

**Chesnutt's African American Child Characters and the Child-Archetype:
Toward Reconstructing Thinking in the Jim Crow Era** by Susan Wright

Charles Chesnutt, like other nineteenth-century African American authors, was aware of what white readers were ingesting; it behooved him to be so if he hoped to use his fiction to appeal to whites, first, to acknowledge their role in oppressing blacks and, second, to reconcile that problem. Portraying sympathetic black characters to a white audience was not easy, as the publication records of black turn-of-the-century authors attest. Chesnutt, however, did manage to please white readers while continuing to make trenchant remarks about the oppressors of blacks without alienating them. He did this by writing dialect stories in which the characters seem artless, by satirizing whites through apparently innocuous white characters, often icons of society, and, in general, by recognizing exactly how far he could go in using his stories and novels as vehicles of social commentary. One medium Chesnutt uses sparingly is the child character; but those child characters the author does portray level some of Chesnutt's most subtle but incisive criticism on the state of race relations at the turn of the century. In studying Chesnutt's child characters, I found it useful to consider the qualities that Jung attributes to the archetypal child--abandonment, wholeness, and transformation. Chesnutt's child characters, however, challenge Jung's sense that archetypes achieve universal associations through the unconscious. While readers will recognize certain universal symbols in Chesnutt's portrayal of black children, both in ante and post-bellum Southern settings, we should remain responsive to Chiné Achebe's observation that it is flawed thinking to assume that colonized people would produce authors who either could or would convey in their works ideas that are considered universal by colonizers.

Alice Byrnes explains that "the symbol of the [archetypal] child is not [to be] taken literally, [and] the conditions of being orphaned should also be taken figuratively . . . [;] it is a way of representing the process of separation that everyone must undergo in order to become an independent adult" (34). In other words, characters such as Cinderella, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel, Jane Eyre, Kim, in The Jungle Book, Huck Finn, and the typical child characters in Dickens's novels are virtually stock characters. And it should be noted that these characters do survive their abandonment and become, or are headed toward, independent adulthood. Ironically, the institution of slavery created an environment in which all black children were effectively orphans: parents could be and often were sold for economic reasons, for punishment, and even capriciously. Further, the perpetuation of the institution relied on masters appointing themselves "surrogate parents" of all slaves--adults and children alike--thus limiting the role of slave parents in their children's lives. Slavery, essentially, afforded no opportunity for slaves to become "independent adults." And, of course, the practice of owners producing children with their female slaves necessitated the systematic abandonment of these children by their fathers who relied on the expedient rule of children following the condition of their mothers, leaving the Southern gentlemen's legal marriages and nuclear families seemingly unscathed. In "Sis Becky's Pickaninny" (1889) and "The Sheriff's Children (1889)," Chesnutt illustrates the prototypical black child character who is both literally and symbolically abandoned.

"Sis Becky's Pickaninny" is one of Chesnutt's most poignant stories condemning race slavery, and, in turn, ridiculing whites' claim to civilization. The very title of the story comments derisively on the plutocracy's propensity to undermine and trivialize the mother-child bond among their slaves, a bond which the Western world has consistently revered in art and literature, and which it has sanctimoniously extolled in life. Chesnutt capitalizes on the theme of abandonment in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny" by naming the story's infant character Mose, an unmistakable allusion to the Bible's foremost abandoned child, Moses. In Chesnutt's story, Becky's bond with her baby, Mose, is broken after her master trades her for a race horse that he desires but which he cannot afford due to previous gambling losses. By using Uncle Julius, the astute Uncle Remus-like storyteller in his conjure tales, to tell the story of Mose and Becky, Chesnutt deftly avoids the bathos that this tale of intense emotion might otherwise evoke, even as he undermines the notion that whites sanctify the maternal role in the family, as they attest in theory and fiction.¹

