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# Folklore for a New Generation: Charles Chesnutt's Updated Trickster Figure

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FOLKLORE FOR A NEW GENERATION:  
CHARLES CHESNUTT'S UPDATED TRICKSTER FIGURE

by

PETER MCCOLLUM

(Under the Direction of Dr. Caren Town)

ABSTRACT

Amidst a surge of plantation fiction writing during the era of American Realism, Charles Chesnutt was arguably one of the most controversial yet prolific authors to address the recent advent of slavery. *The Conjure Woman* was a publication of seven frame narratives that employed the traditional style of a former slave telling tales of “the old days,” and though Chesnutt's work may have mirrored such authors as Thomas Nelson Page, the tales broke from tradition with surprisingly stark accounts that are clearly based on Chesnutt's own conversations with former slaves. Much like another contemporary, Joel Chandler Harris, Chesnutt looks backward to the trickster figure of African lore and applies its tactics to his narrator, Julius McAdoo, to deliver a comical yet austere discussion of the ills of slavery. In *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt addresses the issues of forced separation of families, slave abuse, dark superstition and the ever-present peril of competition among slaves for limited resources. Furthermore, Chesnutt's use of the trickster figure from Old World lore works to not only symbolize the clash between old and new ideologies, but serves to offer an in-road to brokering peace between white Americans and the newly emancipated slaves. This discussion addresses Chesnutt's updated trickster figure: its similarities to the Old World trickster, its distinguishing qualities that modernized the figure and the role that it plays in *The Conjure Woman*.

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CHARLES CHESNUTT'S UPDATED TRICKSTER FIGURE

by

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B.A., Armstrong Atlantic State University, 2010

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CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

I shall not record stale minstrel jokes, or worn out newspaper squibs on the “man and brother.” I shall leave the realm of fiction, where most of this stuff is manufactured, and come down to hard facts. There are things about Colored people which are peculiar, to some extent, to them, and which are interesting to any thoughtful observer, and would be doubly interesting to people who know little about them.

The objects of my writings would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites, - for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism – I consider this 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.

- Excerpts from the journal of Charles Chesnutt, Spring 1880 (Norton 166-67)

It is clear from these journal entries (which predate his 1899 publication of *The Conjure Woman*) that novelist Charles Waddell Chesnutt was working on a project that would not only confront American readers about the recent end of slavery in the United States, but would also attempt to open a discussion regarding the current and future relationships between white and black Americans. While a contemporary of such plantation fiction writers as Joel Chandler

Harris, Chesnutt set himself apart from other authors with his stark examination of slave life, one that frequently addressed the physical, mental, and familial consequences of slavery. Chesnutt's first publication, "The Goophered Grapevine," which would become the initial story in *The Conjure Woman*, introduced American readership to Julius McAdoo, a freed slave with a seemingly inexhaustible store of tales from the slave camps. Julius was the ideal mouthpiece for telling stories of cruel masters and of a society where belief in dark magic and transmogrification were commonplace.

Although not the first to publish a slave narrative or revision of the trickster tales from African folklore, Charles Chesnutt was a pioneer in that he took the style used by authors such as Joel Chandler Harris and used it as a platform to have an honest discussion with American readers about slavery. While Harris touched on the topic of slavery, he never seemed to take the discussion in the direction of the atrocities that occurred. As such, Harris's "venerable patron" (6) Uncle Remus could scarcely be deemed a sufficient spokesperson for freed slaves. Chesnutt's main character Julius McAdoo, however, very plainly tells stories of abuse, neglect and separation. Furthermore, Harris depicts an established understanding between whites and blacks, while Chesnutt more accurately illustrates the struggle between the two to achieve that understanding. By the end of *The Conjure Woman*, there is communication (of sorts) between white and black, but it has not come without a struggle. Chesnutt presents a much more accurate depiction of the race relations of the time, and his tales demonstrate how he molded the trickster figure and the trickster tale to be relevant to a contemporary audience.

#### HARRIS, CHESNUTT, AND THE TRICKSTER FIGURE

The tales told in the Uncle Remus collections are an extension of the African oral

tradition known as the trickster tale. Trickster tales are generally brief and depict an uneven struggle where smaller or weaker creatures must use wit, guile, and fast talk to survive in a hostile environment where they are at a physical disadvantage. The tales of Uncle Remus were inspired by Harris's interactions with slave men while he was employed as a printer's apprentice at Turnwold Plantation (Cochran 23, Mixon 159). Of the stories these interactions would produce, the oft-recounted tale of "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby" remains his most familiar work. In this story, a captured Brer Rabbit uses fast thinking and faster talk to escape an angry Brer Fox. This is part of an ongoing struggle between the two characters, as Brer Rabbit is quite a nuisance in the animal community. His actions often leave him in a bind where only trickery can extricate him, and though he is normally successful, his use of trickery usually sets him up for another problem. Although he is almost always able to extricate himself from a precarious situation, Brer Rabbit seems to enjoy causing trouble in the animal kingdom.

Chesnutt's trickster, however, bears very little resemblance to Brer Rabbit. For instance, the character of Brer Rabbit remains precocious and largely antagonistic throughout his adventures, while Chesnutt's Julius is progressively revealed to be a man of rather remarkable depth and conviction. However, just as Brer Rabbit is one of the smallest creatures in his society, so is the aging freedman in Post-bellum North Carolina. The word "small," of course, in this instance refers to the still-lowly position of recently freed slaves. Therefore, without societal or legal equality, Julius finds himself needing to rely on his wits in order to ensure that the strangers from the North do not come in and alter the landscape that he and the other freed slaves have only recently begun to enjoy.

In the following discussion, I will provide other distinctions between the presentation of



Chesnutt's trickster and other forms of this character. The purpose of this discussion, however, is not merely to provide a comparison. Rather, the aim is to illustrate how Chesnutt's trickster figure not only revives the oral tradition from African culture, but also gives relevance to its usage in American culture. Julius McAdoo is the perfect vehicle for Chesnutt to slowly open the discussion of slavery to his readers, and as a trickster he also served as a harbinger of the freed slave in American literature. I will explore both the oral tradition that gave birth to the trickster figure, and I will also consider the ways that Chesnutt deviates from tradition to deliver a new trickster for a rapidly-changing post-bellum America. Further cited will be the multiple layers of tricksterism within the text, positing further that perhaps Chesnutt himself played the role of the trickster in his own work through literary and rhetorical manipulation. Before doing this, however, the origins of the trickster figure in African lore will be examined in order to determine what elements run concurrent with tradition and what could be said to be of Chesnutt's own design.

