

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tricia May Franks for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 3, 1996. Title: "'I Would Not Have Believed It--Even of a White Man': Critiquing Whiteness in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*."

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In their respective novels, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and *Passing* (1929), both Charles Chesnutt and Nella Larsen utilize racial passing, the process of a mixed-race individual living as "white," to explore the relations between black and white people during early-twentieth century America. This thesis specifically argues that Chesnutt and Larsen use passing to critique "whiteness." In other words, passing allows Chesnutt and Larsen to investigate, through their light-skinned female characters, the racial biases of the white worlds into which these near-white passers enter. Within this discussion of racial passing and whiteness, I also place the near-white female historically as a figure in American literature, tracing her beginnings as the "tragic mulatta" to her evolution as a strong and no longer "tragic" type. In short, this thesis provides a definition of whiteness and racial passing, offering an inter-related analysis of the changes and revisions of literature's tragic mulatta. This work, then, pulls together how racial passing and the ever-evolving tragic mulatta figure actually serve to critique the demands and bigotries of whiteness.

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"'I Wouldn't Have Believed It--Even of a
White Man'": Critiquing Whiteness in
Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*
and Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Tricia May Franks, Author

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When I began to work on this project, I envisioned myself as an isolated figure, reading through notes and writing numerous drafts alone; in my mind's eye, I was much like the "Lone Ranger," but without any "Tontos." Yet, as I enter into the closing stages of this piece, I admit the sheer naiveté of this vision, for numerous people have contributed in immeasurable ways to the production of my thesis. First, I wish to thank my committee members, particularly Dr. Michele Birnbaum and Dr. David Robinson for their continued professional and personal support throughout the long and sometimes painful writing process. Even from a distance of three hundred miles, Dr. Birnbaum dedicated herself to my project, giving me hours of her own time to guide my writing; she showed me that teaching can be at once a demanding and kind act. I also want to thank my writing group, Charlotte Hogg, Ron Scott, and Sue Vega-Peters, for gently pointing out my writerly faults and making me laugh at the same time; they made me feel like a writer. Last, thanks are due to my encouraging family Arnold, Susan, and Kim Franks, and my patient friends, Shauna Gow, Billy Hasbrook, and Heather Elden Hill, for sticking by me all these years and believing in me as a person and writer.

T.M.F.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father and my mother, who have willingly sacrificed in order to make my education possible. And, to Billy, who gives me best and most of all, laughter.

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**"'I Would Not Have Believed It--Even of a
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**I.
Constructions of Whiteness**

In Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Rena Walden warns the novel's readers that black people are not wanted or welcome within strictly white worlds. Rena, a mixed-race individual who attempts to pass for white, exclaims that she thought her fiancé "'loved me, and he left me without a word, and with a look told me how he hated and despised me. I would not have believed it--even of a white man'" (120). That is, Rena's white fiancé, Mr. George Tryon, now abhors her presence simply because he has learned of her "blackness"; his callousness surprises even Rena, whose comment suggests she is not naive to white men's crimes in general. Pained by George's dismissal of her, Rena cannot understand "it." How can the man who claimed to love and want her reject her on the basis of race alone? Hence, George's immediate snubbing of Rena suggests the absolute worst about the white man: even his love does not supersede issues of race, for his affection is conditional upon the "purity" of his beloved's racial ancestry. Similarly, in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), the reader sees Clare Kendry Bellew, also near-white and a racial passer, rejected by her white aunts for the stroke of the "tar brush" (Larsen 159) upon her. In this novel, too, even intimate relations do not provide a shelter from ostracism and betrayal. In both texts, then, Rena's and Clare's closest relations rebuff them because they are not totally and completely "white."