In Uncle Julius's usual disarmingly detached manner, the tragic tale of mother-child separation is set forth to Julius's familiar white audience, John and Annie Sullivan, post-bellum Northern émigrés who buy the plantation on which former slave, Julius, has remained. From the outset of the story, Julius studiously minimizes Becky and Mose's strong attachment to each other and to Becky's plight as a slave field hand, one who is also a nursing mother, in being denied the time necessary to nurture and love her baby son, even prior to their separation through sale. Becky's every available moment is spent with Mose--nights and Sundays, her only day off. Julius tells his listeners that after Becky retrieves Mose at the end of the work day at Old Aunt Nancy's, the plantation slaves' communal baby sitter, she nurses and cuddles him, keeping him [in bed with her] until morning; he adds offhandedly that the cute, dark-eyed child seemed as "fon[d]" of his mother as she was of him. Uncle Julius protests that it was not easy for Colonel Pendleton, Becky and Mose's master, to separate Becky and Mose, for the Colonel "didn' ' keer ter take de mammies 'way fum dey chillun w'iles' de chillun wuz little" (54). Becky's master is nothing if not a master of self-deception. He wastes little time in making the trade, while trading his own humanity for a race horse in the bargain. Becky and Mose's case seems hopeless, but the slave child, like the archetypal abandoned child, "possesses powers far exceeding those of ordinary humanity" (Byrnes 35). The archetypal child, through his or her supernatural powers, is able to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds that enable him or her ultimately to separate from his or her origins in the journey toward the independent status of adulthood. Mose, like his namesake, is burdened with a seemingly insuperable problem: he is an enslaved infant who is under the power of an inhumane master. He seems impotent indeed. Although Mose is not rescued either by a pharaoh's daughter or a fairy godmother, he is aided by the archetypal slave child's best hope for survival in a hostile world--Chesnutt's inimitable conjure woman, Aunt Peggy, who encourages Mose's supernatural abilities that will more than compensate for baby Mose's vulnerability.

On the third day of the separation from his mother, Mose's beautiful, shining dark eyes lose their luster, and then he refuses to eat. Only Aunt Peggy's solution, turning Mose into a bird, thus enabling him to fly to his mother's side on the plantation of her new owner, saves the child from impending death. In turn, Mose, in the form of a bird, serves as a restorative to his inconsolable mother, singing to her in a voice that she recognizes as one similar to her baby's cooing and crowing, eating bread crumbs from her fingers, and fluttering his wings against her face. And finally, although Aunt Peggy orchestrates nature a bit to implement the ultimate reunion of mother and child, it is actually her understanding of the greed and dishonesty of the two masters involved in the separation of Becky and Mose that enables her to work her magic. By crippling Colonel Pendleton's race horse and rendering Becky moribund because she dreams that Mose is dead, the masters exchange what is seemingly worthless property in acts of sham generosity, each thinking he has duped the other. Reunited with his mother who serves as his mentor, the one who, as Jung claims, is required in the life of the archetypal child "to facilitate the youth's transition into the next stage of development" (Byrnes 41), Mose blossoms. He becomes a blacksmith whose time Colonel Pendleton allows to be hired out which results in his ability to buy Becky's and his own freedom, and cares for his mother until her death.

The outcome for Tom in "The Sheriff's Children" is less positive while the message he conveys is more incisive. Indeed, Chesnutt published the story in *The Independent*, a liberal nineteenth-century journal, because the story pressed against the political boundaries set by the more conservative journals' editorial policies. In the story, Tom is another dispossessed slave child who journeys precariously toward adulthood. But he does so without the necessary relationships that would enable him to achieve self-integration: he is motherless, fatherless, and, as far as the reader knows, without any mentor. These absences are ominous for the archetypal child, but they are the death knell for this former slave child. The psychological process of individuation is an on-going one that requires a balance of opposite qualities such as those associated with the child and the adult. The symbiotic relationship of the dependent and the mentor, therefore, serves as a metaphor for personal integration (Byrnes 71). Tom, the product of slave master and slave, is the biological son of Sheriff Campbell, the scion of Patesville, North Carolina, the setting of the story. Tom and his mother, Cecily, were sold down the river by the sheriff years prior to the story's opening. As the narrator explains, the sale was made after the Sheriff

and Cecily had quarreled: "The price offered for [Cecily] and [Tom] had been unusually large, and [the sheriff] had yielded to the combination of anger and pecuniary stress" (144). Considering Tom's background in relation to the character of the archetypal child, it is clear that his journey for self-integration has brought him back to his birthplace--the archetypal circular journey, the homecoming.

