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Peter Taylor

- 1 *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899)¹ was Charles W. Chesnutt's (1858-1932) second collection of stories. The tales in this volume are desperately concerned with the homage Americans paid to racial boundaries after the Civil War and how those apparent retreats compromised advances won through the defeat of the Confederate army. Chesnutt's boyhood was marked by the passage of a 13th Amendment to the Constitution that officially ended slavery, a 14th Amendment giving black men the right to vote, and a 15th Amendment making African Americans citizens of the United States. Signs of hope were clearly in evidence, but Chesnutt's early life was also scarred by poll taxes, grandfather clauses, literacy tests at the ballot box, and, most notably, Jim Crow. Where racial progress had been codified into law, racial disunion in the fabric of daily life threatened to extinguish embers of hope for racial integration. The eighth story in Chesnutt's second volume, "The Bouquet," explores racial segregation with a stark view of its emotional impact on blacks and whites on the heels of Reconstruction.
- 2 In "The Bouquet" a young woman of aristocratic pedigree bows to financial exigencies by assuming a teaching post at a school for colored children; her family's fortune has been lost in the war along with her father, brother, and fiancée. An affectionate relationship blooms between the teacher, her pet spaniel, Prince, and one of her colored students, Sophy Tucker. Teacher and pupil exchange favors and good will within a racially conscious community most acutely represented by the teacher's disapproving mother, Mrs. Myrover. Sophy fondly commits herself to a routine of bringing her teacher a bouquet of fresh flowers and does so for more than a year, but her routine is interrupted when the teacher contracts an unnamed illness and swiftly dies. Recalling Miss Myrover's erstwhile wish to be buried with roses "planted at my head and at my feet," (276) Sophy determines to deliver a final bouquet to her teacher, but her mournful efforts are thwarted by racial hostility, including an official "Notice. This cemetery is for white people only. Others please keep out" (287). Forced to mourn

her teacher from a distance, Sophy turns to the canine Prince, who, taking the flowers into his mouth, deposits the bouquet on the grave of his master as Sophy looks on from a distance.

- 3 Like other stories in the collection, "The Bouquet" is a parable, a warning against the evolution of irrational impulses into law and social custom. Chesnutt--the teacher turned lawyer turned writer--was consumed with the ability and limits of the law to enable social justice. It was a theme he would return to repeatedly in his fiction, most notably in his novel of Reconstructionist Southern life, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901). Turning on relationships and personal agency, "The Bouquet" is a story of the undue power of the past and public to intrude on the present and personal.
- 4 The story commences with reaction to Miss Myrover's decision to teach in a colored school: friends are surprised that she would deign to take such work. All of the town's schools are taught by white teachers, but never before had anyone approaching her "quality" taken to the task. Miss Myrover's bloodline marked her as one of "the aristocracy of the old régime" (270), but her decision to teach signaled a future where labor would come to be regarded as honorable and men and women would learn to "depend, for their place in society, upon themselves rather than upon their ancestors" (270). A new set of values was fast approaching, but they had not yet taken hold, and old visions were applied to an evolving world, with ill effects. For some years after the war, Mary Myrover and her mother had been able to "hold up their heads without embarrassment" (272) but their fiction of means collapses for all to see when Mary, finding the various fields of employment occupied by more skilled and experienced professionals, halfheartedly turns to the classroom. Teaching was a "doubtful experiment" and, in her mind, hardly a choice profession, but it was "the best that could be done" (272) without a further loss of caste and reputation. The loss is most acutely felt by Mary's willful, invalid mother.
- 5 With her husband and son lost in the war, Mrs. Myrover is not entirely without sympathy, but her loss has left her embittered, and she has chosen to console herself with memories of the old order. The one time matriarch disapproves of Mary's teaching and fails to see the purpose of educating black children as "it will only make them unfit for work" (272). Her objection, however, is not absolute; the family needs income and she recognizes that this need must trump her racist impulse. Mary, more practical and progressive, casts the prospective position to her mother (and to herself) as a "business arrangement," (273) one that will involve no closer contact than she and her mother currently have with their servants. But the schoolroom proves an edifying experience for all concerned, and Mary is surprised by the rapport that develops between herself, the colored students, and one in particular. That Sophy Tucker would emerge as a favorite pupil is contrary to conventional wisdom. She is dark skinned, poor, and though she worked hard at her lessons, Sophy is not the brightest of Miss Myrover's pupils. Still, her devotion to "Miss Ma'y" warms the teacher's heart and summons "some of the feudal condescension of the mistress toward the slave" (277).
- 6 Mary Myrover does not share her mother's racial hostility, but her egalitarian impulse is not altogether unqualified. Her view of black students, and presumably all black people, has been seriously compromised by a racist past not easily exorcised. Her time and interactions at work generated natural affection for her pupils, but "she *could* not be seen with them in public" (italics mine, 278). If she happened on one or more of them outside of school, "they did not expect her to speak to them, unless she happened