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This essay explores passing in the context of such interpersonal exchanges, exchanges which foreground in particular "race" as an issue of whiteness as well as blackness. Specifically, why is it that Rena's and Clare's supposed loved ones reject them in the name of "whiteness"? Shelley Fisher Fishkin asserts that "whiteness" is an "imaginary construct. . .where power and privilege converge and conspire to sabotage ideals of justice, equality, and democracy" (430).¹ In other words, "whiteness" is not a tangible designation; it is a fiction--a constructed category--created and carefully tended. According to Fishkin, this color construction undermines steps toward racial equality and harmony between blacks and whites because privilege and control is enjoyed mainly by whites alone. In addition, Fishkin quotes the *Race Traitor* (1993), in suggesting that "'The white race is a club, which enrolls certain people at birth, without their consent, and brings them up according to its rules'" (446). That is, a person who is born white enters, without hesitation, into a privileged "whiteness," adopting (for the most part) its inherent economic and social advantages. The white individual also embraces the "rules" of whiteness, including the unspoken rule that intermarriage or intimate relations between black and white is prohibited and "unnatural," as is the case in these two texts. Finally, this sort of bizarre rule-making connects to the *Race Traitor's* motto, "'Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity'" (qtd. in Fishkin 446), which implies that a breaking of these so-called "rules"--those characteristic of white "clubs"--would be beneficial to all men and women, whether white or black.

Yet, if Fishkin suggests whiteness is an exclusive "club" of sorts, Toni Morrison notes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* that whiteness, in its very conception, cannot exist without a darker backdrop.² From Morrison's viewpoint, literary texts, especially those within the American canon, historically have employed a black presence to construct systems of "otherness." Specifically, authors use black characters to "establish difference" (48) between the white self and the Other. What results from this construction are two distinct and separate race identities based on the affirmation and enhancement of the white characters' whiteness; the dark Other is frequently employed as a point of comparison for the white race. Thus, black characters and their inclusion in literary works provide a way for whites to define themselves--self-definitions dependent upon a complementary blackness, or what Morrison and others have called the "Africanist presence" (5).

II.

A History of the Tragic Mulatta and Racial Passing

This interdependence becomes clearest, perhaps, in narratives of racial passing. What, though, does it actually mean to pass oneself for white? What is it that this action entails; what is it that the passer must do? And what are the consequences of passing?

Some critical accounts define passing as an attempt by pale mulattos who appear more white than black to transgress racial boundaries, particularly those which limited blacks both economically and socially during nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. For example, in *New People*, Joel Williamson includes the non-fictional account of Alex Manley, a man who in 1898 crossed over the race line in order to secure a job: He "allowed himself to be taken as white, found permanent employment, and even joined the all white union" (102). Moreover, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, detailing more recent accounts of passing in *the sweeter the juice* (1994), remembers that "a friend of my family who used to be black moved to neighboring Hamden and is now white" (34) in order to improve her economic circumstances. If successful, then, passers, like Alex Manley and Haizlip's acquaintance, are able to present themselves as white and live freely among white communities. They become, for all means and purposes, "white" and given access to a white person's advantages--benefits which include the ability to prosper within one's social class, moving to wealthier all-white areas, and to succeed financially.

The earliest accounts of passing, however, document the passer's desire not so much for material comfort and social acceptance, but for

actual physical survival. In fact, the first illustrations of this practice are located within the slave narratives, such as William and Ellen Craft's *Running A Thousand Miles For Freedom* (1853). In this instance of passing, a black William and the near-white Ellen, both slaves, are determined to liberate themselves from the "wretched system of American slavery" (Craft 285). In order to escape, Ellen disguises herself and "passes" for William's white male master so that they can travel by train to the free Northern city of Philadelphia from the slave-holding state of Georgia.³ The Craft's scheme ends successfully; William recalls that "my master--or rather my wife, who had from the commencement of the journey borne up in a manner that much surprised us both, grasped me by the hand, and said, 'Thank God, William, we are safe!'" (314). Hence, William and Ellen's victorious escape from slavery, using the "passing" disguise of white master and black slave, illustrates how this practice could aid the subordinated and oppressed Other to triumph over the racial prejudices inflicted upon them. In other words, passing helped victimized black slaves to survive in a race-prejudiced world.

