantage of. From the beginning, he is able to walk behind her with his “glance fixed upon her” for at least 10 minutes before she notices him. (House 5-6)

The reader can see the significance of John moving past the incorruptible cedars encompassing the house and taking Rena away from Molly, a woman who resides comfortably within the protection of the trees. For her, happiness is being close to her family and her roots, the very things the cedars symbolically protect. Molly is not able to pass as Rena is, yet she lives apart from the rest of the blacks in Patesville most likely because of her husband or lover—a man the reader knows very little of. Knowing that Molly is the matriarchal anchor to their family—another authority figure whose opinion holds sway over Rena—John succeeds at manipulating her into letting him take Rena away. After meeting resistance and dropping the subject of sweeping Rena away from Patesville, John starts a careful and tender game that plays upon Molly’s emotions. He says, “Here she must forever be—nobody! With me she might have got out into the world; with her beauty she might have made a good marriage; and, if I mistake not, she has sense as well as beauty” (17-18). John uses the endearing qualities that Rena possesses in order to emphasize her potential while reducing her current state of living to naught. While Molly could be considered selfish with the desire to keep Rena at home because of her loneliness, it is a selfishness born out of the need for support within family ties. John draws upon guilt to further manipulate Molly into relinquishing her to John’s care by stating that Rena’s “duties chain her” to that home (18). The selfishness is greater on John’s part since he has other duties in store for Rena to further chain her to himself.

Upon leaving the house behind the cedars, Rena is thrust into sudden and unexpected popularity at a medieval tournament hosted by the Clarence Social Club. As both she and John

attend, she is noticed by several as one of the most beautiful women at the tournament. This observation is made by onlookers both white and black (34-35). The outward appearance of Rena is most focused on by the crowd and, more particularly, George Tryon who is playing a knight in the Tournament. When Rena drops her handkerchief, she succumbs to the age-old stereotype of a maiden having dropped something to which the gallant, medieval knight must retrieve in return for attention and eventually courting. Tryon does this and since Rena is John's to give away, his glance toward John is an act of asking for permission, who returns it with a smile (34). Already, Rena has become property that John can exchange for, as Ryan puts it, "something more valuable (a white brother)" (49). Rena passes for white only at the expense of her own freedom—leaping from one form of bondage dealing with racial prejudice, to a bondage based on gender roles within society (Ryan, 49).

Margaret Toth discusses in length the effect of these roles within society on Rena as well as other white characters within the novel. The first part of the chapter is "meticulously described" in order to set a "scene." Chesnutt, she says, "allows the reader to envision exactly the set-up of the stage—in this case, the platform on which white Southern men will perform childishly." "We are witnessing a spectacle:" Toth says, "an adaptation, on the part of the aristocratic Clarence Social Club, of a tournament scene from Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*" (81). Chesnutt uses his unique "visual language" and everyone becomes an actor or actress in a scene playing out their roles. Everyone is dressed the part of their role and performing—not only in the tournament play, but also in pre-created societal roles. These roles have taken on aspects and traits of a specific race. Hence, whilst John and Rena are only passing as white, they have taken on the characteristics of whiteness—a race that is, by custom, not their own. This reminds the reader of the Old Judge's warning to John that "custom is stronger than law" (23). Rena, then, is

the one that will be subject to the negative consequences that were foreshadowed by the Judge only a few chapters before.

Rena and John are not the only play-actors that are “performing” their roles. George, while he is a white, Southern man that comes from a prominent, white family, can also be seen as “passing.” If passing is a performance, George is passing as a Southern, white gentleman who pretends he is gallant and chivalric. In essence, he is trying to pass as Rena’s white knight in shining armor. He puts on a show before John, claiming that he doesn’t care about ancestry. He says, “My dear John. There is a great deal of nonsense about families. If a man is noble and brave and strong, if a woman is beautiful and good and true, what matters it about his or her ancestry?” (57). These traits he lists are traits that are assumed to be closely related to chivalry—to whiteness—and he doesn’t even consider that someone of the black race can possess these traits. George’s performance is perhaps more destructive than John’s and Rena’s. Toth states: “[John and Rena’s] passing seems much less transgressive...it is the white characters such as George who seem like imposters, delivering strained performances” (86).

When John and Rena’s ruse is discovered by George, there is a mutual uncovering of performances. Rena’s performance is taken almost as if she were a usurper to a throne—a pretender with no right to it. Chesnutt describes that “the full realization of truth...had for the moment reversed his mental attitude toward her, and love and yearning had given place to anger and disgust.” She was “worse than dead to him” (House 95-96). This complete reversal attitudes tells us more about George Tryon than it does about Rena Walden. Rena followed her role and performance with “a sincere desire for improvement” as well as “innate taste and intelligence” (41). Rena more genuine attitude contrasts with George’s complete 180 degree turn away from her. As a result, she is rendered horrified and eventually ill because she has discovered that the

man she loved was only pretending to love—with no right to it. It was a role that he was to fill and nothing more. With Rena's relatively lesser transgression, the love he professed to her at the Tournament meant little or nothing: "He did not love me," Rena says. "Or he would have acted differently" (120).

John brought Rena into a world of actors. While Rena was legitimately trying to achieve a role within whiteness, George and other white characters seemed to only be pretending to it. Blanche Leary, the woman whom replaced Rena in George's life, also had less than noble qualities about her. She was performing as well, thinking she could win George over by faking interest to his "tastes" (156). As Toth puts it, She is "only a pretender to those values associated white womanliness" (87). Blanche is only passing as the white woman that wants to be in George's life. This act of passing, Toth says, "requires keen 'observation' skills, 'knowledge of correct standards of deportment,' and the ability to modify conduct accordingly." As a result, Toth concludes that Chesnutt's classifies passing within the same categories of other acts that are "less sincere" (87). In Chesnutt's own life, he draws a connection between himself and Rena—he, himself being a mulatto that was able to pass for white. While he relates to Rena, he states that "she was a white person with an attenuated streak of dark blood, from the disadvantages of which she tried in vain to escape, while I never did" (qtd in *Bodies* 38). The statement that Chesnutt never did pass for white seems to be an act that flies in the face of John's bold statement as a child: "I am white" (113).

The purpose of *The House Behind the Cedars* seems to be to argue that race is a construction of society—something determined by social performances and acts. The reason, then, that Chesnutt looks down upon passing is because when one does "pass" it merely taking upon oneself the fictional traits of a created role that runs against a person's nature. Rena,

influenced more by her emotions than her intellect, suffered the most because of her attempt at passing because it wasn't in her nature to deny her roots. She tried but failed to "modify her conduct accordingly" and was doomed to fill the role as the tragic mulatta. Others, such as John, who have taken it upon themselves to deny take upon the attributes of whiteness, may come to echo the same words as the narrator Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*: "...when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (100).

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