

# Love, Sex and Racism in Charles Chesnutt's Selected Narratives

Madhab Prasad Dahal, PhD

Department of English, Institute of Engineering, Pulchowk Campus, Tribhuvan University, Lalitpur, Nepal

---

**Article History:** Received 1 June 2024 ; Reviewed 20 June 2024 ; Revised 20 Aug. 2024 ; Accepted 27 Sept. 2024.

---

## Abstract

*The light-skinned mulattoes in the slavery era in the US employed various techniques of masking their personalities to revolt against the racist society. Besides gaining freedom, masking had a psychological reason related to sexuality which played a vital role by influencing people to fall in love or hate with each other. This study explores some psychological factors that inspired African Americans to mask their identity in Charles Waddell Chesnutt's two stories: *The Wife of His Youth* (1898), and *The House behind the Cedars* (1900). Based on the two stories, the article shows how some white and black members of the post-Civil War period were subservient to their libidinal desires. It uses the Freudian model that unfolds repressed desires revealed on the surface in different forms like dreams and speeches, Stephen W. Simpson's and Bert Olivier's insight on the need for adjustment between sexuality and civilization. It makes a thematic analysis of these narratives by employing a psychoanalytical perspective. The finding of the paper unfolds that besides the Negro slaves' longing for emancipation from slavery, masking had a physical reason related to sexuality. It affirms that their libidinal desires were responsible for leading them to work against their legacy. This study contributes in the field of scholarship by introducing a new parameter of interpretation.*

**Keywords:** Hegemony, latent, manifest, masking, psychology, racism, slavery

## Introduction

The white hegemonic culture had deprived the Negro slaves from their minimal individual rights in the slavery era (17th, 18th and 19th centuries). It was very difficult to live a life of a black in the racist society dominated by the whites. During the slavery era, enslaved individuals employed various tactics to outsmart their masters and safeguard themselves from physical harms. Chesnutt's stories deal with what and how they do so. They adopted clever tactics, narratives, wits and many other ways of fighting against their hard times like hunger or financial crisis. They challenged institutional racism indirectly through music (Arthur 259). Besides avoiding physical punishment from their masters, they thought of different techniques for gaining freedom. One of the techniques was masking. They masked to hide their real identity as blacks. Those who were light-skinned mulattoes, also hid their origin to avoid racial discrimination and harassment. Charles Chesnutt's stories depict darker aspects of lives in the color line. One reason to hide their identity was for the right to live a life free from discrimination. It was for living a respectable life. Besides this obvious reason, there was also

a latent sexual desire or Eros influencing them to mask. The mulattoes (persons of mixed black and white ancestry) who were not the born-slaves also masked their parental heritage. They did this for living a plentiful and respectable life and to avoid racial biasness. Together, the role of Eros influenced them to adopt different strategies. In many of Chesnutt's stories, there are a series of surprising activities of the protagonists who behave under the influence of Eros. "The Wife of His Youth" is a story of a light-skinned mulatto whose acts are typically influenced by the physical drive and lead him to work against the principle of Blue Vein Society. The next narrative "The House Behind the Cedars" is a story of John and Rena Walden, the light-skinned siblings who engage in masking to struggle against slavery. At the same time their movements are also for satisfying their physical drives.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Going through Charles Wendell Chesnutt's narratives mentioned above, I came to know that during the 17th and 18th centuries, African American slaves worked mainly in the US farming as plantation workers on tobacco farms, rice, sugarcane and cotton plantations. Blacks also significantly contributed to the development in terms of enriching folklore, music, dance, food and culture. The white businessmen earned great fortunes through the trade of these enslaved laborers. However, these people were never granted equality, freedom and respect as US citizens. The Negro slaves were sold like cattle and the mulattoes were also harassed, marginalized and discriminated if their ancestral line was revealed. Many researchers have paid attention to how the white masters treated those slaves. I noticed that adequate attention has not been paid to how physical drives of both white masters and Negro slaves motivated them exploit strategies to fight against themselves and slavery. So, this study explores the latent desires of some major characters who work under the influence of Eros.

This study concentrates on answering the following research questions:

1. What is the real conflict between the African Americans and the whites?
2. Why do the African Americans struggle against the whites?
3. How is their struggle reflected in the afore-mentioned narratives?

### **Objective of the study**

This research aims:

1. To identify the real conflict between the whites and the African Americans.
2. To examine the reasons why the African Americans revolt against the whites.
3. To analyze the strategies that the African Americans exploit to fight against the white hegemony in the afore-mentioned narratives.