Passing of any kind was obviously easiest for light-skinned blacks, and thus narratives of passing frequently feature as a staple of abolitionist fiction the "tragic mulatta." Judith Berzon effectively sketches this fictive creature as the "almost-white character whose beauty [is] forever in conflict with the savage primitivism inherited from her Negro ancestors" (100). She is characteristically torn apart by her mixed racial heritage, and attempts to pass in order to resolve her inner confusion about who she is: white or black? Upon passing, the tragic mulatta usually suffers a tragic demise or ending: "Death

through grief, murder, childbirth, abortion, and insanity" (Berzon 102). This description makes clear, then, that the tragic mulatta's passing is enabled not only by her near-white skin but also by her "beauty," which allows her to transcend the "unattractive" and "savage" physical markings of her blackness. Nevertheless, the physically stunning and Caucasian-featured tragic mulatta, especially the tragic mulatta who passes, is doomed in most fiction to a tortured life, where she strives unsuccessfully to solidify her identity.

Both black and white authors alike integrated these tragic mulattas--characters which are, as Berzon puts it, "creatures in a half-world, belonging to neither to one race or the other"--within their nineteenth-century accounts of race.⁴ However, critics have noted that the creators of these literary mulattas were motivated by different purposes, depending on the authors' racial experiences. For example, the tragic mulattas were typically used by white abolitionist writers as a source of white identification with blacks (some, however, did use the image to separate themselves from their near-white "sisters"). In these anti-slavery works, the white, usually female, author's strategy was to align herself with the tragic mulatta, producing a sort of mutual relatedness between herself and this tormented mixed soul. Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes that the mulatta was particularly useful to abolitionist writers because "in being part white and black [she] simultaneously embodies self and other" (42). The mixed-blood tragic mulatta rejected the notion that blacks were not "human" like whites, for she was at once black and at once white. Therefore, how could whites reject this near-white creation, when her biological make-up included a part of them, the so-called "superior" race? Sanchez-Eppler

also suggests that the popularity of the tragic mulatta figure can be attributed to white women's political unrest as a subordinated group within a white male-dominated society. The tragic mulatta, particularly if she is enslaved, "represents the woman's oppression [in general] and so grants the white woman an access to political discourse" (31). In other words, the tragic mulatta permits white women a way to criticize their own oppression as females. Accordingly, Barbara Christian stresses that it is important to recognize that the "mulatt[a] woman rather than the man is the one more often chosen in literature to project this argument. . .to pose the existence of a mulatto slave man who embodies the qualities of the master is so great a threat, so dangerous an idea, even in fiction, that it is seldom tried" (Black Feminist Criticism 4). That is, white female authors rely mainly on the female version of this trope because it allows them to intimately associate themselves with this near-white being--maybe she can be as good as us--without upsetting white masculinity. Specifically, Christian suggests that white men are "dangerous" as a group and should not be compared to black males or confronted with the idea of sameness amongst people, especially any commonalities between whites and blacks.

Black authors too, as I have indicated, invoke the tragic mulatta for reasons of their own, often to reaffirm that the black female is as beautiful and chaste as a white woman, if not more so. For example, William Wells Brown, the first black male to pen a novel, centers his work, *Clotel* (1850), upon this literary archetype. His work tells of "the beautiful white slave victimized by the institution of slavery, which makes her the property of her white aristocratic sweetheart" (Yellin 172), whom she cannot marry. At the story's end, *Clotel*, to

save herself from slavery, jumps to her death from a bridge. Christian comments that "Brown plays upon Clotel's beauty [and religious piety] so heavily that we cannot help but remember the assertions of so many whites, from the time of Jefferson through the mid-nineteenth century, that blacks were inferior" beings (Black Women Novelists 23). So, unlike white-authored texts which attempted, through the tragic mulatta, to present the "you can be as good as us" argument, black authors such as Brown tried to dispel the myth altogether that blacks were unequal and inferior to whites. Or, as Christian puts it, "writers like William Wells Brown present near-white females who say, 'See, I can be. . .even better than you by your very own standard'" (Black Feminist Criticism 4).

