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"By the stroke of a pen": A brief look at writer's representations of race, injustice, and violence

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**“By The Stroke of a Pen”:
A Brief Look at Writer’s Representations of Race, Injustice, and Violence**

How inseparably the present is woven with the past, how certainly the future will be but the outcome of the present.

-Charles Chesnutt, The Marrow of Tradition

When studying American history, it is easy to dismiss racism as a thing of the past, something that we admit is still present but that we think must be better than it once was. Charles Chesnutt wrote The Marrow of Tradition over one hundred years ago, using the title itself to concentrate on how the very core of Southern Tradition is based on racism. Chesnutt would have been disappointed to see how far into the future this ideology extended, and that it would not be until the civil rights movement of the 1970’s that blacks and whites were granted equal treatment of the law. Even today, generations later, we still see the remains of racism.

Last year, a rally took place in Jena, Louisiana that was reminiscent of the civil rights movements of the past. People gathered, joining civil rights activists like Al Sharpton, to protest what they believed to be the unfair treatment of six black teenagers (referred to as the Jena Six), who beat a white classmate to unconsciousness. This incident was one of the race related fights that ensued when a black student sat underneath a schoolyard tree usually occupied by whites, prompting pranksters to hang three nooses from the tree the next day.

The image of nooses is especially terrifying because of the memories of lynching that it brings, and the main reason that I think the case in Jena troubled so many people. It shows that the memory is still very fresh in the minds of many Americans, and begs the question: is the mentality of racism just as present and the is the “marrow of tradition” the same today as it was in Chesnutt’s time?

By writing The Marrow of Tradition, Chesnutt obviously wanted to make his readers aware of this problem of racial violence, for the sake of the well being of himself and his race. But who were his readers? Chesnutt walked a fine line while trying to fight racism and appease his white audience at the same time. Ida B. Wells, one of Chesnutt's contemporaries, also fought by writing to a white audience, but her approach through her pamphlet, "A Red Record," is very different from Chesnutt's. By the end of this paper, I will make a jump through time to the present day, to show how the journalists have dealt with issues of race in relation to the Jena 6 story.

In these three approaches, I found an interesting evolution of strategies. Chesnutt's novel is written in a way that describes the events of the Wilmington Massacre as a person who was there would have experienced them, eliminating the facts, although his uneasiness in writing to a white audience is evident in the descriptions and actions of his characters. Ida B. Wells took an opposite approach in "A Red Record," published just six years prior to The Marrow of Tradition, placing all of the importance on facts. The modern day journalists reporting on the Jena Six story have eliminated all of Chesnutt and Wells' attempts at race politics – trying to not step on any white toes. Instead, they reduce the "characters" in this story of racial injustice to attackers and victims, and villains and heroes, emphasizing which players are white and which are black.

White readers of Chesnutt's time feared racial anger. Black characters that displayed anger would have been unacceptable for white readers, but no sort of action would have occurred in the plot of The Marrow of Tradition if all the black characters

had been outwardly ready to please, such as Jerry, or willing to peacefully compromise, like Miller. Marjorie George and Richard S. Pressman discuss two characters in the novel that display two kinds of racial anger: Josh Green, who displays anger through violence, and Janet Miller, who displays a quieter, more dignified anger. By the end of the novel, Janet's anger has been released in an emotional reunion with her half-sister, and Green's acts of violent resistance have resulted in his death (George 298-9). In this way, the threat of racial anger has been removed, leaving only the rational cooperation of the non-threatening Miller. The white readership can rejoice in the happy ending and the disappearance of angry black characters, but by this time, the events of Green's courageous death and the exposure of Janet's family background have already pulled at the reader's emotions, thereby leaving some part of Chesnut's intended message behind.

Jae H. Roe discusses the internal conflicts that appear in The Marrow of Tradition as a result of Chesnut's restraint as a writer. The number of black readers he could have realistically reached at this time would have been dimly small, but writing about race issues to a white audience presents its own problems. Roe argues that Chesnut felt the futility of his efforts, evidence of which can be seen in passages from the novel: "the habits and customs of a people were not to be changed in a day, nor by the stroke of a pen," (qtd. in Roe 8). He sees this as Miller questioning the power and effectiveness of writing; asking if it is even possible to change the minds of white readers through a novel (Roe 8).

Roe also argues that the struggles Chesnut experiences can be seen as they are reflected in the three most complex black characters in the novel: Dr. Miller, Josh Green, and Jerry. Miller may seem at first to be the character closest to the voice of the author

himself because as a light skinned, educated, black man, Miller physically resembles Chesnutt. However, Roe claims that based on Chesnutt's other writings in which he expresses his opposition to the ideals of Booker T. Washington's less severe treatment of white Southerners, Green represents what Chesnutt strives for but cannot achieve (Roe 8). Green is a strong man, both physically and in his ability to lead others, and he holds the courage to fight back against oppression. However, this creates problems in reaching a white audience because the nature of this character would not appeal to white readers (Roe 10). For this reason, there is Dr. Miller.