### **Research Methodology**

Though this research does not neatly fit with the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy, it has employed some parameters of qualitative research design which gains an understanding of a particular issue based on a focused and in-depth analysis of data. It falls under the paradigm of hermeneutic research that exploits interpretive and argumentative modes. It is more subjective rather than being objective, more descriptive rather than numerical. It is a discursive analysis which takes the primary texts as primary data and the scholarly articles related to the issue

raised as secondary data. It employs the interpretative technique to analyze the data.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This research focuses on the psychological causes of the confession of love and the use of resistance rhetoric that African American slaves exploited to fight against racism. It is limited to Charles Chesnutt's two texts: *The Wife of His Youth* (1889) and *The House behind the Cedars* (1900).

### **Significance of the Study**

The study introduces a new parameter of literary interpretation. It sheds light on the way that African American slaves faced oppression during the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It adds a new hermeneutic tool in literary studies.

### **Theoretical Parameter**

This study develops its theoretical insights from the ideas envisioned by Stephen W. Simpson, Bert Olivier and relevant critics' ideas on sexuality. It makes a thematic analysis of the narratives by using African American perspective.

### **Literature Review**

Being the popular texts of Chesnutt, the above-mentioned narratives have gained a good deal of critical and scholarly reviews from different critics. This paper observes some relevant critics who have expressed their views in the similar or nearby context of this project. This study reviews what these critics have said; then, it seeks a suitable point of departure from the opinions given and sets its course to fill the gap.

Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth* has been variously interpreted by different scholars. William L. Andrews writes that this story is unprecedented. Chesnutt "broke the ice in the American fiction of manners" (13). Like the other Blue Veins, Ryder has idealized whiteness and dreams of becoming white (14). Andrews looks at Ryder's activities as the idealization of white color. He accepts the supremacy of white color over black. Dean McWilliams questions whether Ryder really is Sam Taylor. He is surprised by Liza's description of Ryder's drawing room at the beginning of the story and feels that it does not look like the plantation worker's room (113). Cynthia Wachtell takes this narrative as a social satire (162). She understands Ryder as a pretentious mixed-race American who always promotes the advancement of lighter-skinned people. For Ann duCille, the story questions the legality of marriage during enslavement. Ryder/Taylor's decision is about choosing to accept or negate "the old plantation past", or "between moral obligation and romantic desire" (16). In the same context, Tess Chakkalal questions if the reader should be certain that he is Sam Taylor, has he made the "right" decision. There is an uncomfortable tension in his attempt to abandon the past and racial definitions in order to move into the future (54).

Like *The Wife of His Youth*, Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* has also received abundant critical gazes from different scholars. Melissa Ryan thinks it as a love story in which the fundamental conflict is between natural affection and unnatural law (38). As Rena's mother

Molly Walden is sick, she goes to see her. But she does not tell George, a wealthy white man who had proposed her to marry soon, about the secret of her ancestry. On knowing that Rena is from a black ancestry, George breaks his relationship with her. This is a major conflict in the narrative. Melissa Ryan has described Rena also as a tragic mulatto image to which Chesnutt uses as an anti-stereotype (54). Rena decides not to see George second time after he breaks up the relationship with her. His attempt to see her again is rejected. This shows she is an anti-racist image.

The literature reviews made above have interpreted Chesnutt's two stories from different perspectives. Some have interpreted them from gender perspective. Adequate attention has not been paid on how Eros influences white masters and some African American characters to go against their own ancestral practices. This research explores the role of Eros in the major characters of the stories under scrutiny.

### **Discussion/ Textual Analysis**

This paper explores the role of sex in Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth* and *The House Behind the Cedars*. It first examines how the central characters of these narratives are under the influence of libidinal desire. *The Wife of His Youth* is about the race consciousness of mixed-race Americans. The story presents a light-skinned mulatto named Sam Taylor, later identified as Ryder, as a leading member of the Blue Veins Society, an organization of the colored people of both North and South. Its members are those who have gained a higher social-financial status and look more white than black. Ryder is a biracial American who has now gained a respectable social status. He plans to propose a light-skinned girl named Molly Dixon in the Blue Vein ball. But before he meets her, a dark-skinned lady named Liza Jane comes to ask him about her lost husband Sam Taylor whom she has not seen for more than 25 years. She reveals the fact that though Sam was a born free mulatto, his family had tried to sell him in a slave market. She had assisted him to escape. At that time, Sam had promised to free her from slavery but had not returned so far. Ryder tells her that her husband Sam might have either died or married another woman. He also reminds her that marriage before the Civil War had not been made legal. As Liza is about to leave, she shows an old image of her husband to Ryder. Later in the ball, Ryder gives a speech and talks about Liza's story to ask the attendees whether her husband Sam should accept her as his wife now. Everyone, present in the ball, says 'yes'. So, at the end of the ball, Ryder introduces Liza as the wife of his youth.