to be alone and no other white person was in sight" (278). Mary was not socialized to speak to blacks in public, "and she *could* not act differently from other people" (italics mine, 278). Mary, of course, could acknowledge her students in public, but to do so would earn the backlash of public rebuke, and this she is not prepared to suffer. This unwillingness to defy convention, to break artificial rules was, in Chesnutt's view, the bane of the nation. He would thematize this failure in each story in *The Wife of His Youth* and in virtually all of his fiction. In his mind, the break with racist traditions was a challenge that could be met ("The Wife of His Youth") or lost with tragic ("The Sheriff's Children") or potentially tragic consequences ("Her Virginia Mammy"). That he would return to this theme of confronting the past in order to reconcile or overcome it so often during his literary career underscored his belief that the nation's course was still undecided. It was not clear when, or if, America would lay to rest the ghosts of racial bigotry that haunted blacks and whites throughout his life. Mary Myrover, herself, is haunted by a fear of public opinion, both on the street and in her own home. When her favorite pupil offers to carry a parcel of books for "Miss Ma'y" at the conclusion of a busy day, the latter readily accepts, but Sophy must follow with the burden of books in hand "at a respectful distance" (279). Upon arriving at the Myrover home, the books are delivered at the doorstep. Sophy is not invited in, "for Miss Myrover was white and Sophy was black, which they both understood perfectly well" (278). The impact of these slights on Sophy's young constitution is unreported, but she cannot fail to hear the elder Myrover's complaint not to "let those little darkey's follow you to the house. I don't want them in the yard. I should think you'd have enough of them all day" (279). Mary, mindful of her mother's nervous condition, and perhaps assuming that her view of the world is in its twilight, acquiesces. Her failure to confront the racist worldview of her mother is ironic in the aftermath of a war in which so many Americans lost their lives confronting the same bigotry.

- 7 African Americans were not necessarily the primary victims of the damage realized in these moments of failure. Like the slave authors before him, Chesnutt was as concerned with the moral degradation of the white American as he was with black victimization. The problem of the color line was invariably linked to problems between and within white ethnic groups (Render 14). Weighing the prospect of authorship in 1880, Chesnutt confided to his journal that "the object of my writing would not be so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites" (Brodhead 139). Indeed, Chesnutt's mission was a conscious response to a body of literary and cultural rhetoric focused on black misery and subjugation at the expense of white moral devolution. The psychology of racial division evident in "The Bouquet" points to the wholesale failure of a generation to repudiate the corrupt beliefs of their progenitors. Mary "was a woman of sentiment and capable of deep feeling" (278), but the stories in *The Wife of His Youth* expose feeling as a mockery if it fails to yield action. Her good will aside, Mary Myrover is not willing to subject herself to the practical consequences of her emotions. The dissonance between Mary's belief and Mary's behavior may have been lost on her young charges, but it was not lost on Chesnutt's immediate audience, many of whom identified with Mary's cowardice and in so doing felt complicit in the social ruin. If the teacher was a contradictory model for her students, she was an incriminating one for readers, and all hope for recovery is lost when her agency is suddenly, finally, extinguished.
- 8 In this story, Chesnutt deploys one of his favorite devices. The reader has been baited to identify with Mary. She is young, once upon a time well to do, willing to work,

sympathetic, and not obviously racist. She is loved by friends, family, Prince, and her pupils. A seemingly perfect proxy, she invites emotional investment, but identification with Mary leads to a dead end. In one sentence, she is eliminated, the identification severed. We are in immediate need of a new anchor, but to whom should we turn? Mrs. Myrover? No. She is old, embittered, shortsighted, and selfish—hardly a fitting repository for the reader's sympathy. Mary's friends? No. They are part of an anonymous judgmental public and therefore share responsibility for Mary's (and our) emotional disquiet. The colored students? No. They, too, are an anonymous collective and appear deprived of agency by virtue of their youth, inexperience, and lack of cultural capital. The spaniel, Prince? No. The only viable candidate is Sophy Tucker. The bait and switch from Mary to Sophy, from white to black, was neither simplistic nor automatic in 1899, but the reader has been studiously prepared for this shift of sympathies. Sophy's ignorance and dialect accent her innocence; she is young, vulnerable, sensitive. Her commitment to bring Miss Myrover roses "off'n my own bush" and saving them all for the teacher by refusing to "let nobody e'se pull 'em" (280) suggests sincere devotion, a kind of sacrifice, which society is inclined to regard as laudable. Miss Myrover, herself, is particularly fond of Sophy, identifying her as "a very good girl" (280). The two had developed genuine affection for one another though their feelings had been muted and without witness. Sophy's emotion (now our emotion) inspires determined action. She will deliver a final bouquet to her beloved teacher. This is, by any measure, a commendable aim. It will honor Miss Myrover, fulfill her erstwhile wish, and assuage, in small measure, Sophy's grief. But this simple, wholesome gesture quickly morphs into a major project.