It is not until after Tom is arrested for allegedly murdering one of the townspeople that he comes into contact with his father who, as sheriff, is duty-bound to secure Tom from the lynch mob that has gathered outside the jail to exact its method of vigilante justice, a common historical occurrence in 1899 when "The Sheriff's Children" was published. After the mob is dispersed by the sheriff, Tom gains control of a handgun and threatens the sheriff. This shift in control leads to a discussion about the concept of duty, during which the child becomes the father of the man in terms of his comprehension of the obligation and role of a parent/mentor and the reality of the sheriff's complete neglect of both roles in relation to Tom. After Tom divulges his identity to the sheriff, the sheriff remonstrates that it would be wrong to kill the person who gave him life. Tom's response is bitter:

"What kind of life? You gave me your own blood, your own features . . . and you gave me a black mother . . . [who] died under the lash because she had enough womanhood to call her soul her own. You gave me a white man's spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out." (144-145)

If we look at Tom as the archetypal *slave* child, which necessarily alters the symbol, we can attempt to comprehend the psychic damage inflicted on historical slave children who were systematically dispossessed by their white fathers. Self-integration could be achieved through another mentor-protégé relationship, but not easily, for the shadow of abandonment looms large over the dispossessed. This is recognized in Tom's very realistic bitterness toward his father. The symbolized archetypal child, on the other hand, is almost saintly in his or her ability to forgive, or more precisely, to disregard unjust treatment altogether. At the end of "The Sheriff's Children," Tom bleeds to death after he removes the bandage from a superficial gunshot wound inflicted by the sheriff's daughter (and, significantly, Tom's half sister), Polly; Chesnutt, thus, drives home to the reader the most disquieting implications of the story's title, emphasizing those most closely associated with the shattering of familial bonds during slavery.

Although the death of the child protagonist is a common occurrence in nineteenth-century literature, the difference between Tom's death and the death of other child literary heroes, such as Dickens's Little Nell, and Stowe's Little Eva, are several: Tom is a twice-abandoned child; one could argue that his father abandons him a second time the night of Tom's death leaving the boy wounded in jail, knowing that he is innocent, knowing that a lynch mob is thirsting for his blood, and, most important, knowing that Tom is his biological son. Tom dies alone--not even the reader is privy to his final words or thoughts, thus eliminating, once again, the potential for sentimentality. But the stark difference between Tom and other child characters who die in turn-of-the-century literature lies in his African heritage.

Chesnutt seems particularly aware that white audiences were rarely moved by the death of black characters, not even children, and, perhaps, especially not those who were killed by whites. Still, he insists on writing realistically from an African American perspective.² "The Sheriff's Children" is not sentimental, but it is tragic. However, although Tom's role is tragic, it is also regenerative.³ The obvious reason Tom ends his own life is that he *chooses* to do so rather than die at the end of a lynch rope, a death that is inevitable for a black youth accused of the death of a white man. But Tom's death may lead to the sheriff's redemption. After Sheriff Campbell's encounter with his son in the jail cell, the sheriff returns home and spends the night in contemplation. In a moment of revelation, the sheriff decides that he "owed some duty to this son--neither law nor custom could destroy a responsibility inherent in the nature of mankind" (147). By the time the sheriff falls asleep, he has decided to help Tom prove his innocence, and, once acquitted, the sheriff believes that "some plan could be devised by which [he] might in some degree atone for his crime against this son of his--against society--against God" (148). In terms of the symbol of the archetypal child, the sheriff will regain the humanity that he has lost as a proponent of

slavery, as a slave owner, and as the father of a son he sold down the river—one who dies as a result of the chain events relating to the sheriff's choices made in regard to Tom and Tom's mother. If we see Tom as a Christ-figure, the child-archetype savior, then his death will not be in vain, and the sheriff will, indeed, be redeemed.

Chesnutt does portray child characters who fit more neatly into the archetypal-child paradigm, one who exhibits saint-like forgiveness of unjust treatment. One such character is Sophy Tucker, protagonist of "The Bouquet" (1899), another story set in the Reconstruction South. Sophy is a child who idolizes her teacher, a white woman, Mary Myrover, who teaches in a "colored" school in North Carolina. In historical terms Mary's job is unusual because she is a member of the antebellum planter class.⁴ Miss Myrover accepts the position because she and her mother, survivors of the Civil War, are not solvent. Unfortunately, however, Mary's taking the position accounts for the cruel treatment Sophy endures from Old Mrs. Myrover, Mary's mother, during the course of the story.