The story communicates a racial theme in which the characters are in a quest for identity and struggle for more meaningful life, however, it can be seen that their movements are typically influenced by Eros. Their physical drives inspire them to move here and there. The establishment of Blue Vein Society itself can be said to have come into function due to a desire for higher social identity acceptable among the whites. The major character Mr. Ryder is always conscious of his increased social status and wants an upward mobility by marrying a light-skinned woman Molly Dixon. Stephen W. Simpson writes, "sexuality defines identity in direct and indirect ways. The direct ways are obvious: sexual orientation, gender, attraction, and sexual behaviors compose a substantial part of selfhood and relationships." (iii). As stated by Simpson here, Ryder had maintained his identity as a handsome man whose room was also

handsomely furnished, containing among other things a good library, especially rich in poetry, a piano, and some choice engravings. He shares his house with some young couple who look after his wants and are his company (Chesnutt 11). He plans to address the participants of the ball and propose Molly Dixon there. He had organized the ball only because he was guided by the romantic desire to unite with Molly Dixon. He wished that his ball must be worthy of the lady in whose honor it was to be given (Chesnutt 11). But a sudden and unexpected arrival of Liza Jane and his compulsion to accept her as the wife of his youth suppresses his sexual desire. He grapples with the quandary of endorsing the Blue Vein Society or embracing his own cultural heritage. Though his desire to get a lighter-skinned woman Molly Dixon is challenged by the sudden appearance of Liza Jane, he accepts Jane as his wife because of her attractive dark-skin that had already lured him. Freudian model of psychoanalysis unfolds that the repressed desires are revealed on the surface in different forms like dreams and speeches. Sigmund Freud contends that there is always a conflict between Eros (love, specifically erotic love) and the interests of society, or civilization (55). It means that he noted a tension between the libidinal or sexual needs of the individual and society's requirements for survival to which he called the principle of necessity. Mr. Ryder shows his repressed desire for Liza Jane forgetting his own struggle against the white. Had he not been attracted by the physical beauty of Jane, he would not have accepted her at the ball in front of so many participants. Simpson remarks that sexuality is so powerful its meaning and influence run deep and wide. Sexuality can be a source of pleasure because of its potent physiology (iii). This temptation of erotic bliss forces Ryder to accept Liza.

Liza Jane, despite being separated with her husband Sam for 25 years, tirelessly searched for him believing that he would still accept her. She had a faith that she reunites with Sam. It was certainly a true example of unconditional love. However, had her physical desire not pushed her, she would have been content with a life without husband. She finally encounters her husband under the influence of Eros.

*The House Behind the Cedars* is about how the two mixed-race children who struggle in the white society in America after the Civil War is over. John Warwick, the elder brother, to hide his ancestry, leaves Patesville, his birthplace, for South Carolina at the age of 15 to become a lawyer. He studies law under the mentorship of Judge Straight. At 18, he acquires desired success in his profession. It is possible because he lives there as white (John Warwick) and he is safe from the worst imaginable discovery about his black heritage there. Rena Walden, his sister, also leaves her mother Molly Walden to escape possible racial segregation in Patesville. A wealthy lawyer falls in love with her and proposes her to marry him before he comes to know about her connection with black ancestry.

The narrative shows that race relations between the whites and the blacks are still strained even after the Civil War. The blacks, though free after the War, still address the whites as master. And the whites still regard the blacks as subordinate. Gorge's decision to quit his relationship with Rena after he discovers her black ancestry is an example of how racism exists in the white people's minds. Upon knowing her true identity, George says that she was worse than dead to him; for if he had seen her lying in her shroud before him, he could at least have cherished



her memory; now, even this consolation was denied him (Chesnutt 98). He clarifies that he could tolerate any of her flaws, no matter even it is illegitimate birth, except race. He cannot accept any connection with black heritage. Through this racial relation, it is obvious that the ability to mask as white person is for avoiding racial segregation and achieving success in life. John becomes successful by concealing his identity. His fair skin makes it easier to become a prominent lawyer. In the same way, Rena also receives attention in the white society. Their education and intelligence matter less than color. Their mother who is a mulatto still suffers due to her dark skin. In this context, John and Rena mask their personality to adjust themselves in the white society.