In the first chapter, two major works will be consulted to illustrate the multiple incarnations of the trickster figure throughout African, Caribbean, and South American lore: *The Signifying Monkey* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and *Talk That Talk* by Linda Goss and Marian Barnes. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate both consistency and diversity throughout the existence and evolution of the trickster figure. The first work focuses on what is perhaps the earliest trickster in African lore, Esu-Elegbara. The second work demonstrates further variety in the trickster tales, highlighting multiple animal trickster figures and the various roles that the tricksters play. In the second chapter, I will illustrate how Chesnutt's trickster both adheres to the tradition of the tricksters discussed in Chapter 1 and distinguishes himself as a much more

advanced version. In the third chapter, I will examine other rhetorical strategies employed by Chesnutt to write a more advanced trickster tale by creating a second trickster figure and playing the role of a trickster himself. I will close by tying together the comparisons between old and new and explain how this updated trickster tale was the perfect platform not only for a discussion on slavery, but also a demonstration of future harmony between the races that Chesnutt believes could exist, with considerable mutual effort.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE MANY FACES OF THE TRICKSTER FIGURE

Although the central trickster figure created by Charles Chesnutt has attributes that harken back to older modes of storytelling, he also has certain distinctions that keep the stories relevant to his era. In other words, to successfully tell stories of slavery using the trickster figure, Chesnutt has to use elements of both old and new. American audiences already had exposure to the framed slave narrative through Harris, but without the tales ever directly speaking of slavery, it was not a very accurate depiction. In this chapter, I will briefly narrate trickster tales of Harris to lay the groundwork for comparison between the modes of storytelling, followed by what elements were retained and what were altered to fit the discussion of slavery and race relations.

Chesnutt discusses his exposure to conjure tales told to him by former slaves in his essay “Superstition and Folk-Lore in the South” (Norton 200-205). He tells of numerous interactions where former slaves spoke of being conjured or hexed, and he also considers how widespread the belief in this strange magic was among the slaves. Though he strongly renounces those who actually believed such tales (Norton 200), his numerous conjure tales illustrate a desire to preserve the folklore. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to reveal the stories recounted to him as a link in the chain of evolution of both the trickster figure and the trickster tale. Just as individuals found themselves needing adjust to a rapidly changing society, folklore too needed to change in order to remain relevant and to retain its efficacy. After all, the preservation of these tales was, in a sense, the preservation of African identity, because folklore is not in itself a conscious entity that can change; only the *tellers* of folklore can change.

## COMPARISON TO ESU-ELEGBARA

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes that “[the] topos that recurs throughout the black oral narrative traditions . . . is the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara” (5). This early model of the trickster figure has survived a long and turbulent journey, as it appears in African, Caribbean, and South American mythology. One of the primary functions of Esu is interpreting universal truths that are written in what is known as the Ifa, a text that is incomprehensible even to the gods. As the only one who can read the Ifa and comprehend what is in its pages, Esu is responsible for interpreting and distilling this information. The root of this need for interpretation comes from a fateful decision made at the dawn of time. According to the Ashanti (natives of Ghana and the Ivory Coast), God created the African race first, and upon doing so gave him the option of mastery of arts and sciences, writing, or all of the gold on earth. He chose gold, and for his avarice was cursed with an inability to ever gain mastery of art, science, or the written word (Gates 13).

There is a trickster tale that demonstrates the indeterminacy Esu creates and serves as an etiological tale explaining why humans appear unable to fully grasp truth or their own destiny. Ayodele Ogundipe cites this Yoruba tale, commonly known as “The Two Friends.” In this legend, Esu dons a hat that is painted black on one side and white on the other. He rides through a field where two friends are laboring, stopping to greet them both. Later, the two friends are speaking to each other about a visitor, and they begin to quarrel when one insists that the visitor was wearing a white hat and the other a black hat. As the quarrel becomes heated, Esu reveals himself and warns the friends about reckoning with him first. He closes by telling them: “Do you not know that he who does not put Esu first in all his doings has himself to blame if things misfire?” (Gates 33-35). This confusing line demonstrates that Esu is a trickster, constantly

seeking to confuse mortal men while proclaiming that he is there to create understanding.

One aspect of Chesnutt's trickster that is consistent with Esu-Elegbara is that Julius himself is an interpreter to both John and Annie. This Northern couple comes to the Deep South with intentions of establishing themselves through cultivating the land, though it is demonstrated in the earliest pages that John very quickly finds himself in need of a guide: “we sat there for ten minutes... waiting for another human being to come along, who could direct us on our way” (Chesnutt 7). Throughout the duration of *The Conjure Woman*, Julius continues to discourage John's expansion on the land by telling him a series of seemingly far-fetched stories, though presenting each as if it were the truth. All of his stories contains a kernel of truth about the history of the land, yet these truths are indecipherable to John, who can never look past their supernatural elements. As such, Julius is the only link to the truth about what has taken place on the land, and thus can be seen to be similar to Esu, as he is the sole bearer of truth and creates indeterminacy whenever he attempts to impart these truths.

#### COMPARISONS TO ANANSI

One of the more celebrated tricksters of African mythology is Anansi, a figure who has taken many forms and has appeared not only in Africa, but also in Jamaica, Trinidad, the Virgin Islands, and even England (Goss 35-44). In Ghanaian lore, Anansi most frequently appears as a spider. Jermiah Nabiwi recounts one particular story of Ghanaian origin that tells of Anansi and his friend Rabbit. During a visit, Rabbit asks for Anansi's help in building a drum. Anansi is too lazy to help Rabbit, so he provides a myriad of excuses for why neither he nor his family can assist. He further declines lending Rabbit the materials necessary to build a drum, so in a huff, Rabbit leaves Anansi alone. Later, Anansi, having forgotten all about the incident, stumbles upon a drum that Rabbit has made. He begins tapping on the drum and is soon discovered by

Rabbit. Incensed, Rabbit summons the animals of the forest accuse Anansi of being not only lazy, but an unworthy friend. Anansi is so embarrassed by this that he and his family withdraw to the corner of their home. It is said that to this day this is the reason for spiders spinning their webs in the corners of houses (Goss 35-38). This story makes it clear that a trickster tale can also serve as an etiological (or origin) tale. There are two installments of *The Conjure Woman* that follow the lines of an origin story. First is the story of “Po' Sandy” and his unfortunate transformation from a tree into a building. Second is the story of “The Conjuror's Revenge,” where Primus the slave has a club foot from once being transformed into a mule. (As a side note, Joel Chandler Harris and Rudyard Kipling also employed this mode of storytelling in many of their animal tales.)

In addition to its etiological function, Anasasi plays other roles in folklore. Louise Bennett designates the Jamaican version of Anansi as a “tricky little spider man who speaks with a lisp and lives by his wits” (Goss 39). Marian E. Barnes tells of a Jamaican Anansi tale where the spider man enters into a competition with a tiger for the affection of a beautiful girl named Linda. In an attempt to impress Linda, Anansi brags to her that he uses the tiger regularly as his personal horse. Hearing this rumor, the tiger becomes enraged and confronts Anansi. When pressed, Anansi begs for clemency and somberly informs the tiger that he has just discovered that he is dying. The tiger insists to Anansi that he must come with him to tell Linda the truth, and Anansi agrees that he should tell the truth since he did not have long to live. He implores the tiger, however, to carry him to see Linda, as he is becoming too weak to move around, to which the tiger agrees. When the two arrives to see Linda, Anansi begins whipping the tiger like a horse. The tiger, humiliated, runs away (Goss 42-44).