Old Mrs. Myrover's plantation-mistress mentality, her insistence on maintaining a strict racial hierarchy in the post-bellum era, precludes her comprehension of the economic necessity of Mary's teaching (especially African American children), and obviates any conception of a New South—a society in which African Americans should and will have civil and legal rights that will positively affect the entire society. Her residual slave-owner attitude concerning the education of slaves as a detriment to their remaining satisfied bondmen and women and her inability to recognize any real intellectual potential for black children result in her protesting against her daughter's taking the position: "I don't like it, Mary. . . . It's a long step from owning such people to teaching them. What do they need with education? It will only make them unfit for work" (239-240). Old Mrs. Myrover's words echo the pervasive antebellum attitude, one perpetuated in the post-bellum era, toward the education of blacks. Wilma King, in Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth Century America, notes the sentiments of Virginia slave owner William Taylor Barry: Barry "complained about slaves being kept in 'a state of almost brutal ignorance,' yet he believed [that] to 'enlighten them is to make them unhappy at their condition,'" or, worse still, more "dangerous" (78). King also includes the reaction of former slave mistress, Tryphena Fox, who returned to her plantation after the Civil War to find a "'nigger school' in the old slave cabins. The school, established by the Freedmen's Bureau, was a ready reminder of the new social order. Although angered by its presence, Fox 'determined to put up with the annoyance of the little darkey school'" only because the impoverished former slave mistress was recompensed for the buildings by the Bureau (165). King argues, "Negative reactions toward education for newly freed people stems from the desire for continued denial to equal rights and disdain for the curriculum that went beyond the three R's" (164). Like Fox, Mary recognizes her employment as "only a business arrangement" (240). She tries to mollify her mother's concerns about educating freed slave children by suggesting that her position will allow her to maintain a master-servant relationship with the students. Her mother responds indignantly, "Not one of them will dare to presume on your position to take any liberties with us. I'll see to that" (240). Mrs. Myrover's words change the temper of a "The Bouquet" from a seemingly innocuous short story to one that speaks volumes about the South's Jim Crow mentality at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Sophy and Mary's pupil-teacher relationship turns on Sophy's "intense devotion" to her teacher: Miss Myrover always notes the look of admiration on her pupil's face: "In it there was [significantly] *nothing of envy, nothing of regret*; nothing but worship for the beautiful white lady--she was not especially handsome, but to Sophy her beauty was almost divine--who had come to teach her" (emphasis added, 241). For Mary, the child's devotion "had a sort of flavor of the old regime, and she felt, when she bestowed her kindly notice upon her little black attendant, some of the feudal condescension of the mistress toward the slave" (241-242). Such a relationship, insofar as Mary's feelings are concerned, is comparable to the thinking of post-Reconstruction Redeemers, a political force whose concerted effort was to recover white supremacy lost as a result of the Civil War. But it also reflects Sophy's role as the post-bellum African-American child-archetype--the Jungian eternal child--especially in terms of his or her abandonment, invincibility, and potentiality.⁵ Sophy represents, perhaps, all black children who gained the right to achieve their full potential in the post-bellum South, a right denied to their antebellum

counterparts who were victims of what might be termed collective abandonment. And if the reader carefully notes the narrator's description of Sophy and Mary's relationship, one discovers Sophy's "worship" is of Miss Myrover the teacher, not the white aristocrat.⁶

Ironically, on more than one level, Sophy's greatest rival for the attentions of Miss Myrover is her small white dog (the reader is forced to consider Mary's surname in connection with the teacher's treatment of Sophy and her pet dog). The juxtaposition of child and pet dog is masterful on Chesnut's part; the dog, Prince (another meaningful designation in relation to spinster Mary Myrover), the narrator explains, "is a clever dog, and could fetch and carry, sit up on his haunches, extend his paw to shake hands, and possessed several other canine accomplishments" (242). The narrator only paragraphs previously describes how Sophy springs to pick up an item her teacher drops, anticipates her every wish, and "performs" numerous services for her teacher in the classroom (241). Prince, like Sophy, "worships" Mary, following her everywhere she goes and sleeping under her desk at school until classes end. However, at the end of the school day, it is Prince who leaves with Miss Myrover and Sophy who stays behind, "for Miss Myrover was white and Sophy was black, which they both understood perfectly well. Miss Myrover taught the colored children, but she could not be seen with them in public" (242). To emphasize the strict rule of segregation the narrator explains that Sophy carries part of Miss Myrover's heavy bundle home after school one day "follow[ing] the teacher at a respectful distance." When the two arrive at the Myrover home, Old Mrs. Myrover makes certain that Sophy is put in her place telling her daughter within the child's hearing, "Mary, I wish you wouldn't let those little darkeys follow you to the house. I don't want them in the yard. I should think you'd have enough of them all day" (243). And when Mary dies two years after taking the teaching position, Mrs. Myrover associates her daughter's death with a curious type of exhaustion: "It seemed unnatural for her to be wearing herself out teaching little negroes who ought to have been working for her" (244). Mrs. Myrover adds that "the world has hardly been a fit place to live since the war" and suggests she would be content to leave this apparently aberrant world (244).