- 9 The day of the funeral finds Sophy washing her face, combing her hair, and donning her best dress. She arranges a final bouquet plucked from her rosebush and heads for the Myrover home, but Mrs. Myrover's racial hostility is un-mediated by grief, and she will admit no colored person to pay respects to her daughter. Further, she "don't want one of them at the funeral or anywhere around" (282). The service, held at St. Paul's Episcopal church, likewise bars black mourners, but from a window aside the church, Sophy spies the proceedings with her bouquet at the ready. The scene is tearfully touching and marked by an abundance of flowers. Sophy's bouquet seems superfluous but also, somehow, necessary. Beneath the coffin sits Prince. He has followed the gathering to the church and slipped in unnoticed. Planted at the foot of Mary's coffin, no one has the "heart" to remove him. Sophy stares longingly from without. In this scene, Chesnutt makes explicit the absurd effect of racial segregation. The affection of live human beings in mourning is explicitly excluded even as a dog and a corpse are afforded a sacred place in the house of worship.
- 10 Surreptitiously, Sophy follows the funeral procession at what the narrator this time terms "a proper and respectful distance." (287) Throughout "The Bouquet" the narrative voice has been oddly schizophrenic, oscillating between conservative and egalitarian postures. Here, the contradiction becomes impossible to ignore. The distance, for Sophy, is neither proper nor respectful. She desperately wants to be with her teacher, to mourn in the company of others who share her sense of loss. The characterization of her distance from the cortège is obviously the reflection of another's disposition. But precisely whose sentiments does it reflect? Certainly not Miss Myrover's. She would welcome the respect and solicitude of her students, particularly Sophy's. Nor does the characterization reflect the will of the elder Myrover. We know that, in her mind, no distance between Mary and black students

could be great enough. Some members of the public knew Mary was loved by her pupils and expressed disapproval of their exclusion from the proceedings. Their sentiments are likewise unaccounted for. The sense of "a proper and respectful distance" is attributed, and attributable, to no one in particular. A vague, almost anonymous, culture of racism pervades the world of "The Bouquet." The culture is quiet but it is also measured. It is not, for example, the extreme worldview Mrs. Myrover would impose. It is nevertheless characterized by an emotional inertia, grounded in the ante-bellum era, that retards the racial progress ostensibly assured by the Civil War. The telling of the story, its focus on sentiment, its use of education as a tool for self-improvement, the bait and switch--all betray a progressive agenda even as the narrative plays hostage to a wounded culture slow to eschew the standards of an earlier generation. Mary, and to a lesser degree Sophy, exhibits an internalized *culture* (not merely an attitude) of racism which inhibits her behavior in public and threatens to trap her in the past even as she looks to the future. The struggle between past and future, between public and private, between external and internal is manifest in the texture of the narrative itself. The story's apparent schizophrenia represents a bow to the very grain against which it is written. "The Bouquet" unsettles precisely because it openly reflects the ambivalence of its audience. Before this tension reaches a climax it is diffused (deferred?) with the death of Mary Myrover. The teacher's death leaves the contest between past and future unsettled, but for Chesnutt's immediate audience the contest was still ongoing and very near its climax. Viewed in this context, "The Bouquet" is a catalyst; it modifies and increases the rate of "reaction" without being consumed or rendered conspicuous in the process.