This story is an excellent illustration of the trickster's ability to talk himself out of a

situation. Like Anasasi, Julius is able to have his wishes met on more than one occasion due to his ability to spin a yarn that strikes a chord with Annie, who, in turn, pleads on behalf of Julius to allow his modest request. This story also greatly resembles a tale that occurs in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*. In this book, Uncle Remus tells the exact same tale, instead using Brer Rabbit in the place of Anansi and Brer Fox in the place of the tiger (Harris 16-18). This is perhaps one of the best models for a trickster tale, as it demonstrates a trickster both using his wit but also diminishing himself for the sake of achieving a mental advantage over its adversary. Eric Selinger points out that Julius also uses this tactic, diminishing himself almost immediately by referring to himself as “a ole nigger” (Chesnutt 9) as a tool of manipulation (Selinger 670). This is an important scene in *The Conjure Woman*, because it also demonstrates Julius's awareness that he is about to be locked in a battle of wits with John. He cleverly underestimates his intelligence and power in order to disarm John and win the battle.

These ancient stories reveal three important aspects of the trickster figure. First and perhaps most important, the trickster is not always on the winning side. Second, the trickster is not always morally correct in its dealings with others. Finally, the trickster's actions are often self-serving. This holds true for Chesnutt's trickster as well. There are two occasions where Julius is unable to get his wishes, which illustrates how the trickster is fallible and not always able to accomplish its objective. Also, a truly effective trickster needs failure; a trickster who is always on the winning side will eventually run out of reasons to need to use trickery, and, essentially, be out of a job. In addition, Julius's secret bargain with the man who owns a sick horse illustrates that Julius is not always morally correct in his dealings with John. However, this also illustrates the third point of the trickster-- acting in self-interest. In fact, five of the seven stories demonstrate this self-interest, as Julius wants John to refrain from making any

alterations to the land. Between his grape profits, his church and his secret cache of honey, Julius has many reasons to want to keep John from disrupting the land which he once occupied, presumably without trespassers.

#### COMPARISON TO OTHER ANIMAL TRICKSTER TALES

Chesnutt's trickster has affinities with other tales. For example, Naomi Clark retells a tale from Guyana entitled "Bush Got Ears," a trickster tale with a stern message. In this story, a tiger observes a mother and her three daughters in their daily rituals. One of the rituals the tiger sees is that the mother uses certain phrases and songs to let her daughters know that she is home and that it is safe to open the door. Over time, the tiger learns these codes and learns how to mimic the mother. Two of the three daughters are eaten by the tiger for this reason, and, according to Clark, the moral of the story is to always be mindful in speaking, because someone is always listening (Goss 66-71). We see in this instance that the trickster is the tiger, and in spite of what appear to be an evil deed, the tiger is merely being a tiger, adapting to the circumstances so he does not starve.

Similarly, we see Julius doing what he believes is essential to his own survival in "The Goophered Grapevine." The reader learns at the end of this story that Julius has been making a profit off of scuppernongs that still grew on the land, and this is why he tries to convince John that the land is hexed. In addition, the story also illustrates the cautionary tale, a warning to John of what will happen if he violates the sanctity of the land. The story of "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" is a cautionary tale as well, as it demonstrates some harsh consequences appropriately inflicted upon a harsh man. Julius even hints at a moral at the beginning of this tale when he cryptically announces that the man abusing his horse is likely to have nightmares if he does not cease.



Another tale relevant to Chesnutt's work is retold by Gerald J. A. Nwankwo, and is entitled "A Tunnel to our Ancestors." This story is said to take place before humans roamed the earth and animals had dominion. In this tale, a great famine has devastated the land, and the animals find themselves struggling to adapt to the scarcity of food. One day, they consult Uncle Turtle, a wise figure in the animal community, who suggests that the animals pull together what food remains and store it in huts for preservation. After further contemplation, Uncle Turtle announces that he is to embark on a journey uncover the reasons for the famine. His stated intention is to dig a tunnel to the land of their ancestors to ask the gods in person what they had done to displease them. The starting point for this tunnel is in his home, so one day he announces his departure and closes the door. After many weeks, Uncle Turtle does not return. The animals become concerned that something happened to Uncle Turtle, so one day they break down his door. Inside, they find Uncle Turtle sitting contentedly in a room full of hoarded food, eating blissfully (Goss 88-90).

This tale shows another connection to Chesnutt's trickster tales: the consequences of scarcity. John Roberts explains that on a slave plantation there were often more female than male slaves. Competition for the affection of a woman between male slaves (and sometimes masters) was fierce and often served to divide the slave community. Just as the scarcity of food divided the animal community in the previous story, so did the scarcity of potential mates in *The Conjure Woman*. In both "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" and "Hot-Foot Hannibal," the consequences of this scarcity are illustrated, as in both stories the competition for the affection of a woman results in the death of the male characters.

#### MAKING THE FINAL CONNECTIONS

Before closing, let us further consider the connections between the aforementioned

trickster tales and *The Conjure Woman*. Although he may not have been familiar with the specific tales described above, Chesnutt had heard many stories of conjure and magic and recounts one in his essay “Superstition and Folk-Lore in the Deep South” (Norton 202-203). He was also aware of the works of Joel Chandler Harris and mentions similarities in the uncle figure, as well as the locale of the stories and a few other small details (Gloster 58). However, Chesnutt notes an important difference between his work and Joel Chandler Harris’s: “the stories [in *The Conjure Woman*] are the fruit of my imagination, in which respect they differ from the *Uncle Remus* stories which are avowedly folk tales” (Gloster 58). This comment associates Harris (at least in Chesnutt’s mind) more closely with the African tales.

Chesnutt’s imaginative fruits differ in significant ways from both those of Harris and the older trickster tales. First, although Harris’s stories use Uncle Remus as a narrator, none of the African trickster tales employ a framed narrative, and the trickster in the ancient tales and Harris’s stories has no personal involvement with the characters. Julius, on the other hand, is a slave on the McAdoo plantation associated with Aunt Peggy, giving the trickster a personal history with the stories. In addition, Julius’s tales, unlike Harris’s, bear a stamp of truth, as Annie comments (Chesnutt 68). Each of the stories speaks of true-to-life instances of the harsh realities of slavery. Finally, Chesnutt’s trickster tales are presented as recent history. Both the African and Harris trickster tales take place outside of the narrator’s temporal sphere.

The distinctions and similarities, however, are merely the tip of the iceberg, because so far all that has been analyzed are the tales. Merely considering the tales, it is possible to argue the similarities within the tales are simply Chesnutt’s attempt at preserving the oral tradition, while his ongoing discussion of slavery is his means of modernizing the tales. One could also say that Harris’s preservation of the trickster tale did, as did Chesnutt, provide a modern element,

as they, too, are narrated by a freed slave. However, to fully grasp the innovative qualities of Chesnutt's tales, it will be important to examination of the trickster figure in much more detail.