The irony of Mrs. Myrover's believing that she is living in a world wherein the unthinkable has occurred--the "bottom rung of the ladder has replaced the top," in the parlance of post-bellum Redeemers--renders the old woman incapable of human decency. However, in the role of the invincible child, Sophy does not succumb to the psychological warfare perpetuated against her by antebellum society as represented by Mrs. Myrover. In delving deeper into this point, it is interesting to consider Jung's description of the "divine child":

It is a striking paradox in all child-myths that the "child" is on the one hand delivered helpless into the power of terrible enemies and in continual danger of extinction, while on the other he [or she] possesses power far exceeding those of ordinary humanity . . . and, despite all dangers, will unexpectedly pull through. (qtd in Christopher Fortune 461)

To insure that Sophy understands where she stands in Mrs. Myrover's sense of hierarchy, she rudely and cruelly denies Sophy permission to enter the Myrover home to pay her final respects to her beloved teacher as she lies in state; neither is she allowed to deliver a bouquet of Miss Mary's favorite yellow roses, tied with the yellow ribbon Mary had given to the grateful Sophy. Despite her treatment, Sophy remains quietly resolute in her effort to deliver the bouquet. Even though black mourners are virtually denied entrance to Mary's funeral, significantly Sophy climbs onto the window sill of the sanctuary which encases a stained glass depiction of "Jesus blessing little children. . . . [and] just at the feet of the figure of Jesus a small triangular piece of glass had been broken out [and] [t]o this aperture Sophy applied her eyes, and through it saw and heard what she could of the services within" (246).⁷ Sophy overcomes the psychological onslaught against her with Christ-like acceptance of her situation; and, with Christ's apparent blessing, she continues with determination to prevail in her quest to say her final farewell to her teacher and to deliver the bouquet. In the ultimate success of this mission, Prince, Mary Myrover's faithful dog, plays an important role.

In "The Archetypes in Peter Pan," Ralph J. Hallman points out that the abandoned child archetype often "establishes an immediate kinship with the more instinctual aspects of nature, the animal level," which explains Peter's being aided by "all sorts of creatures whose primary mode of behaviour is instinctual" (67). In this regard, Sophy listening to the eulogy for Mary from her window perch, and Prince, lying under his mistress's coffin, establish what will become the image of the invincible child and the animal helper. From her outpost, Sophy hears the minister reinforcing antebellum paternalistic notions, speaking of Miss Myrover's "love and self-sacrifice for others . . . to her labors as a teacher of the poor ignorant negroes who had been placed in their midst by an all-wise Providence, and whom it was their duty to guide and direct in the station in which God had put them" (246-247). She then follows the cortege to the cemetery that is marked with a sign reading "This Cemetery is for white people only. Others please keep out," a sign that had previously kept Sophy from walking among the lush green mounds, shady walks, and lovely flowers that she had appreciated from outside the gate. Distraught and sobbing outside the gate after the mourners have left and the cemetery gates are locked behind them, Sophy notices the faithful Prince is lying on his mistress's grave. Calling him to her she tells him to take the now wilted bouquet to the grave; he does so and is rewarded with Sophy's nod of approval. The narrator states that Sophy leaves the cemetery looking at Prince "a moment with a feeling very much like envy," an ambiguous description of Sophy's feelings. The relevant point is that Sophy succeeds. As Jung argues, "One of the essential features of the child-motif is its *futurity*. The child is potential future" (qtd in Fortune 463). Sophy, then, as representative of the nineteenth-century African American child, symbolizes triumph in overcoming the racist barriers set in her path to limit her intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

