

**Untitled Final Paper**  
(Penn State University, English 487W.5: Spring 1999)  
by Fred Coppersmith

If we accept Ernest Hemingway's belief that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*..." -- and I think that, to an extent, we must -- then we must also recognize that *Huck Finn* is in many ways a culmination of a long-standing American literary tradition, that of the trickster myth. Authors like Twain borrow liberally from the past, building an amalgam from seemingly disparate elements -- the trickster, the bad man, the boast, the fight -- and stitching together a narrative far greater than the sum of its parts. Huck is *not* the Winnebago trickster, *not* Sut Luingood, Brer Rabbit or Ransy Sniffle, but the novel fulfills much of the promise of those earlier works and builds upon their foundation.

Yet, in glancing back again at the material we have read thus far in the course, I find myself continually drawn not necessarily to Mark Twain (despite the prodigious talent obvious in his work and the pleasure I have had in rereading it), but to Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman and Other Tales*. I am intrigued by the subtlety of Chesnutt's prose, the narrative complexity of trickster stories nested within trickster stories, framed so that *we* must peel away the layers to glimpse the true meaning beneath. As Richard H. Brodhead wrote in his introduction to the 1996 edition of the text, "...any simple reading of the case is likely to be the wrong one." Like Twain, Chesnutt seems to be a kind of realization of the tales that preceded him, piecing together diverse elements and using the very conventions of the tradition to expand its possibilities.

Uncle Julius does perhaps owe much to Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus and to other trickster storytellers, just as the disbelieving framing narrator of Chesnutt's *Tales*, John, shares a great deal with the framing narrator of T.B. Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas." Yet, Chesnutt's stories are again, quite simply, more than the sum of their respective parts. They do not merely inherit a literary tradition, but instead build upon that heritage. "The Goophered Grapevine" and the tales that follow it do not merely piece together elements from the past or present us, for example, with a trickster who is *also* a boaster. Rather, they weave together these disparate elements, expanding upon them and creating a much more subtle trickster figure, infused with deeper, sometimes hidden meaning. Chesnutt's stories utilize their carefully constructed framework in order to present what is ultimately an indictment of slavery, one which we might easily miss if we grant the text only a cursory reading -- if we provide the same sort of audience as John elects to provide.

If we hope to gain anything from Chesnutt's stories, we must instead approach them as careful, critical readers, even if this is *not* what his early audience, readers of *The Atlantic Monthly*, would have done -- even if this is not what Chesnutt's own narrator does. As an educated audience, familiar with the conventions of the trickster myth -- and, more importantly, much less inclined to view slavery in anything approaching a positive light -- we have an opportunity (and perhaps an obligation) to dig deeper, to look past a veneer of nostalgia at the message, the truth, lurking beneath. These stories written solely as entertainment, although it is quite conceivable that Chesnutt's initial audience would have viewed them as such.

For as Robert M. Farnsworth wrote in his introduction to a 1969 printing of the text, nostalgic stories of plantation life (into which *The Conjure Woman* does ostensibly fall) also had their own tradition in American literature, and "had emerged as a popular form in the late Reconstruction period. . . . Implicitly," Farnsworth adds, "such stories attacked the social rationale behind the Reconstruction effort, but they were applauded and promoted not just by Southern whites but by Northern whites as well." Chesnutt aimed to undermine this tradition, to use its conventions to showcase the harsh realities of slavery -- to turn the traditions upon themselves -- but he could not use Julius as a platform to openly decry or denounce slavery, to attack the degradation of African Americans even after the war. His attacks would have to be more subtle, almost hidden, so that a Northerner like John (or even Chesnutt's own readers) might not immediately see them.

A quick skimming of the surface would, I think, lead us almost inevitably to view Uncle Julius' stories much the same way as John does -- as reaffirmation of slavery or, at best, as pure entertainment, not as indictments of slavery's cruelty and the dehumanization of blacks under such a system. "The Goophered Grapevine" *can* be viewed as the story of a shifty, lazy Negro attempting to con a respectable Northerner out of a profitable expanse of land and the grapes that grow upon it. "Po' Sandy," although more disturbing and admittedly tragic -- certainly not an altogether happy or pleasant narrative -- *can* be viewed as little more than the story of two star-crossed lovers or of slave conjuring gone awry. These are, indeed, the interpretations made by John.