## CHAPTER 3

## CHESNUTT'S TRICKSTER

While Hugh Gloster in his article, “Charles Chesnutt: Pioneer in the Fiction of Negro Life,” argues that the *raison d'être* of Julius McAdoo throughout *The Conjure Woman* is to promote the welfare of himself and his friends (58), Julius also acts in ways that could be seen as selfless. These acts do not merely demonstrate a more complex trickster; they add an element of humanity to the story that demonstrates that the freed slave was capable of empathy towards white people in spite of generations of forced servitude. However, Julius is also often seen defying certain social conventions, such as his bold attempts to manipulate Annie. The following chapter will address all of these contradictory elements of Julius's character: kindness, defiance, altruism, naturalism, humor, and duplicity.

## ANNIE'S SENTIMENTALISM

There are two instances in *The Conjure Woman* where Julius's wishes are granted, thanks to a little help from Annie. First, the Sandy Run Baptist Church is spared from demolition after Julius tells the tragic story of “Po' Sandy,” and, second, a lazy grandson is given a reprieve following the tale of “Mars Jeems's Nightmare.” Heather Tirado Gilligan uses the word “auditor” in reference to John and Annie (203), and it is a rather fitting description if one considers that Julius finds himself in a position in every story where he must plead his case in defense of the land John wishes to develop. If Julius is to be successful in slowing John's plans, he must find a way to appeal to the primary auditor, John, and if not, he must seek a supporting vote from the secondary auditor, Annie. Though his efforts are not successful at the conclusion of the opening story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” Eric Selinger suggests that it is merely because Julius has not yet figured out how to correctly divide (and conquer) his audience (670).

It does not take very much time, however, for Julius to ascertain that John's approval is not necessarily needed; rather, he must find a way to appeal to Annie's pathos in order to achieve his objectives. In other words, Julius's goal becomes to choose just the right story of plantation cruelty to evoke Annie's sympathies. He needs to remind her that she and John have encroached upon his life, a life of newly-found freedom, and perhaps they should go more slowly in their plans to clear out the land that has been Julius's home for far longer than either of them has been alive.

Selinger states that in "Po' Sandy," the "horror of separation forms the backbone of Julius's bid for Annie's sympathy" (672). This is revealed when Annie "murmured absently, and with a dim look in her fine eyes, 'Poor Tenie'" (Chesnutt 28). Similarly, the connection Julius makes between the spectacle of the man beating his horse and the tale of "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" demonstrates that Julius has very quickly learned to appeal to Annie's sense of justice, pity, and human sympathy. The aforementioned story is full of abuse and cruelty, and it is the first story in *The Conjure Woman* to explore the dark and sordid side of plantation life. The story ends with John asserting that he did not want his servants to think that there has been a power struggle between him and Annie, which shows that Julius has now learned how to successfully divide his audience. This means that even though John will inevitably continue to stonewall Julius when he pleads with John to slow his expansion, with the right kind of story, Julius can secure a sympathetic vote from Annie.

However, this behavior is highly manipulative for two reasons. First, the reader is made aware early in the story that Annie suffers from some manner of depression. Julius may not know that Annie is depressed, but he is quickly able to figure out that Annie identifies with stories about separation. From "The Goophered Grapevine" to "Po' Sandy," the reader sees that

Julius has been able not only to divide his audience, but also he has learned that evoking sympathy is the most effective tool to successfully divide them. There is, however, a second kind of manipulation employed by Julius: he is undermining John's authority as head of the household. John even hints at a passing awareness of the tactic at the conclusion of "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," but he never seems to grasp fully that Julius is winning skirmishes due to his ability to convince Annie to cancel out her husband's vote. This is a bold move for a freed slave, as it was highly taboo for a black man to have such direct interaction with a white woman in the Deep South in this era of recent emancipation.

#### JULIUS, THE THERAPIST

In the opening lines of *The Conjure Woman*, readers learn that the primary reason for the northern couple's relocation is due to Annie's health (Chesnutt 5). It is revealed that John is acting upon their doctor's advice to move Annie to a warmer climate, but he almost immediately launches into his capitalistic intentions, so it is difficult for the reader to grasp the severity of her condition in the beginning. Robert B. Stepto and Jennifer Rae Greeson in the *Norton Critical Edition of The Conjure Woman* offer two suggestions regarding what troubles Annie. First, they suggest that Annie suffers from neurasthenia, defined as "a psychological disorder marked especially by easy fatigability and often by lack of motivation, feelings of inadequacy, and psychosomatic symptoms" ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)). They also argue that because the couple is childless, Annie may have had a miscarriage and is suffering from that loss. Regardless of the primary cause, Chesnutt takes the time to illustrate that Annie is suffering from some manner of depression from the very beginning; therefore, it is prudent to surmise that this malady is somehow going to be a factor in the lives of the couple as the story progresses. This is a relevant detail because it quickly reveals a weakness in the white couple's united front. After

all, for a condition to be so bad that it requires relocation means that the problem will undoubtedly resurface at some point in their story.

And resurface it does. At the beginning of “Sis' Becky's Pickaninny, the reader is informed that in spite of marked improvements in her health, by the end of the couple's second year in North Carolina Annie had fallen into a “settled melancholy, attended with vague forebodings of impending misfortune” (Chesnutt 58). Julius immediately senses something is wrong and begins telling the story of a woman who was forcibly separated from her child. He cleverly includes the depression both the mother and the child felt from their separation, no doubt an attempt to once again strike a sentimental chord with Annie. At the end of the story, John notes that his wife has been listening “with greater interest than she had manifested in any subject for many days.” She debates the validity of the tale with John with “delightful animation,” proclaiming that the story bears a stamp of truth to it (Chesnutt 68). This story is one of the most significant sections in *The Conjure Woman* for several reasons. First, it illustrates Julius's ability to read a situation, as he is able to discern that Annie is behaving differently. Similarly illustrated once again is Julius's ability to divide an audience, as the entire story centers on a superstition involving a rabbit's foot which somehow Julius manages to transfer to Annie without John's knowledge (Chesnutt 69).

Annie's depression is also important because it is a weakness just as much for John as it is for Annie. John must constantly devise ways to stave off Annie's depression, and soon, Julius becomes aware of this, and the two men become locked in a silent competition to see who can do the better job of stimulating her and keeping her mind off of her malaise. This kind of awareness is certainly a demonstration of a more evolved trickster, especially considering that Julius tries to assume John's role by attempting to curtail her depression himself. This again illustrates the

complexity of Julius McAdoo. In a single act, he is able to divide his audience, curtail Annie's melancholy, and undermine John's role as a husband.