There are several episodes in the novel that they reflect the erotic pursuit of the protagonists and several other characters. Eros, according to Raphael Demos, is the principle of relationship (337). Gerasimos Santas claims that it desires only beauty or beautiful things (69). And the lover of good things wants that the good should solely be his/her possession. The male characters, in *The House behind the Cedars*, are influenced by female body and the females by male bodies. From the beginning, the novel focuses on Rena's body. Rena Warwick is romantically pursued by an African American named Frank Griffith though she ignores it and leaves her mom and birth place for South Carolina. A nostalgic-looking young man named Dr. Green, a male Patesville white supremacist, makes a lazy tour of Patesville and encounters Rena, admires her beauty regardless of her social or racial status, and then continuously follows her through streets. His movements can be said to have been influenced by Eros rather than rationality. Not only Dr. Green, even John was attracted by Rena's beauty, though he could not explicitly reveal it to her. He had suppressed his feelings because they were born from the same parents. He always admired her beauty, gracefulness, intelligence, and her resemblance to their mother. He was worried to leave her when he decided to leave Patesville to pursue his career. This can be found in Melissa Ryan's lines thus:

The opening lines engage the readers in erotic pursuit: led by John, we follow a beautiful female body through the town . . . John's initial status as a putatively white male- "the gentleman from South Carolina"- is solidifies by the way he looks this woman (who will turn out to be Rena). As he walked along behind her at a measured distance, he could not help noting the details that made up this pleasing impression, for his mind was singularly alive to beauty, in whatever embodiment. Protected by that measured distance, from emotional investment he takes impersonal pleasure in the body, whose angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence. (41)

Outwardly, John had guardian's feeling towards Rena. He wanted her to find a good and suitable husband from the community. At the same time, he also wanted her to stay closer to him, be it in the name of his babysitter or any other form. He enjoyed her company. As said by Bert Olivier, in the light of Freud's claim, there is a tension between Eros and the interests of civilization (which requires repression), it is argued that, today, one witnesses a peculiar instantiation of this tension, namely the conflict between Eros as prerequisite for life to exist (41). Both John and Dr. Green move here and there to adjust their life in the tension between Eros and life.

In the episode when Rena participates in the tournament, George Tryon's appraising gaze

to her body is an example of his erotic pursuit. He was captivated by her beauty and grace when he first saw her at the hotel in Patesville. He described her as “the most beautiful woman he had ever seen” and “a vision of loveliness” (Chesnutt 30). He knew nothing about her personality, background and ancestry except her brother John. He did not bother to learn more about her family, her history, or her opinions. He only wanted to possess her and make her his wife. This is an expel of how Eros was influencing him. Influenced by his Eros, he immediately invites her to the ball and proposes her without detailing discovering her familial statue and race. He was obsessed with her physical appearance and praised her for having white features and light skin. He did not appreciate her intelligence, her kindness, or her courage. He also had a racist and sexist attitude towards women of color, whom he considered inferior and unworthy of respect.

He abandoned her when he discovered that she had some African ancestry and that she was John’s sister. He felt betrayed, disgusted, and angry. He did not care about her love, her suffering, or her dignity. He only cared about his reputation, his pride, and his prejudice. He bothered no more to understand and forgive her for the predicament she was experiencing, to facilitate her financially or emotionally. This justifies his physical drive was more dominant than any other force.

Though Rena’s attraction to George Tyro was more social one, she was enchanted by his physical looks. She was lured by his handsome appearance, delicacies and manners. She was impressed by his gentle voice too. She also felt a thrill of excitement when he kissed her and proposed to her. She quickly believed that he would love her always at all costs and make her happy forever. She wanted to erase her past and her racial identity, and to enjoy the privileges and pleasures of the white society. She thought that marrying Tryon would secure her position and protect her from any suspicion or discovery. Therefore, she is bewildered by the muscular man dressed as knight to participate in the competition. She immediately accepts his proposal without knowing his inner principles and assumptions. Her achievement is ironically her downfall (Ryan 49). She becomes the envy of all men when she captures Tryon’s attention. She also becomes the object of exchange between men. In spite of her masking of her race, she terribly suffers from sexist racism. Her sexual urge and the plan to secretly marry George without letting him know about her mulatto origin fails before she accomplishes it. She finally returns to Patesville to satisfy her urge with Frank though she confesses she is too miserable then (Chesnutt 3). These episodes are the evidences that the reason behind Rena’s and John’s struggle against white hegemony is both for gaining a decent status quo in the white society on the surface and for addressing their physical drives.