In early twentieth-century fiction, however, the tragic mulatta stops serving as a racial index to the merits of whiteness; she no longer functions as a problematic symbol of sisterhood or a defense mechanism to race prejudice. Instead, the mixed-race individual becomes symbolic of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "double consciousness" (1013). That is, in these fictions, the mulatta/os undergo a heightened and sometimes conflicted sense of looking at themselves not just through "white" eyes, but by their physical link to both races. For example, in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1927), the unnamed protagonist/narrator experiences a confused sense of allegiance to two disparate races--"'Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger. . . .Well, mother, am I white?'" (17-18). This inner conflict follows him through his childhood and causes him, as an adult man, to pass and consciously align himself with whites. But Johnson's protagonist fluctuates between his "black" self and his "white" self.

At one instant this mulatto is proud of his blackness--"for days I could talk of nothing else with my mother except my ambitions to be a great man, a great coloured man" (46). And in the next moment Johnson's narrator renounces his blackness in order to avoid racial oppression and enjoy the economic and social fruits of whiteness--"it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead" (190). Thus, Johnson's protagonist's confused state of race allegiance mimics the tragic mulatta's in one respect, for he belongs to neither blacks nor whites; Johnson's narrator is stuck somewhere in the unwelcoming middle. Consequently, though Johnson's protagonist finally critiques the economic justification for passing in the novel's end--"I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (211)--the main dilemma tormenting this racial passer is his "two-ness," his conflicted sense of himself as a mixed race being (Du Bois 1013).⁵

Charles Chesnutt and Nella Larsen borrow from and revise this literary history, particularly the abolitionist fictions and early-twentieth century texts, in *The House Behind the Cedars* and *Passing*. Specifically, these two authors present their readers with women characters, Chesnutt's Rena Walden and Larsen's Clare Kendry Bellew, who appear to be tragic mulattas because they use their near-white skins and physical beauty to pass for white, subsequently enjoying economic and social advantages. But unlike other "tragic mulattas" and Johnson's protagonist, Rena and Clare do not pass either for survival or to "know" their lost white selves. Rather, Chesnutt and Larsen manipulate and "redo" the tragic mulatta type, engaging their mulattas in passing, in order to critique whiteness. Passing is not, then, just about

"rejection of black culture" (6) as Berzon suggests, or about "winning acceptance in the white world" (100) as Williamson intimates. Instead, this practice, according to Chesnutt's and Larsen's texts, also exposes the "colour" biases and prejudices of the white worlds into which near-whites pass.

In short, both novels manipulate racial passing for a new and different purpose, actually adding a "twist" of sorts to past authors' and their characters' traditional uses of it for survival (as in the slave narratives), for a renewed sense of identity (as in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*), or for individual opportunity or gain alone. That is, while Rena Walden and Clare Kendry Bellew do pass in order to better their lives, Chesnutt and Larsen use their passings in order to interrogate the white side of the color line. These representations of passing reveal how this "hazardous business" (Larsen 157) of becoming white can situate passers in positions of insight into white racism and bigotries. Hence, in the course of their respective investigations, Chesnutt and Larsen turn passing on its head, effectively evoking it as a means to examine whiteness. Passing thus becomes, in both novels, a way to critique whiteness during what Nella Larsen calls "this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly" (157).

III.
Cruel Loyalties: The Demands of Whiteness

"I will write for a high holy purpose. . .
 not so much [for] the elevation of colored
 people as the elevation of whites."⁶

Set in Patesville, North Carolina, *The House Behind the Cedars* tells the story of Rena Walden, daughter of the black Mis' Molly and sister to the near-white John Warwick, who returns to his family after several years away. During this momentous visit, John convinces Rena to join him within his white community where he lives a financially prosperous and respected life as a "white" man and lawyer. Rena agrees to John's proposal, and soon after meets and falls in love with the white George Tryon. By sheer coincidence, George discovers that Rena is a member of the "despised race" (112), and calls off their engagement. The rest of Chesnutt's story chronicles Rena's return to her "black" life (she no longer passes after George renounces his love for her) where her time is devoted to educating black children. Near the novel's close, George changes his mind and returns to reclaim Rena as his own, but she dies soon after from an attack of "brain fever" (183). Her family and friends open a window to free her "passing spirit" (195).