It is in Miller that we have a black character that a white audience can relate to; a man who is light skinned in appearance, speaks in a white dialect, and can in no way be seen as a threat. He represents the possibility of compromise between the races, which is seen towards the end of the novel, (although, by saving Dodie the son of the novel's central white character, whom Roe argues is the representation of Southern tradition, Miller is, symbolically, saving and prolonging the existence of that same tradition that Chesnutt is trying to criticize (Roe 8), but this ending must be present to provide for a sentimental resolution that a white audience would accept and appreciate). However, Miller also displays several unattractive characteristics such as cowardice and the willingness to repress memories of the horrors inflicted by the KKK – as seen in his conversations with Green – while Green is both courageous and willing to remember these injustices so that he has the strength to fight against them.

We see another side of Chesnutt through Jerry, who, like Miller, adopts survival strategies to live in white society. His aim is always to please white people, even if he privately criticizes them. Chesnutt says, "To Jerry, as to the white people themselves, the

white people were the public” (qtd. in Roe 9). Through his writing, Chesnutt must always keep in mind that to reach the white audience at all, he must keep them happy. And although he may not actually wish to be white, as Jerry does, he must act the part convincingly, for just as “to please the white folks was Jerry’s constant aim in life,” (Chesnutt, 244), Chesnutt must “please the white folks,” to maintain even the slightest hope that they would listen to what he has to say at all, and how does one criticize and please one’s audience?

Chesnutt tells his readers that, “...the records of the day are historical; they may be found in the newspapers of the following date, but they are more firmly engraved upon the hearts and memories of the people of Wellington” (Chesnutt 274-5). Roe points out that Chesnutt’s main strategy in tackling this re-telling of the Willmington Massacre is to evoke emotional response by “...ask(ing) his reader to imagine the ‘picture,’ to see the events through the eyes of the people in whose ‘hearts and memories’ the truth is ‘firmly engraved,’” rather than to lay out the details of the scene (Roe 6). By doing this, the reader can more closely identify with the characters, no matter their race, and become emotionally involved with the story. It is not the actual events that Chesnutt is concerned with portraying, but the experience of the people.

In the conclusion of her pamphlet of statistics on lynching in the South, “A Red Record,” Ida B. Wells says, “The very frequent inquiry made after my lectures by interested friends is, ‘What can I do to help the cause?’ The answer always is, ‘Tell the world the facts,’” (Wells 101), and tell the facts she certainly does. Wells elicits an

emotional response from readers of “A Red Record” in a different way: by bombarding them with statistics.

In her introduction, Wells states, “These pages are written in no spirit of vindictiveness, for all those who give the subject consideration must concede that far too serious is the condition of that civilized government in which the spirit of unrestrained outlawry constantly increases in violence, and casts its blight over a continually growing area of territory,” (Wells, 15). To reach a white audience, Wells had to be careful to not make villains out of the white race in general, (although she often portrays white Southern men somewhat villainously). She also had to make sure that her argument was sound, and not powered by any kind of “vindictiveness.” Like Chesnutt, she was aware that a white audience, even one who strongly opposes racial violence, fears an angry black person. SEE HUSBAND’S NOTE

Wells acknowledges this strategy in the chapter that suggests actions that can be taken to against lynch law. She directly speaks to the reader, telling him/her to spread the facts contained in the book and to “let the facts speak for themselves, with you as a medium,” in order to change the minds of the people with her words.

Well’s main argument in this publication is that although Southern men justify lynching as a means of protecting white womanhood, the underlying reasons for racial violence is the fear that black people will overtake the whites economically. She proves their hypocrisy by listing not only incidents of lynching, but also incidents when white men raped black women and received little to no punishment (Wells 68-70). SEE HUSBAND’S NOTE

Keeping in mind that her audience is white, Wells makes sure to tell her readers why they should care about lynch law, reminding her readers that the actions of the people who practice lynch law in the South are reflected on all white Americans and that these actions directly oppose the very American ideal of “equality before the law.” “Think and act on independent lines in this behalf,” she tells her readers, “remembering that after all, it is the white man’s civilization and the white man’s government which are on trial.” In this way, Wells calls on her white readership to not only be aware of and fight against the injustices to blacks in the South, but also to work to defend the image of all white Americans as people who love justice and equality.

Although there are a variety of angles on the Jena 6 story in the media, the mainstream press seems to lean towards looking at the Jena 6 as victims.¹ An August 2007 article from the *Washington Post* begins by mentioning the “Jim Crow-like hangman’s nooses,” that are alleged to be the start of the infamous fight, evoking the disturbing images of race-related lynchings that haunt the South’s past. The writer talks of the “town’s deep racial divide” and how “(r)ace fights roiled the town for days” after the nooses were hung from the schoolyard tree. He makes a point to say that Justin Barker, the white teenager who was beaten, “suffered no life-threatening injuries,” and although he was knocked unconscious, he was able to walk out of the hospital after two hours of treatment and attend a class ring ceremony later that night. The writer also points out that Mychal Bell, the first of the Six to be tried, had been convicted by and all white

¹ In this essay, I highlight only two articles for the sake of closely analyzing the language. The articles are taken from the *Washington Post* for the reason that it seemed to have more extensive coverage than others, however I believe that these articles provide a fair representation of the views of other mainstream media outlets.

jury (Fears). All of this language convinces the reader of the racist nature of the town, and characterizes the black students as victims and the white student as one of the town's racists, and even as a sneaky or conniving person, as he had convinced the court that he had been badly beaten to the point of near death, even though he was able to attend a school event hours later.