For Julius himself does not *condemn* slavery, nor does he rail against a white society that he has ample reason to mistrust or blame for his own misfortune. Chesnutt's prose, rather, aims for subtlety and, as Brodhead states, this "total absence of righteous moralizing is one of the beauties of Julius's tales." I doubt that John's views are the interpretations of plantation life that Chesnutt, himself an African-American (and the son of freed slaves), hoped that his readers would accept or finally arrive at. By becoming the trickster and attempting to upset the balance of his society, Julius reveals what is wrong with that society and where reform ought to occur. If he merely advocated reform or enumerated the crimes of slave owners without the backdrop of his story, it seems unlikely that Chesnutt would have found any audience at all, much less in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

"This book of plantation tales as told by 'Uncle Julius' in the dialect of the North Carolina Negro," Chesnutt's own daughter wrote, "was quite different in point of view from the plantation stories of George W. Cable, Thomas Nelson Page, Harry Stillwell Edwards, and others of that school. There was no glossing over the tragedy of slavery; there was no attempt to make the slave-master relationship anything but what it actually was." Yet Julius does outright claim that slave owner Mars Dugal' McAdoo was wrong to sell Henry, nor does he publicly blame slavery for the tragedy of what happens ultimately to Sandy and Tenie. Chesnutt, instead, leaves that to us. We must interpret as we read, discovering not simply *what* happens, but *how* and *why*. Like many of the framing narrators that we have seen before, however, John is self-absorbed, more or less oblivious to the truth in what Julius tells him, *misinterpreting* nearly everything he hears.

In "The Goophered Grapevine," first published in 1887 in *The Atlantic Monthly*, John writes that there was in Julius "a shrewdness in his eyes . . . which was not altogether African, and which, as we afterwards learned from experience, was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character." Intelligence, cunning and black skin are not traits that readily combine in John's worldview. Julius' features "suggested a slight strain of other than negro blood," and John uses this fact to explain away the old man's cunning, his ability (although thwarted here in Chesnutt's first story) to deceive, to become the trickster -- believing, in effect, that Julius is only so intelligent because he is also partly white.

We, too, cannot ignore this white heritage or the role that it plays in the story, but I doubt that we can as easily accept it as the direct *cause* of Julius' intellect. The fact that he bears the McAdoo name may provide him with *motive* to trick John out of the land -- to protect what is rightfully, if not legally, his -- but can we, like John, truly believe that shrewdness is alien to a Southern Negro? We *can* view "The Goophered Grapevine" as little more than a trickster tale, a story in the same vein as those told by Uncle Remus, but to do so leaves us as blind as John to the reality of Julius' tale, what John himself (in a rare moment of insight) calls "the darker side of slavery." We must see not only the trick but the reasoning and motive underlying that trick.

The dialect and affected mannerisms of Uncle Julius (which at first seem to mold him into as much of a caricature as Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus), are merely diversions, then, the trickster again at work, revealing truth through his lies. These mannerisms are, as critic Jeannette S. White suggests, deliberate guises or masks, of the sort which "have long been employed by creative artists to impart certain unpleasant truths that might not otherwise be heard." Julius has no authority over John, no legal claim to the vineyard or any true sense of power in this Reconstruction era. Deceit is his only option. He must wear a mask, become a trickster, attempt to arrive at the truth through cunning and lies. Julius tells these stories, which this Northern narrator finds "quaintly humorous" or "wildly extravagant," so that he might

also reveal the truths that John may not want to hear, so that *we* may grasp their meaning and expose ourselves to that dark side of slavery -- to understand that Julius is entitled to the vineyard, that slavery was the cause of Sandy's death. We see only what John sees, hear only what he, as narrator, imparts to us, but we are better equipped to interpret what Julius tells him, for we do not carry the same expectations, prejudices, or unwillingness to understand.