## **Finding**

The study finds out that the real conflict between the African American slaves and the White masters is based on the desire to perpetuate the institution of slavery and a desire to come out of it. The African Americans struggle against Whites to establish their respectful identity in the White society. Their repressed physical drives inspire them to mask their personalities. And the given narratives unfold the hardship faced by them and their struggle to end racism.

## Conclusion

The narratives reflect a painful experiences of Slavery era. When the mulattoes were in tension between masking their identity or embracing their cultural heritage. They masked their identity for ensuring equality in the land they were born and raised. On the other hand, their physical urge forced them to work against their own rationality. Not only the mulattoes, the white people who had a typical hatred towards black ancestry and feared that their blood might be polluted by the entanglement with the black, also acted against their own legacy under the influence of Eros. *The Wife of His Youth* and *The House behind the Cedars* show the struggle of mulattoes for respectful identity in the American land. The narrative focuses on the physical drives of both the white masters and the Negros. They depict masking as their desire for freedom on the manifest level but together the vital energy that always inspires these characters to function all the time is their latent physical drive. Had their sexual drives not forced them to move ahead, Liza Jane would not have been searching for Sam for 25 years, Ryder would not have organized a ball in the Blue Vein Society. Both John and Dr. Green would not have moved here and there to adjust their life. Freudian model of the workings of repressed unconscious self is found to be working actively in the above mentioned major characters. The inner drive for sexuality takes the plot development to the further climax. George's hatred to black ancestry and his decision to break up relation with Rena do not justify that his final attempt to see Rena were the acts of human compassion. They were rather influenced by erotic impulses.

## Works Cited

- Andrews, William L. *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980.
- Arthur C. Jones. "The Foundational Influence of Spirituals in African-American Culture: A Psychological Perspective." *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2004, pp. 251-60. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4145493>. Accessed 6 Sept. 2023.
- Chakkalakal, Tess. "Wedded to the Color Line: Charles Chesnutt's Stories of Segregation." *Representing Segregation: Toward an Aesthetics of Living Jim Crow, and Other Forms of Racial Division*, edited by Brian Norman and Piper Kendrix Williams, State U of New York P, 2010, p. 54.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. *The House Behind the Cedars*. Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1900.
- .... *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line and Selected Essays*. Read How You Want, 2008. pp. 149-79.
- Demos, Raphael. "Eros." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 31, no. 13, 1934, pp. 337-45. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2016195>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2023.
- duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. Oxford UP, 1993, p. 16.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Translated by James Strachey, W.W. Norton, 1961.
- Gutzwiller, Kathryn. "Eros and Amor: Representations of Love in Greek Epigram and Latin Elegy." *Supplement*, no. 125, 2015, pp. 23-44. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44216707>. Accessed 6 Sept. 2023.



- Jane, Richard, editor. *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Routledge, 2013.
- McWilliams, Dean. *Charles W. Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race*. U of Georgia P, 2002, p. 113.
- Olivier, Bert. "Eros and Love; Eros and Life." *Journal of the South African Society for Greek Philosophy and the Humanities*, vol. 12, no.1, 2011, pp. 41-63.
- Ryan, Melissa. "Rena's Two Bodies: Gender and Whiteness in "The House behind the Cedar." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2011, pp. 38-54. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41203500>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2023.
- Santas, Gerasimos. "Plato's Theory of Eros in the Symposium: Abstract." *Noûs*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1979, pp. 67-75. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2214796>. Accessed 1 Sept. 2023.
- Stephen, W. Simpson. "Introduction." *Eros and Psyche: Existential Perspective on Sexuality*, edited by Stephen W. Simpson, Melissa M. Racho, Brent Dean Robbins, and Louis Hoffman, University Professor Press, 2023.
- Wachtell, Cynthia. "The Wife of His Youth: A Trickster Tale." *Charles Chesnutt Reappraised: Essays on the First Major African American Fiction Writer*, edited by David Garrett Izzo and Maria Orban, McFarland, 2009, pp. 161-162.