The article goes on with a laundry list of recent cases in which white and black criminals were sentenced differently in courts all over the Southern United States, and it quotes people who believe that there is a problem with how the justice system deals with people of different races. A small quote from a white Jena resident, saying that the white people of Jena are no longer as racist as they once were, is a somewhat grudging compliance to the other side of the argument; the opinions of the black residents that take up the majority of the story, and say that race relations are still a major problem. The story wraps up with another reminder of the tree strung with nooses, and a statement from a student who remembers District Attorney Reed Walters, who came to the school to break up the "scuffles," telling some black students, "I can make your life go away with the stroke of a pen" (Fears). The article acknowledges that Walters denies saying this, but the quote is nevertheless chilling and is effective in demonizing Walters, whether he said these words or not.

The article goes further to portray white residents of Jena as villains and black residents as innocent victims through descriptions of fighting that followed the appearance of nooses: one of the Six, Robert Bailey, claimed that a white man broke a beer bottle over his head after jumping him at a party, where investigation did not occur until months later. The white man was charged with simple battery and given probation. Later, a white

teenager who had also attacked Bailey earlier aimed an unloaded shotgun at Bailey and his friends. When Bailey took away the gun and refused to give it back, he was charged with stealing the gun (Fears). By making a point to specify that these fights were between white and black people, and that in both of these incidents, the white people were “armed” attackers, the author indicates that it must be assumed that the violence was related to race and that the people who both initiated the fight and held the upper hand were white.

It takes little effort to recognize the Six as victims when the white residents are seen as villains, but the author goes further to assert their innocence by specifying that none of the Six had prior criminal records. The description of Bell after his charges were reduced (he still “faces up to 22 years in prison”), evoke a great sense of pity for the boy: ““Can they really do this to me?”” Bell asked recently, sitting in his jail cell looking frightened and numb” (Fears). It would be almost impossible to picture this terrified teenager in the role of anything but innocent victim.

The story ends with a quote from Bailey’s mother, “It’s always been about race in Jena...It’s just gotten to a point that people were ready to stand up and fight” (Fears). Since Bailey has already been set up as an innocent victim, the reader is ready to feel sympathy for his mother as well. As a victim herself, readers would trust her statement that Jena is a racist town. Her quote also gives the image that her son and the rest of the Six are fighters against racism, and that they have made a conscious decision to be the heroes of the black community, giving further call for readers to rally behind them.

A later article in the *Washington Post*, reporting on the rallies that took place to protest what participants believed to be unfair sentences for the Six based on race,

reiterates the story of the nooses and beaten white teenager who was able to leave the hospital within hours. Also reiterated are claims about whether or not Jena is a racist town. A former Jena High School student remembered frequent fights between white and black students, and said, “It’s always been a racist town. It’s just never been this blatant before”(Whorisky). Quotes from two white men counter these views, closing with, “...they don’t know us. We really ain’t that way” (Whorisky). Although the article shows the opposing side, the author makes sure to point out that the people who claim that Jena is not racist are white. Further, the fact that the man quoted uses the word “ain’t” gives the impression of a stereotypical white southern racist. Since the student who claimed that racism is present in the community used standard English, the reader will tend to believe this statement before the one made by the man speaking in southern dialect.

Like Chesnutt, the writers of these articles create broad stereotypes out of many of the “characters.” Through the quote from the man who says “We really ain’t that way,” for instance, the writer has created a character comparable to Chesnutt’s Captain McBaine, the son of a slave overseer who has recently come into money and believes strongly in white supremacy. In the white boy who was beaten, there are similarities to Tom Delamere, a sneaky and untrustworthy white young man who literally gets away with murder on his good looks and wealthy background.

Charles Chesnutt, Ida B. Wells, and the journalists reporting on the Jena story all shared the same goal: achieving equality under the law for people of all races and eliminating race related violence. The fact that it is still a hot issue and that there are still those writing about it is proof that racism is more deeply rooted in the “marrow of

tradition” of our country than even Chesnut predicted. We have seen here three very different strategies that writers have used to oppose racial violence and discrimination, but which approach is most effective—“Let(ting) the facts speak for themselves,” or telling the story as those who were there experienced it? What is the best way to both represent and speak to a white audience—writing to appease them but also admitting that “the habits and customs of a people were not to be changed in a day, nor by the stroke of a pen,” or creating broad stereotypes of white villains who can “make your life go away with the stroke of a pen.” Writers of this kind have been trying for over a century to put an end to racism, so perhaps the evidence that it still exists today is proof that the most effective approach has not yet been found.

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