- 11 As the funeral procession moves from the church to the cemetery, Sophy follows so far behind the mourners that no one notices "the little black girl with the bunch of yellow flowers" (287), yet Sophy cannot afford to be similarly oblivious. At the cemetery gate, she observes a politely worded "*Notice*" barring her entry. The sign carries the force of law and cannot be flouted without serious consequence, but the message of the sign intimates an even greater offense than its crafters explicitly intended. The "*Notice*" effectively codifies the tension between past and future by projecting the legal, yet morally bankrupt, values of a past and present life into a future one for both the living and the dead. That is to say, the sign presumes to hold the future hostage to the past. This is, arguably, characteristic of most public notices that restrict or prohibit behavior. The innocuous "Do Not Walk On The Grass" comes to mind, but the daring and desperation of a "*Notice*" which marks a cemetery as "for white people only" is betrayed by its effort to resurrect and inscribe a set of values which had been previously defeated by force of arms and explicitly rejected by federal law.
- 12 Sophy's concerns are decidedly more immediate. Her bouquet is still undelivered, and Miss Myrover is now beyond her reach. Following a brief shell game with the departing mourners, so as to avoid their notice, she returns to the cemetery gate. Her flowers have become somewhat wilted. (Already? If one is inclined to miss metaphors, Chesnutt will not allow it.) But a solution to her design suggests itself in the form of the high minded Prince, who answers her call at the gate and deposits the bouquet onto the grave of his master.
- 13 The conclusion of "The Bouquet" is more disturbing than satisfying, provoking, as it does, a sense of waste and irrevocable loss. The delivery of flowers is, at best, a qualified success, one eclipsed by an overwhelming sense of desolation and futility. Her mission

accomplished, Sophy moves to return to the habits of daily life, where she will find the racial animus of agents like the elder Myrover and similar "Notices" from anonymous authorities dictating black exclusion. Surrounded by racist ideological structures and handicapped by an internalized culture of racism, she will see little prospect for change and find few escapes from an oppressive racist society. A return to normalcy is a return to a social landscape marked by stark inequality and scant hope for a better future. A bleak enough message, to be sure, but perhaps a necessary one for a population all but resigned to the status quo. The bait and switch has served Chesnutt's purpose well. The close of the story signals the end of our attachment to Sophy, but the consistent, and therefore meaningful, element in the switch is the reader. It is we who are left to face the challenge and opportunity of a fractured social landscape. The end of war, Chesnutt seems to admonish, is not the end of conflict. Sometimes the child must be willing to confront the parent; the present must be willing to confront the past. That the primary figures in the story--Mary, Mrs. Myrover, and Sophy--are all female affirms that conflict, agency, and moral responsibility are not limited to men or the public sphere. Because the action, or inaction, of women has the potential to uplift or ruin it is as consequential and morally charged as the actions traditionally associated with male conflict.

- 14 In the last paragraph of the story, we read that Sophy gazed at Prince with "with a feeling very much like envy" (290) before turning to move slowly away. The pathetic irony of a canine with access and privileges above those of a human being aside, the revelation of this emotion underscores Sophy as a literary and cultural type. For William Andrews, she is a "diminutive personification of the Afro-American as devoted, patient, long-suffering, and wholly self-forgetful" (Wonham 122). I propose an alternate emphasis. Sophy's two-dimensional rendering is self evident, but, it seems to me, negligible in as much as the story is not about her emotions but our own. We are certainly baited to identify with Sophy, but the material switch in the story is between Miss Myrover and the reader. Young, industrious, sympathetic, egalitarian--these are traits with which we identify (or want to). Through the death of Mary Myrover a baton is proffered. To accept the baton, to prove worthy of this identification--to the world and to ourselves--demands that we succeed where Miss Myrover failed. Here Chesnutt called his readers to act on the "deep feeling" with which they identified. It was a high calling in 1899, but the author well knew that the emotional upheaval and moral evolution initiated by Civil War would never be fully realized without it.

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NOTES

1. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of The Color Line*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994. Parenthetical references are for this edition.
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ABSTRACTS

Le présent article étudie « The Bouquet » (1899) de Charles W. Chesnutt. L'intrigue de cette nouvelle repose sur un processus, auquel Chesnutt a souvent eu recours, ici appelé « bait and switch »: le lecteur est porté par l'auteur à sympathiser avec un personnage noir qui, soudain, meurt; Dans le contexte de l'époque, ce processus crée une « complicité raciale » entre l'aimable noir de l'histoire, et le lecteur, blanc et potentiellement raciste. Le présent article étudie la manière dont ce processus favorise, chez le lecteur, une réflexion sur la ségrégation.

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Peter Taylor has published essays on William & Ellen Craft, Claude McKay, and Herman Melville. He holds a B.A. from the University of Maryland, an M.A. from Georgetown University, and a Ph.D. from Brandeis. He has held teaching appointments at Brandeis University, Virginia Tech, and Santa Clara University; he currently teaches English at Barry University and lives in Ft. Lauderdale Florida.