#### JULIUS, THE MARRIAGE COUNSELOR

Another example of Julius's complexity can be seen in his regard and concern for the family who has placed him under their employ. In "Hot-Foot Hannibal," the reader becomes privy to other aspects of the Northern couple's life as the story opens with a heated conflict between Annie's sister, Mabel, and her fiancé, Malcolm. This argument may mark the end of their relationship, as Mabel is quite jealous over Malcolm attending a church service with another woman. In fact, the chapter opens in the middle of the story, with Mabel very loudly declaring that she does not wish to see Malcolm ever again.

One afternoon, Julius takes John, Annie, Mabel out on a drive to visit a neighbor's vineyard. While they are out, Julius wants to take a more scenic route, but Annie insists on taking another. While they are driving on the route that Annie has suggested, their horse stops. When John inquires about the pause, Julius alleges that the horse is sensing the presence of a ghost. Annie insists that Julius elaborate on the story, so he tells the tale of "Hot-Foot Hannibal." Upon the completion of this tale, the horse seems ready to move again. However, Annie requests that they take the route that Julius initially suggested. Along this route, they encounter another coach which, coincidentally (or not), belongs to Malcolm. Mabel and Malcolm disappear for a short period of time, and then they come back to the carriage holding hands.

In this instance Julius has the luxury of *two* sympathetic auditors, and his story is well received by them both (judging by the tears that follow). Once again, his story is tailored to the situation at hand, even corresponding with the detail of suspected infidelity among lovers. Furthermore, the reconciliation that occurs with the supposedly haphazard encounter of Malcolm



demonstrates that Julius is not merely an employee of the couple, nor is he only after his own interests. This story illustrates that Julius *genuinely cares*. This particular display of kindness and consideration goes against almost everything that a trickster is supposed to be.

### JULIUS, THE NATURALIST

In “Other Nature,” Jeffrey Myers focuses on yet another element of Julius’s complexity: his closeness to nature. The reader is already privy to this in the opening scene of “The Goophered Grapevine,” as readers see Julius resting upon a log and enjoying a rather generous serving of scuppernongs that have apparently been growing wild for some time. The reader gets another glimpse at the conclusion of “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” when John discovers a cache of honey in an old tree on a plot of land that Julius strongly discouraged John from clearing out. In both instances, it could be posited that Julius is merely trying to sway John from clearing out the land because in both cases he has a vested interest in what the land provides for *him*, but Myers suggests that personal gain is not the primary motivation. He states that “[w]hereas John derives a sense of self from his mastery over the land, Julius – along with the slaves in the tales he relates – gains his from kinship with it” (8). For each acre of land that John clears to further his capitalistic ventures, he erases more and more of Julius’s past, and, more importantly, his identity. It is doubtful that Julius would be so adamant about stopping John from clearing the land if he did not have some kind of personal commitment to preserving the land.

As noted earlier, in the opening of “The Goophered Grapevine,” John observes Julius enjoying a hat full of scuppernongs: “a pile of grapeskins near him indicated that the performance was no new thing” (Chesnutt 8). John is able to identify that Julius has been occupying this plot of land undisturbed for some time, an observation he is able to make at first glance. At the beginning of “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” John makes a similar observation:

“[Julius] had a thorough knowledge of the neighborhood, was familiar with the roads and watercourses, knew the qualities of the various soils and what they would produce, and where the best hunting and fishing were to be had” (Chesnutt 30). He is able to identify that Julius has an extensive knowledge of the land, but he fails to realize what it all means. He sees this symbiosis as primitive, and if anything Julius's established rituals and secret caches impede his ability to capitalize on the profits that could come from the land. On the other hand, John's constant desire to clear the land threatens to erode any sense of self that the freed slave has been able to establish. In other words, John sees Julius as a threat to profit, while Julius sees John as a threat to any stability he has managed to gain in the few years he has been a freed man.

#### JULIUS, THE FUNNY MAN

Although it may not seem a relevant detail, Julius McAdoo's sense of humor is certainly a building block in the argument that he is a more complex trickster figure. The reader is given only a few glimpses of his sense of humor, but they are significant when one considers the kinds of stories he tells. For example, following the gruesome conclusion of “Po' Sandy,” readers discover that Julius has jokingly suggested that Sandy's spirit lingering around the Sandy Run Baptist Church would “do it good” (Chesnutt 29). Furthermore, he and Annie share a moment of teasing John about his vehement renunciation of the superstition surrounding Julius's rabbit foot at the conclusion of “Sis' Becky's Pickaninny.” The first example may not demonstrate that Julius is a more advanced trickster, but the second story reveals not only a growing rapport between Julius and Annie, but also shows that his sense of humor is beginning to rub off on her. It almost seems that Annie herself is becoming a trickster, playfully chiding John at the end of this story as if she believes the superstition about the rabbit's foot. However, this story not only demonstrates his sense of humor, but also shows that Julius is building a

genuine friendship with Annie. The way she is able to finish Julius's thought reflects a relationship far more intimate than a hired hand and his employer; Julius is becoming a friend of the family.

### JULIUS, THE MAN

To conclude this chapter, I would like to briefly discuss a final element atypical of the traditional trickster tale: character development. At the beginning of "The Goophered Grapevine," readers see a man who is obviously threatened by the Northern couple, who clearly have plans for the land on which he lives. In the very next story, however, not only has he become comfortable with the couple, he has already figured out how to get what he wants from them. By the third story, John even goes so far as to praise Julius's usefulness in his continued development of the land, revealing that Julius, in spite of his desire to thwart John's expansion efforts whenever possible, has become settled in his position as not only a coachman, but an adviser to John. By the fourth story, a new tale is almost expected of Julius by this point in their relationship. Readers also notice a glimmer of his continued rapport with Annie, as he at first declines to be seated when John makes the offer, yet concedes once Annie insists (Chesnutt 46). The final three stories thus demonstrate Julius's growing affinity for the couple. Between his acts of selflessness, his ecological consciousness, his sense of humor, and his continued character development, Julius McAdoo proves himself to be no average trickster. Furthermore, Julius's position as a freed slave makes him a complex and fully realized trickster for modern audiences.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE CONJURER AND CHESNUTT AS TRICKSTERS

It has been demonstrated that Julius McAdoo is a man with many characteristics of earlier tricksters, but the goal of this chapter is to demonstrate that Chesnutt and the conjurers in his stories also bear many of the same traits. After only a cursory glance, readers can see the flexibility of the conjuror. The conjurer is never given the same task, nor does the conjurer have any obvious loyalties, making it similar to Anansi. Furthermore, the use of the frame narrative can be compared to the story Esu told to the two friends. This challenging rhetorical strategy often makes truth hard to discern, and the reader often finds himself or herself at the same disadvantage as John. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that Charles Chesnutt creates a more advanced trickster in *The Conjure Woman*, through including multiple conjurers and through becoming a trickster himself.