At the beginning of his text, Charles Chesnutt acknowledges the misguided but popular mid-nineteenth century notion that passing can provide self-assurance and social acceptance to the near-white, but nevertheless "black," individual. To Rena Walden, who transforms into the privileged Rowena Warwick while passing, the idea of being white is initially a favorable concept; she envisions everything white as

superior, and without question, better. For instance, when Rena's successfully passing brother, John, returns to his family home, the so-called House Behind the Cedars, for a secret visit with his black-skinned mother and light-colored sister, Rena notes:

How proud she would be, if she could but walk up the street with such a brother by her side! She could then hold up her head before all the world, oblivious to the glance of pity or contempt. . . . All sorts of vague dreams floated through [Rena's] mind during the last few hours, as to what the future might bring forth (13, 27).

On their face, these words seem to indicate the black character's desire, if not need, for whiteness. As Rena proclaims, passing permits the pale-skinned black an opportunity to feel a sense of pride when strolling the streets. It also allows the passer to escape looks of sympathy from white people who recognize the limitations that inflict the almost-white-skinned person's existence as well as envy from blacks who are not light enough to engage in--or to choose--passing. Moreover, the very thought of transgressing race barriers prompts Rena to fantasize about life as a white individual, a life she believes will offer her respect. From one perspective, then, *The House Behind the Cedars* appears to endorse racial passing as a vital means of race evasion and upward mobility, both economically and socially, for white-looking blacks. In fact, Arlene Elder suggests that Chesnutt "cannot help but understand and support John's and Rena's subterfuge [their passings], however futile, as the only possible way in which they can hope to combat the rigidity of southern traditions" ("The Hindered Hand" 177).

Like Rena, Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry Bellew in *Passing* also begins her life as a lower class black and is motivated to escape her

economically and socially repressive life. Clare particularly longs for this escape when her abusive father dies and she is sent to live with her three bigoted white aunts. In response to these circumstances, Clare runs away, passes for white, and marries the wealthy but racially prejudiced John Bellew. By sheer chance several years later, Clare finds herself dining at the same, whites-only restaurant with a black friend from her past, Irene Redfield, who is passing for convenience at the time. After this meeting, Clare decides that she cannot tolerate a life void of blackness--black friends, black gatherings, even "Negro laughter" (200). When John is away on business, Clare begins to spend her free time with Irene, embracing her rediscovered black lifestyle and ultimately wishing that John would find her out. During the final pages of *Passing*, Irene's resentment of Clare's intimacy with her own family and friends escalates into an intense hatred of her. While attending a "black" party with Irene and her husband, John rushes in and discovers that Clare is a "dirty nigger" (238). At that moment, Clare falls to her death from an open window--"one moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing. The next she was gone" (239).

A portion of Clare's experiences and comments before her death appear to present an argument for the benefits of becoming white. The near-white Clare Kendry, for example, readily admits that her passing initially supplied her with an immediate and easy avenue of escape from her past circumstances. Tormented by her separation from the black community and entry into her aunts' judgmental, white home, Clare candidly reveals her reason for passing to Irene, also a black woman of light complexion: "It, they [my aunts], made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a

charity or problem. . . .Then, too, I wanted things" (159). According to Clare, this practice offers the racially mixed person an opportunity to actively resist any sort of subordination or patronage as well as to improve her circumstances with possessions; Clare personally uses passing to find the material happiness and acceptance she lacks in her life. Jonathan Little notes that "Clare's background of grinding oppression and physical abuse shaped her decision to pass for white and improve her circumstances" (176). Hence, like Rena's fantasy of an economically and socially favorable white existence in *The House Behind the Cedars*, Passing too seems to recommend stepping across the great color divide into the "purity" of whiteness, a land where the reborn white can desire and have "things" typically not within a black person's reach. In a word, by becoming white, passers, such as Clare and Rena, gain the chance to prosper--to "improve [their] circumstances." And simultaneously, they evade that awful "it"--prejudice against blacks--that has limited their opportunities from birth.