The student-teacher relationship is important in another work of Chesnutt's, The House Behind the Cedars (1898). In House, the relationship Chesnutt portrays is not between a black student and a white teacher, as it is in "The Bouquet," but between a black student and a biracial teacher, one who can, and briefly does, pass for white in the novel, a circumstance Chesnutt was intimately acquainted with as a particularly light-complexioned African American. The hypocrisy of the color-line plays an important role in the theme of the novel, a theme that comments on the unjust but eradicable color-line of nineteenth-century society. In connection to this theme, Chesnutt uses a child character to undermine Greek philosopher Plato's early racist theory of blackness, naming the child Plato and allowing him to teach important lessons about adult duplicity. Plato is the student of Rena Walden, the novel's mulatta heroine, at a rural black school in North Carolina where Rena has retreated following desertion by her white suitor, George Tryon, after he learns of her African heritage. The school children, including Plato, are in awe of Rena because she is a stranger and because she is "white." The narrator states that "the theory of blackness as propounded by Plato could not quite counterbalance in the young African [students'] mind[s] the evidence of their own senses": not only is Rena light complexioned, but she combines "gentleness with firmness," and she has an unmistakable strength of character (244).⁸

House's Plato is the ironic antithesis of the ancient Greek thinker for whom he is named--indeed, Plato is all boy. Young Plato is loquacious and friendly, is always in motion, and is a natural performer, constantly walking on his hands and turning cartwheels. In this regard, he fits rather neatly into the profile of the archetypal child, the extravert who is outgoing and friendly and who "radiates warmth." In archetypal literature he would complement the "unredeemed adult" type who is "introverted, sensate, and thinking" (Byrnes 48). To a point, the descriptions work, for Plato is pitted against George Tryon, his former owner; Tryon, the man who betrays Rena, is also one of the two men (the other is Jefferson Wain, the mulatto superintendent of schools where Rena teaches), who is most directly responsible for Rena's death. However, since Plato plays a relatively minimal role in the novel, it would be arbitrary to carry this analogy too far (the reader does not witness the two sides of the archetype integrate, for example). But Plato's character serves Chesnutt's purpose perfectly in rendering the signifier "black" or "blackness" ludicrous. Plato has been fully indoctrinated into the white supremacists' notion of blackness, apparently by his early close association with his former owner, George Tryon. Proof of this occurs in an incident that brings him in contact with George Tryon and his current love interest, Miss Leary, when they ride past the school at which Rena teaches and Plato attends.

Once Miss Leary glimpses a beautiful young, and obviously white, woman in the door of the school, she urges Tryon stop so that she can make inquiries of a young black student about the woman's race. The boy, Plato, replies to Miss Leary's query, "No, ma'm, she ain't w'te; she's black. She looks lack she's w'ite, but she's black" (237). Although Tryon does not recognize Rena at this point, Plato's bemusing disclosure leads quickly to his understanding that the teacher is Rena, and, in turn, this knowledge leads ultimately to Rena's death. Tryon himself could easily have authored Plato's description of Rena, for he believed her to be white when he asked her to marry him months previously. Tryon is also aware of Rena's acquaintanceship with the local superintendent of the black school, Jefferson Wain. Consequently, Tryon quickly deduces that the pretty new teacher at the school is Rena. After this point, Tryon pursues Rena to her death through his manipulation and exploitation of young Plato.

In what turns out to be an ironically understated chapter title, "Plato Earns Half a Doll'r," the narrator explains that Plato's "acquaintance with Mars Geo'ge gave him the privilege of looking at money," specifically, and sardonically, referencing the half dollar mentioned in the chapter's title with which Tryon tempts Plato to complete a number of errands that culminate in the child's innocent betrayal of his beloved teacher, Rena (254). Plato's first errand is to deliver to Rena a letter entreating her to meet Tryon to discuss their former relationship, one which ended abruptly and cruelly when Tryon accidentally discovered Rena's African ancestry. After Rena responds to Tryon refusing to meet with him, Tryon's "re-inflamed . . . smoldering passion" for Rena compels him to offer Plato additional money for the child's assistance (264). Knowing that Plato and other students take turns walking their teacher home after school, part of the information Tryon coaxes from the naïve Plato about his teacher's daily routine, Tryon promises the child money to abandon Rena in the forest the next time he walks with her, thus allowing Tryon to meet with her alone. Tryon makes this pact with Plato in a chapter titled "An Unusual Honor," a simple title for the complicated interaction that ensues between the white male adult and his recently freed slave child.