## THE CONJURER AS A TRICKSTER

In the stories discussed in Chapter 1, it is clear that the trickster can be good or evil. The same holds true with the conjurer. Sometimes their magic is used to benefit another slave, while other times it does harm. Second, the trickster is generally portrayed as a creature at some kind of disadvantage. Though in the animal trickster tales the disadvantage of the trickster is its smaller size, the conjurers in these tales (as with Julius) have a social disadvantage. A freed slave may not have been subjected to the rules of a plantation, but this doesn't mean that the trickster was given equal consideration in society. Rather, a freed slave was often at a severe disadvantage, especially in the Deep South where there were still very strong prejudices (and Jim Crow laws) against blacks.

Returning to the trickster Esu-Elegbara, the reader will recall that this particular trickster

was the sole bearer of truth. John Roberts explains that the some African slaves believed that the ability to use magic could be taught, while others believed that it was an inherent gift (94). In either event, the conjurer is the bearer of this strange, mystical truth, very similar to Esu. Next, as it is seen in the story of Anansi's disgrace, the trickster is not always on the winning side. In "Po' Sandy," Tenie is able to keep Sandy away from the slave master, but she is unable to prevent Sandy's demise. However, in the story of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny," the trickster is able to overcome powerful odds. Just as Anansi the spider is able to cause the tiger to run off in shame, so too is Aunt Peggy able to reunite two slaves that were forcibly separated.

Just as the deed of reuniting mother and child can be viewed as good, Uncle Jube tricking Dan into killing Mahaly in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt" can be regarded as evil. The trickster's consistent moral inconstancy mostly likely reveals an inherent self-interest. Similarly, "The Goophered Grapevine" opens with an illustration of just how self-serving a conjurer can be, as Aunt Peggy is asked to do *whatever is necessary* to protect the profits of "Mars Dugal'." Though "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Sis Becky's Pickaninny" illustrate the use of Aunt Peggy's magic in strikingly different ways, the bottom line is that Aunt Peggy is a freed slave and must do whatever she can to survive, much like the tiger in "Bush Got Ears."

Perhaps the trickster's propensity to be self-serving could be the consequence of scarcity, as revealed in the story of Uncle Turtle, where the scarcity of food could account for why the conjurer cannot have allegiances other than to himself. John Roberts explains: "the African conception of the trickster is a figure partially adept at securing the material means of survival, especially food, under famine-like conditions" (25). This point is further illustrated by Julius always describing payment to a conjurer for their services. For example, in "The Goophered Grapevine," Aunt Peggy is given a basket of food and wine, and paid with a "mess er peas," and

she is given a “head-hankercher” in “Sis Becky's Pickaninny” (Chesnutt 63, 65). A stern warning from Aunt Peggy regarding the size of one of her payments reinforces that she subsists off of the payments for her services: “You'll hafter fetch me sump'n mo', fer you can't spec' me ter was'e my time diggin' roots en kukkin' cunj'ation fer nuffin” (Chesnutt 63). It is clear by this warning that Aunt Peggy has no regard for little Mose; if the payment is not right, then Becky and Aunt Nancy would not be receiving Aunt Peggy's assistance.

There is, however, an element of the conjurer that sets him or her apart from the previously discussed tricksters: the psychological effects of their presence. William Wells Brown, in his article “Voodooism in Missouri,” recounts a story of a slave named Dinkie who illustrates the psychological power of the conjurer over both the slaves and the masters. In this story, Dinkie is a slave on the Gaines family farm, but he is never called upon to perform any manual labor. It was said that Dinkie has strong mystical powers, and that nobody, not even the master of the plantation, will do anything to cross Dinkie. When he is sold to a speculator by Dr. Gaines, the speculator returns Dinkie the next day threatening a lawsuit because he was sold unusable goods. Similarly, a new overseer who was not aware of Dinkie's supposed powers takes Dinkie to the barn to be whipped for disobedience. After fifteen minutes, Dinkie and the overseer emerge from the barn, walking side by side as if nothing happened. Dinkie would explain later that he told the overseer that he would summon the devil if the overseer touched him, and apparently that was enough to convince the overseer to leave Dinkie alone (Norton 170-173). In this case, the conjuror appears to have psychological power over Dr. Gaines, the speculator, and the overseer.

Similarly, this power of belief is illustrated in “The Goophered Grapevine.” In this story, Aunt Peggy is observed wandering around the grapevines by some of the slaves, and soon word

gets out that whoever eats any of the scuppernongs will die within a year. Not surprisingly, three incidents that occur on the plantation are attributed to the hex. First, a coachman's horse eats some of the scuppernongs, and though Julius's account is vague, he explains that the horse killed its master. Second, a slave child eats some of the scuppernongs and dies a week later. Julius explains: "W'ite folks say he die' er de fevuh, but de niggers knowed it wuz de goopher" (Chesnutt 11). Finally, Henry, a new slave (unaware of the hex) eats from the vines. When he is told of the hex, he is immediately filled with fear. After a long battle with rheumatism, he dies as well. This psychological impact is revisited in "Hot-Foot Hannibal," as this story takes place on the same plantation. When "Mars Dugal" finds out that Chloe used Aunt Peggy's powers to put a hex on Hannibal, he punishes her by sending away Jeff. This psychological effect that the conjurer has over the slave community makes them the ultimate trickster figure. Conjure does not even *have to be real*; it is the slaves' (and, frequently, their white masters') *belief* in conjure that gives conjurors power.

For example, the outcomes of all of the stories can be explained by natural (not magical) causes. In "The Goophered Grapevine," Henry is an old, slave, and therefore rheumatism and unexplained death do not seem particularly unnatural. Similarly, there are many explanations for why the horse killed its owner; perhaps it was startled by a snake and the coachman lost control. In "Po's Sandy," it could very easily be posited that Sandy simply ran away. In "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," the nightmare could have been real and not a hex. Furthermore, a club foot is a known birth defect, thus explaining what happened to Primus in "The Conjuror's Revenge." The race horse that was acquired in "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" could have been injured, thus explaining the nullification of the trade. In "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," both Dan and "Mahaly" could have simply disappeared after their run-in with Jube's son. Finally, in "Hot-Foot

Hannibal,” Hannibal could just have been a clumsy slave. Each one of these incidents, however, is attributed to a conjure or a hex, and once again reveals the power of belief in the slave community. The conjurer in each situation already has the benefit of belief on his or her side, so all she or he has to do is perform some manner of ritual, and the slaves will automatically attribute any hardship they endure to the ritual.

Additionally, the explanations of the disappearances in “Po' Sandy” and “The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt” can easily be attributed to this psychological effect that the conjurer has over the slave community. In other words, if the slaves truly did run away, it was more than likely a result of the fear of being conjured or hexed. Julius himself already illustrated this psychological effect by stating that the child who died was said to have died of a fever by the “w'ite folks.” This subtle hint illustrates that the conjurer has precisely no power other than the power given to them by those who chose to believe. The same argument could be applied to “Mars Dugal.” Though it is doubtful that most white people believed in conjure, there are some who undoubtedly wished to err on the side of caution when dealing with suspected dark magic, such as the man who thought he was going to punish Dinkie. This goes back to the argument about the conjurer being the sole bearer of truth. If the conjurer were able to project himself strongly enough that he was the sole bearer of dark magic, then he is truly the ultimate trickster.

