
Ryan Simmons. *Chesnutt and Realism: A Study of the Novels*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 198p.

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Ryan Simmons' *Chesnutt and Realism: A Study of the Novels* is a timely work that proposes a key paradigm shift in critical studies about Charles W. Chesnutt. Simmons argues that all too often Chesnutt is on the periphery of studies on realism when he should be considered as a major contributor to the genre, alongside William Dean Howells, Henry James, and others. Nonetheless, Simmons' goal is not to simply judge Chesnutt against canonical white authors. Rather, Simmons contends that criticism should recognize Chesnutt for his challenge to white readers to reconsider their racial politics and his life-long career goal to determine the best way to sway an often indifferent mainstream audience. For Simmons, labeling Chesnutt as a realist is not posthumous classification, but rather a recognition of how Chesnutt viewed himself as a writer.

Chesnutt and Realism combines criticism on Chesnutt's most famous works, such as *The House Behind the Cedars* and *The Marrow of Tradition*, with analysis on his unpublished and posthumously published novels. Simmons' study focuses only on novels, which he contends were Chesnutt's most successful realizations of realist techniques. Simmons begins with Chesnutt's undervalued novels of urban life in the North: *A Business Career*, *Evelyn's Husband* and *The Rainbow Chasers*. These novels, unlike Chesnutt's most famous works, focused on upper-class Northern whites, and issues of racial problems were conspicuously absent. Simmons argues that although these Northern novels were markedly different from their successors they served a key purpose in Chesnutt's development as a writer: they helped him hone his skills as a realist. Simmons insists that these works should not be dismissed as commercial flops that ignored racial politics and were unable to be published, but as the training ground for Chesnutt's later, more successful, ventures into realist fiction. Furthermore, Simmons provocatively contends that these novels do include racial issues through a covert subtext of miscegenation, which Chesnutt inserts so subtly that readers and critics alike have inadvertently overlooked them.

Simmons explores the "tragic mulatta" in the posthumously released novella *Mandy Oxendine* and *The House Behind the Cedars* and argues that while these texts may, on the surface, recycle the oft-told tragic nature of the mixed raced woman, they actually reveal a more complex negotiation about race, identity, and community. Characters in these texts upset rigid classifications of race and, for Chesnutt, the very possibility of the passing motif illustrates both "cultural fluidity" and the fragility of the foundations of race-based discrimination (78). Thus, these works are part of

Chesnutt's mission to have his readers recognize that while they cannot change the history of slavery and oppression, they do have the power to not let these circumstances overdetermine their society's future. While Simmons champions *Mandy Oxendine* and *The House Behind the Cedars* as complex renderings of race, he does, however, find fault with what he sees as Chesnutt's inability to forward solutions to the problems that he documents. This critique is a running commentary for Simmons and he cites it as one of Chesnutt's major critical shortcomings.

Simmons devotes an entire chapter to *The Marrow of Tradition*, where he argues that it is too simplistic to designate the novel as propaganda because that dismisses Chesnutt's narrative restraint in his retelling of the bloody 1898 Wilmington race riots. The novel reflects Chesnutt's persistent goal to undermine the "naturalness" of social practices such as racial discrimination and to jolt readers into antiracist action. Most important for Simmons is that *The Marrow of Tradition* was in many ways Chesnutt's test case for marrying race to a more explicitly realist novel than his previous efforts. Simmons sees this experiment continuing in *The Colonel's Dream*, which he argues deserves more the scant critical attention it has heretofore received. The novel marks a significant shift in Chesnutt's racial politics, whereby it seems he began to abandon his hope of morally revolutionizing whites, in favor of a dismantling the corrupt social system in the United States.

Chesnutt and Realism ends with a discussion of two unpublished novels, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C.* and *The Quarry*. Simmons masterfully uses these texts to argue that Chesnutt did indeed write significant racial novels in the wake of the commercial failure of *The Colonel's Dream*. Simmons links Chesnutt's evolving moral project in his writing to his engagement with the literary movements in Harlem Renaissance. When Chesnutt, like W.E.B. DuBois, admonished the new generation of writers to construct idealized black characters, he is not abandoning realism, argues Simmons. Instead, this reflects Chesnutt's technique of using the absurd and the unreal to denote the real. In illuminating the passing narrative in *Paul Marchand*, Simmons makes a provocative connection to Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, asserting that Chesnutt is more successful than Twain in asserting that identity is shaped by one's environment. Simmons convincingly asserts that even in the decline of his career, Chesnutt's novels had the power to highlight race as a social construction that had tangible and often destructive effects.

Simmons' text persuasively urges readers to reassess Chesnutt's placement in the canon of realist writers. While his work is not the first to call for Chesnutt's inclusion, it is significant in its attempt to address the fullness of Chesnutt's realist mechanics over time. Indeed, what is perhaps most useful about *Chesnutt and Realism* is Simmons' serious attention to the author's unpublished and under-regarded

works. In tracing the trajectory of Chesnutt's intellectual commitment to realism, Simmons underscores that Chesnutt did not seemingly desire realism's so-called detachment and objectivity and that the overriding question of Chesnutt's career was to discover whether realism was in fact the best literary mode to fight for social justice. Ultimately, Simmons asks us to reconsider Chesnutt's contribution to realism and recognize that he consistently contested reality and understood that the ability to understand different perspectives could inform one's moral power. *Chesnutt and Realism* may indeed fulfill Simmons' desire to advance deeper discussions of writers of color, such as Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and James Weldon Johnson, into criticism regarding realism. ✱