Whereas Tryon might well serve as Plato's mentor, reinforcing the boy's scholarly pursuits and reaffirming the child's positive relationship with his beloved teacher, instead, Tryon corrupts the child's innocence, exploiting him as a procurer of Rena. And Tryon is aware of his powers of manipulation, both monetarily and in relation to the continued strict adherence to a racial hierarchy in the post-bellum South. To insure his desire to meet Rena unaccompanied in the forest, Tryon furnishes Plato cause to leave her alone. Tryon tells Plato that to earn the promised dollar; he must leave Rena at a certain juncture in the forest and proceed to town in order to deliver an important message for his former master. He carefully reels Plato into his plan with the logic that Rena only wants *someone* to accompany her home, and Plato is assured that Tryon would be the perfect stand-in for himself. Tryon will use his position of power to achieve his goal: in his urgency to meet with Rena in such compromising circumstances, elicited by Rena's refusal to communicate further with him and spurred on by Plato's potential to foil his plan, Tryon feels "some dim realization of the tyranny of caste, when he found it not merely pressing upon an inferior people who had no right to expect anything better, but [were] barring his own way to something that he desire[s]" (265). Neither Rena nor Plato has a chance against Tryon's resolution: Rena, after all, is a black woman being pursued by a white man in the post-bellum South.⁹ For his part, Plato recognizes "the opportunity to earn a dollar [as] the chance of a lifetime [that] must not be allowed to slip [away]" (261). Following the dictates of race and caste, Plato, according to the narrator, reasons:

Mars Geo'ge was white and rich, and could do anything. Plato was proud of the fact that the had once belonged to Mars Geo'ge. He could not conceive of any one so powerful as Mars Geo'ge, unless it might be God. . . . It would undoubtedly be a great honor for the teacher to be escorted home by Mars Geo'ge. The teacher was a great woman . . . and *looked white*; but Mars Geo'ge was the *real article*. . . . and the teacher would doubtless thank Plato for arranging that so great an honor should fall upon her. (emphasis added, 265-266)

With the term honor at play in the above rationale, the reader is concerned that Plato has been taught, and so believes, that Tryon is a person of integrity for whom the boy will gladly help set up a meeting that leads to Rena's death (one that results from her attempt to escape Tryon and Wain who both pursue her in the forest after Plato leaves her). The narrator's derisive tone is notable in the description of Plato's elation in having pleased everyone involved after the deal is made with Tryon: "Noble Mars Geo'ge! Fortunate teacher! Happy Plato!" (266). The fact that Tryon is absolutely ignoble, that it is tragic that Rena ever met him, and that Plato's happiness will be as fleeting as the candy he buys with his ill-gotten dollar is driven home by Chesnutt's portrayal of Plato, a happy, innocent, and ignorant child whom Tryon exploits as readily as he betrays Rena earlier in the novel. While Plato does not become the integrated child, at least not within the scope of The House Behind the Cedars, Tryon epitomizes the unredeemed adult--narrow-minded and sensate and absorbed in his immediate world.

Though Chesnutt's child characters are not all invincible, they are all characters of integrity, despite their abandonment, exploitation, and/or unjust treatment by adults. Mose, Tom, Sophy, and Plato are like the historical children of American slavery, able to contend with and, most often, overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers proving their ability to survive and, thus, offering hope for a better future. Looking at Chesnutt's African American child characters as symbols of the child-archetype exposes us to the obvious differences between them and the Jungian prototype who, though encumbered in a number of ways, is not burdened by the same impediments and does not carry the same psychic scars as the slave child-archetype. But the importance of looking at Chesnutt's child characters through the bifocal lens of the child-archetype and literature is valuable. Alice Byrnes explains the potentially extensive influence of archetypal literature:

By bringing us into closer contact with the personal and collective unconscious, archetypal literature has the power to transform our own lives and the world around us. In particular, the archetype of the child invites each of us to a deeper union within ourselves and into closer communion with all people. (100)

Charles Chesnutt had a special mission as a turn-of-the-century African American author to fully engage white readers in the plight of blacks in the Jim Crow era. The portrayal of his child-characters must certainly have brought sympathetic white readers into closer communion with their African American compatriots.

Notes

1. See John Ashworth, Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic: Volume I, Commerce and Compromise, 1820-1850 (England: Cambridge UP, 1995), esp. 174-184, for insight into the abolitionist argument concerning slavery's wholly detrimental influence on both black and white nuclear families, which they argued was the very essence of every society.