All these references to conjuration make an even stronger case for Julius as a trickster figure, who was using tales of conjuration to explain perfectly natural occurrences. Granted, this is hypothetical, but as Chesnutt himself writes, “imagination . . . can only act upon data” (Norton 200). Julius is an uneducated man who had been surviving off of his ingenuity ever since he was set free. As such, his use of conjuration to explain natural phenomenon is yet another way that Julius is not only a trickster, but a highly advanced trickster who, just like the tiger in “Bush Got



Ears,” adapts himself to the widespread belief in conjure in order to try and protect himself from any white interlopers. Of course, the appearance of multiple tricksters in the tales could also be seen as *authorial tricksterism*, which will be the next topic of discussion.

#### CHESNUTT AS A TRICKSTER

There are several rhetorical strategies in *The Conjure Woman* that make Charles Chesnutt a trickster in his own right. A primary one is that he employs an unreliable narrator as a mouthpiece for what Heather Gilligan refers to as “an open confrontation between the oral and the literary” (203). This confrontation arises between Chesnutt's eloquence and Julius's unusual (and difficult to understand) storytelling, which makes *The Conjure Woman* a narrative that fluctuates between clarity and confusion. Julius may function as an often enigmatic interpreter of truth, but *Chesnutt* is the one with access to all the facts.

Just like Esu-Elegbara, Chesnutt presents these truths in what might be seen as a riddle form. Because Julius is more interested in thwarting John's attempts to clear the land, there can be only so much trust placed in him. With an unreliable narrator providing his version of the history of the land, readers are left with second-hand (and often third-hand) information. This means that readers are in the same position as John, as they are forced to try and extract truth from confusing tales presented in a nearly incomprehensible dialect. As the horrors of slavery are sandwiched in between fanciful tales of transmogrification, Julius becomes a very unreliable narrator and Chesnutt an authorial trickster for leaving Julius in charge of distilling the truth.

In his essay, “Social Realism in Charles Chesnutt,” Russell Ames observes another one of Chesnutt's strategies in *The Conjure Woman*: “[Chesnutt's] method was first to disarm his readers with conventional scenes and seeming stereotypes – for example, with idyllic relations between servant and aristocrat – then in lightning flashes reveal the underlying facts of injustice

and rebellion” (201). Indeed, Chesnutt opens *The Conjure Woman* by illustrating in “The Gophered Grapevine” amiable relations between freed slave and slave master. This is ironic, however, when later in the same story “Mars Dugal” uses Aunt Peggy's conjure to carelessly kill two of his slaves in order to secure his profits. This rhetorical strategy is exceedingly clever; the reader is disarmed when the story opens up with amiable relations between whites and blacks. However, this idyllic scenario is consistently undermined throughout the rest of the story. This is a trickster tactic; like Esu-Elegbara's method, this strategy challenges the readers' understanding of race relations during the time of slavery, Chesnutt's message, and race relations in their own time.

There are other small examples of authorial tricksterism in *The Conjure Woman*, such as the position of power given to black women through the characters of Aunt Peggy, Tenie, and Aunt Nancy in their roles as conjurers. Furthermore, the idea that a black woman can successfully overpower a white man, illustrated in “Mars Jeems's Nightmare,” is another violation of the social order in the Post-Reconstruction Deep South. Separately, there are certain rhetorical tricks, such as the ironically named “Sandy Run Baptist Church,” constructed from poor Sandy, who was turned into a tree. Ultimately, however, these tricks are clever devices incorporated by Chesnutt to dilute the harsh realities of the slave plantation. He very deftly uses humor and misdirection to soften the underlying themes of separation, abuse, and even infighting among the blacks.

But why did Chesnutt *need* to dilute these harsh realities? In his journal, Chesnutt says that one of the responsibilities of the African American was to “prepare himself for social recognition and equality... [and] to accustom the public mind to the idea” (Norton 167). If there was a need to dilute the harsh realities of slavery in his writing, it was for the benefit of the

African American more so than the whites. These softened truths were, in a sense, Chesnutt giving white America a clean slate. Furthermore, Julius accepting the job as John's coachman seems a symbolic act that reinforces this idea. Though Julius is not yet ready to embrace the Northern couple, he is willing to try and cooperate with them. While he tries for most of the story to outwit John, this is Chesnutt's way of acknowledging that the races simply cannot integrate overnight, and that distrust is normal, given historical. Over time, Julius lets go of his distrust of the white couple, a transformation that could not have occurred if Julius chose to harbor resentment towards the race responsible for the enslavement of his people.

What Chesnutt accomplished by challenging gender stereotypes undoubtedly had a purpose similar to preparing the African American for social integration and equality. The figure of Aunt Peggy represents the hidden potential of women, a potential that made them just as powerful as men. Though the vehicle for the delivery of this message is not the same, Aunt Peggy's willingness to work for whites and blacks seems once again indicative of an individual who does not hold a grudge. If Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* seems to not take a particularly harsh stance on slavery, perhaps it is because Chesnutt knew that such a stance was not the proper way to open the discussion for negotiations between races and genders. After all, bringing past injustices to the table is not exactly indicative of a willingness to offer a clean slate.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

The writer, of whatever color, with the eye to see, the heart to feel and the pen to record the real romance. . . will find a hearing and reap the reward.

- Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?" (Chesnutt 219)

As has been previously discussed, America was changing rapidly during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The influx of women and Negro writers into the mainstream literary culture illustrates that the social landscape was slowly moving in the direction of equal consideration, regardless of gender or race. Furthermore, the *appearance* of women and freed slaves in literature revealed that the country was gradually becoming aware of the shift in the social paradigm. However, even though there were many emerging Negro writers, Chesnutt found his contemporaries to be burdening themselves with the task of uplifting the Negro race. His idea was to simply *tell his story*, and if the story was interesting and worthy of readership, American readers would not care about the author's race (Norton 219). Chesnutt follows this formula in *The Conjure Woman*, drawing upon stories he had heard and incorporating the popular style of frame narrative, successfully joining Old World folklore with the modern conversation about racial justice and coexistence.

Through incorporating the model of the Old World trickster tale of African folklore, Charles Chesnutt champions racial equality. Using Julius McAdoo as a voice for the voiceless, he illustrates both the struggle for, and finally the achievement of, a cautious understanding between whites and blacks. This depiction, however, is subtle and progressive, as at first Julius

is a stranger to the family. Through the progression of the stories, readers are able to see Julius evolve into a trusted member of the family. This is in spite of all of the trickster tactics Julius used to convince John not to clear out the land. Although there is a power struggle going on between John and Julius, it becomes evident as the book progresses that Julius has developed an affinity for the couple, and that John acknowledges the good that Julius does for them. By the end of the story cycle, Julius is even able to help the couple with their problems. This illustration of gradual trust and growing affinity seems to illustrate a world where freed slave and white man can slowly reconcile. Furthermore, Chesnutt stays true to his own mantra by not elevating Julius, but instead presenting him as a man who very slowly begins to let go of his distrust and remains in a subservient position to the white landowner.