"The Negro's part," Chesnutt wrote in his journal in 1880, only seven short years before the first publication of "The Goophered Grapevine" in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "is to prepare himself for recognition and equality, and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it -- to accustom the public mind to the idea; to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling." Chesnutt's collected *Conjure Tales*, then, are themselves tricks, a means of revealing truths about slavery and the later Reconstruction -- that blacks could be sold without warning, stripped of dignity, power, the right to ownership -- even when his audience is potentially unaware that such truths are being revealed. Just as Julius attempts to manipulate John to his own ends, Chesnutt attempts to maneuver his readers into a new understanding, to awaken them to the realities obscured by misplaced nostalgia and a misinformed literary tradition.

Uncle Julius, then, is more a reaction *against* Uncle Remus than an extension or variation of the character. Though his dialect might locate him in the same nostalgia-drenched universe -- a world of minstrel shows, Jim Crow and a desire to return to the so-called quaint days of the plantation -- the two are actually diametrically opposed. Compared to Chesnutt's tales, Harris' work seems obvious, conservative, even pro-slavery. The stories in *The Conjure Woman* are infinitely more complex, filled with shades of meaning. As White states:

Ranging the gamut from the grotesque and pathetic to the comic and tragic, the conjure tales expose, under the guise of folklore, the scourge that was slavery. Thus, underlying these fanciful and frequently mystifying works, there is invariably another dimension -- the sphere of the nightmare the slaves inhabited. Always, this world emerges as a horribly real one from which there was no exit....On the surface, they might seem like entertaining slave narratives, but as a group, the stories serve as Chesnutt's dark fable of his own times.

Uncle Remus tells his stories to entertain, to put on a show for his white audience, while Uncle Julius tells stories to reveal harsh truths and to gain some of the authority he is due. If his attempts to do so with John fail (as in "The Goophered Grapevine"), Julius still has the reader to turn to; we need not be as blind as Chesnutt's narrator.

Thus, while there are certainly similarities between Julius and Remus, the differences are vast and much more important; Chesnutt has, in fact, been able to mold those similarities *into* differences, giving Julius McAdoo motive, depth, and personality -- all of which the narrator of Harris' Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox stories lacks. Both have their genesis in Southern folklore, in local dialect and the stories of black slaves. Yet Chesnutt "alone faced the issue of slavery realistically," writes White, "even as he continued working in the mode made famous by Harris. Chesnutt, in fact, used the Uncle Remus creator for his own ends to cloak his real message and thus formulate his own Southern mythology in terms of a new, more realistic insight." Chesnutt uses the traditions of trickster and plantation myth, toying with their conventions, in order to expose the truth at their heart.

While John's initial description of Julius paints a picture almost identical to that of Uncle Remus (a picture also found on the original Houghton Mifflin cover of the collected stories), Julius does not tell the story of the so-called goophered grapevine, or of Sandy and Tenie, merely to entertain as Remus does. His are not bedtime stories for a young white boy on a Southern plantation. Rather, he has specific goals in mind -- the continued use of the vineyard, the lumber to build his church -- and the fact that he must resort to deception to achieve these goals is telling in itself. Whereas the stories of Joel Chandler Harris depict a more innocent time, tricks as play between two anthropomorphic animals, Chesnutt seems to argue that this innocence never was and that tricks are more about obtaining power and revealing buried truths.

In 1880, Chesnutt declared that he would "write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort. . . .I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation. . . .a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it." Thus, Chesnutt's writing (at least in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales* and specifically in "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy") exposes the reality of slavery and the reasons that slaves may become -- must become -- tricksters, while undermining those who might view pre-Emancipation life through a film of rose-colored nostalgic longing. The horrors of slavery, he would seem to argue, must be redressed rather than buried under the narratives of an Uncle Remus. As a writer (and not simply as a black man), Chesnutt has an obligation to tell the truth, to expose the hypocrisy he sees in his society and its longing to undo Reconstruction through its literature. Only in becoming the trickster, ironically, is Julius capable of being honest with his listeners -- and by extension, the reader. Only through careful, subtle deceit can the truth be reached.

### **Bibliography**

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