2. Take, for example, The Marrow of Tradition (1901), Chesnutt's fictionalization of the historical circumstances surrounding the Wilmington, North Carolina, riot of 1898 during which several African Americans were killed. The reception of the novel was lukewarm at best. White critics faulted the uncompromising treatment of the subject of white oppression of blacks in the novel: William Dean Howells, influential editor of the Atlantic Monthly, who had for years staunchly supported Chesnutt's fiction, commented on the novel's "bitterness" while an anonymous reviewer termed it "remarkably vindictive" in its "unfair" portrayal of whites' abuses of blacks (Chesnutt, To Be an Author, n. 172 and 174-175). There was no mention of the novel's historically accurate portrayal of events that took place during the riot, and no one mentions the tragic, untimely death of the baby of Dr. Miller and his wife, Janet, the black protagonists of the novel: the baby was the victim of a white rioter's stray bullet. One can only imagine the repercussions the reverse portrayal might have caused, but a fair indicator might be noted in the fallout following the publication of Thomas Dixon's plantation novel, The Clansman (1902), in which a black man causes the death of a white girl. The novel was especially inflammatory in its film version, The

Birth of a Nation (1915), which elicited race riots in every city in which it debuted.

3. Interesting in relation to the reception reviews of Marrow is Joseph McElrath and Robert Leitz's response to "The Sheriff's Children": it is, they argue, "straightforwardly didactic and coldly accusatory in its portrayal of the victimized mulatto," Tom (Chesnutt, To Be an Author, n. 21-22). In a letter to Albion Tourgee, after "Sheriff's" was accepted for publication, Chesnutt himself called the work a "Southern story dealing with a tragic incident, not of slavery exactly, but showing the fruits of slavery." He adds, "[W]hile [the story] has a moral, I tried to write as an artist and not as a preacher" (Chesnutt, To Be an Author, 44). Obviously, some of Chesnutt's critics continue to disagree with the author himself on his tone and intentions, perhaps because critics persist in minimizing the importance of his insights within the context of his writing.

4. Since Chesnutt was an ardent historian and was himself a teacher in North Carolina from 1874-1883, the exposition of "The Bouquet" seems an interesting source of explanation of the South's general disposition toward white teachers of black students around the time of the story. It also offers insight into the position of blacks on educating their own children. In part, it states:

Public opinion [of white Southerners] . . . did not oppose Miss Myrover's teaching colored children; in fact, all the colored public schools in town . . . were taught by white teachers, and had been so taught since the State had undertaken to provide free public instruction for children within its boundaries. . . . The colored people of the town had for some time been agitating their right to teach their own schools, but as yet the claim had not been conceded. (238)

5. See Ralph J. Hallman's "The Archetypes in Peter Pan" for a more "conventional" reading of the Jungian child-archetypes, especially in relation to the eternal child, in literature.

6. For an historical account of the lengths to which slave children would go to attain literacy, see Wilma King, Stolen Childhood, especially 67-90. King's account includes a discussion of Frederick Douglass's unquenchable thirst for literacy and knowledge.

7. Alice Byrnes, The Child: An Archetypal Symbol, esp. 21-22, discusses the universality of Dickens's A Christmas Carol in relation to its them of the "saintly child who comes into the life of a disgruntled adult and, as a result of their relationship, the adult experiences a regeneration" (21). Byrnes continues, citing the example of a Jewish editor of the novel stating that his orthodox Jewish grandfather read the story to his family every Christmas. Byrnes adds that in the novel Tiny Tim serves as the child-archetype savior to Ebenezer Scrooge, and that Dickens "gave special prominence to the words of Jesus, 'Whosoever shall receive one such little child in me name receiveth me'" (22). The same sentiments are implied in "The Bouquet."

8. Plato's Phaedrus, the source of the theory of blackness to which Chesnutt refers, portrays a dark horse, one of the three divisions of the soul, describing it negatively, both physically and temperamentally, with a short neck, flat-face, snub nose and a propensity to pride, insolence, and recalcitrance (as opposed to the white horse that is honorable, modest, temperate and, thus, easily guided). Rena Walden is the antithesis of Plato's theory of blackness, as Chesnutt clearly points out. See Henry Louis Gates, in The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), esp. 237, for a discussion of more recent black authors, such as Ishmael Reed and Ralph Ellison, troping Plato's theory, turning black into a positive--presence--instead of a negative--absence.

9. Chesnutt does not delineate the mulatto, Jefferson Wain, as a positive character, it is important to note. While Wain does not betray Rena, *per se*, his intentions toward her are less than noble. He tries in vain to seduce Rena, and, prior to Tryon's renewed interest in her, Wain has frightened Rena to the point of avoiding him at any cost, including moving in with a trustworthy family and never walking home alone.

His intentions on the day that both he and Tryon attempt to accost Rena in the forest are not honorable.

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