The usage of Julius as the trickster figure in *The Conjure Woman* is also the perfect way to illustrate the trepidation that the freed slave felt. Furthermore, Chesnutt takes great care to depict Julius as a man who does not resent his former owner, a very neutral platform and excellent starting point for race negotiations. In order for this simulation of reconciliation to be delivered properly, Julius *must*, in the beginning, be distrustful. Furthermore, he must try to prevent John's plans of expansion. Although he himself was never treated with any cruelty by his former master, he cannot initially envision a world where he and John live side by side, peaceably and with cooperation. Many times he puts up a fight with this social transformation because he knows that John is unaware of Julius's connection with the land. However, because John *does* continue with many of his plans of expansion, we see that both he and John must learn to meet the other man halfway. Thus, John allows Julius certain victories. Julius takes note of this; he works alongside John to help curtail Annie's depression.

Similarly, Julius is also used as a vehicle for the advancement of the woman of the

household. Although at times he evokes sentimentalism with Annie to secure her help in convincing John to grant Julius's requests, John cannot be entirely ignorant of this strategy. Rather, we see John conceding, not because of ignorance, but for the sake of appeasing Annie's sentimentalism. To put it another way, sometimes Julius is *needed* to remind John of Annie's depression. Similarly, Annie must demonstrate to John that Julius should be given a vote in John's plans. Neither makes an explicit appeal for sympathy, but they are both forced to remind John of their respective limitations. As such, John could represent a typical white man of the time, who is ignorant about the needs of white women and freed slaves. The story ends with John still not quite understanding, but this is to be expected. John clearly knows little to nothing about of slavery *or* depression (or women), so both Julius and Annie must, at times, stand in John's path to remind him that they are not yet on his level.

Although it is difficult to say why Chesnutt opted for the framed trickster tale to deliver his message, certain conclusions can be drawn from the effectiveness of the stories. First, it was a useful strategy to expand upon Julius's experiences with slavery. By not making Julius a slave with a history of abuse, Chesnutt is able to use Julius as an unbiased or non-confrontational voice for blacks. At the same time, however, it is clear that Julius has seen atrocities, but these atrocities are recounted in trickster tales, wildly imaginative stories of conjure and magic. This factor serves to further take the sting out of the underlying message, which is that most slaves were treated horribly. The trickster tale removes the venom from this awful truth, while its seemingly unaffected narrator demonstrates a willingness on the part of the Negro to offer a clean slate to the white man. Similarly, John represents an archetype as well. Chesnutt very intelligently uses a Northerner, a man who did not own slaves. This confrontation between a freed slave who is not angry about slavery and a white man who was not involved with slavery

seems to illustrate where both sides needed to be if they were to begin to understand one another.

Finally, the trickster tale approach to telling the story was a gentle way of having a stern discussion. While the stories within *The Conjure Woman* speak of harsh treatments towards slaves, they do not come out and make accusations. Similarly, Julius does not level accusations against the white couple; he merely recites stories as a matter of fact. Julius is neither hostile, nor does he complain about his former life as a slave. If *The Conjure Woman* consisted only of the stories that Julius told, it would read more like a horror story than a plantation tale. This would undoubtedly shock most readers and present the ills of slavery too forcibly. Instead, Chesnutt, just like his trickster, presented palatable truths wrapped in fanciful tales. The conjurer plays yet another role as the trickster to the reader, as it tends to distract the reader from the harsh truths being presented. In the end the reader, just like John, is left sorting out the conjure tale, as opposed to dwelling on the stories of separation, abuse, and racial infighting.

It was a bold rhetorical strategy for Chesnutt to use the trickster tale to speak of such dark subject matter. He used Julius to tell the world that the Negro would not hold a grudge if the white man was willing give him equal consideration. To further bolster this observation, *The Conjure Woman* concludes with a trickster tale not designed to thwart John or convince Annie. Rather, it is the tale of “Hot-Foot Hannibal,” a tale used to try and convince Mabel to reconcile with Malcolm. This is a symbolic act by Julius, as it demonstrates that while he once distrusted the Northern couple, now he is almost a part of the family. Furthermore, this is a symbolic way to end the story by Chesnutt, as it illustrates what the relationship between whites and Negroes could be like if they slowly and carefully learned to listen to one another.

Not surprisingly, the trickster figure and the trickster tale have continued to evolve following the American Realistic period. The Harlem Renaissance would see the emergence of

such tricksters as Jesse B. Semple created by Langston Hughes and Rinehart in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Once again, these trickster figures were altered to fit the era, as a push for greater rights was occurring in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. While Jesse B. Semple was an archetype for the unassuming yet clever black man, Rinehart represented the silent rage that was beginning to mount as racial inequality once again led to violence in America. The country would see a new trickster figure in the 1970s, as film became the medium of choice for social protest. Figures such as Petey Wheatstraw and Huggy Bear ushered in the Era of the “badman,” a rebellious figure who often earned its living by illegal means. Combining elements of the fast-talking pool hall hustler and breaking social mores such as interracial couples, the trickster figure of the 1970s was once again a radical figure that rather loudly called for social change.

And *change* is what the trickster figure in African-American literature has always represented. Chesnut's depiction of a clever freed slave locked in a battle of wits shows the struggle that lay ahead for the African American. Similarly, John reveals the absence of understanding that the average American had for the African-American. However, Annie represents the faint glimmer of sympathy towards African Americans; although she could not relate to the struggles depicted in Julius's stories, she knew that *separation hurts*. The ability to identify with the struggle represents the beginning of understanding between races, and furthermore indicates the kind of sympathy and open-mindedness that was required for the races to begin to reconcile. Chesnut's use of a Northern shows that Chesnut was aware that not all Americans participated in slavery, and the ending of *The Conjure Woman* hints at the kind of peace that could exist between the races.

While the use of the trickster figure in *The Conjure Woman* is at times very confusing for the reader, the point is that the reader did not need to *fully* understand; just like Annie, she simply



needs to be able to extract elements of truth and realize that identification with the slaves should not be the goal. Rather, it is empathy for another race that was necessary if the two were to ever come to an understanding. Chesnut's brilliant use of the framed narrative and the trickster figure strays from a confrontational tone and delivers simple, stark truths about abuse and separation. These truths are not provided for the sake of provoking guilt; they are truths, plain and simple. John and Annie needed to be made aware of the atrocities that occurred on the land they were trying to develop to ensure that they did not become like the plantation owners, cruel and domineering. Similarly, America needed to be made aware of the dark and terrible things that occurred during slavery to make certain the same mistakes were not made. Into this area enters Julius McAdoo, a clever and complicated broker for peace and racial understanding.

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