But even though *The House Behind the Cedars* grants Rena the luxury of dreaming about the advantages of passing and the seemingly wonderful world of whiteness, the novel more importantly challenges the cruel loyalties that this very whiteness demands. Chesnutt uses John, who abandons his mother and sister for the "pleasures" of whiteness, in order to emphasize the tragic truth that is hidden beneath Rena's fantasy of white existence; John, without remorse, reveals this truth when he manipulates his mother, the dark-skinned Mis' Molly, into setting Rena free from her black life:

It's a pity that she [Rena] couldn't have a chance here--but how could she? As long as she has never known any better, she'll probably be satisfied as though she moved with the best in the land. . . .

I'll let you hear from us often, and no doubt you
 can see Rena now and then. But you must let her go,
 mother,--*it would be a sin against her to refuse.*
 (18-19 italics mine)

These lines indicate John's lack of compassion or sympathy for his black, ultimately abandoned, mother; he willingly and cunningly plays upon the emotions of Mis' Molly--"it's a pity that she couldn't have a chance here"--in order to secure Rena's passage into the very whiteness that turns its back on Mis' Molly. Also, John condescendingly assumes that Mis' Molly will be content with where she is in Patesville, without the company of her children. Thus, through John's carefully articulated plea, Chesnutt divulges both the unwelcoming rigidity of white America and one of the many harsh realities of passing: the passer must leave his or her loved ones behind, only to see them, as John so diplomatically articulates it, "now and then." Whiteness insists upon whiteness only, and risks leading to assimilation.

John's manipulative words also illustrate Chesnutt's use of satire in order to further his critical examination of whiteness. As Darryl Hattenhauer contends in his discussion of *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt "often satirizes much of the [white] ideolog[ies] that some blacks emulated" (33).⁷ For instance, Chesnutt laces John's words--"it would be a sin against her to refuse"--with satire in order to mock the white value system--the white-is-better ideology--for which John is speaking. Specifically, these words are satiric due to their exaggerated reference to biblical crime ("sin") if Mis' Molly were to deny John's request. Furthermore, Chesnutt engages a third-person narrator in his text that speaks not for him in the literal sense of the word, but as the voice which speaks of the narrow-mindedness of white society. For example, the narrator relates George Tryon's thoughts--his

immediate stereotype of blacks--when he discovers Rena's mixed heritage: "'With the *monkey-like* imitativeness of the negro she had copied the manners of white people while she lived among them'" (Chesnutt 150, *italics mine*). Accordingly, Hattenhauer suggests that Chesnutt himself is not the reaffirming voice of either his characters' words or his narrator's, both which, for the most part, favor white over black existence. Thus, the reader should be aware and suspicious of any seemingly unequivocal endorsement of whiteness in this novel; both satire and unreliable narration lurk within.

Larsen's readers must be alert as well to unreliable narration because like Chesnutt, Larsen also employs a myopic narrator, Irene Redfield, in order to unpack how whites (falsely) perceive those with black blood. Throughout the entire text, Irene drops bitter words about a "having" (153) and "catlike" (144) Clare that seem inconsistent with her other descriptions of Clare as an abused child and a displaced, lonely, adult woman. In fact, most critics agree that Irene's voice is a prime example of unreliable narration. In her discussion of *Passing*, Deborah E. McDowell claims Larsen's text is a "duplistic" analytical account of Clare's life and person, told through the "blurred" eyes of Irene (xxiv). David Blackmore stresses that "Irene is the classic unreliable narrator" (475). Jonathon Little notes that "we [as readers] only learn of Clare through Irene, whose increasingly paranoid and unreliable vision and projections cloud our access to all of the characters and action" (175). Finally, Claudia Tate states that "as the story unfolds, Irene becomes more and more impulsive, nervous and insecure, indeed irrational. She tends to jump to conclusions which discredit her credibility as a reliable source of information" (144

italics mine). Therefore, similar to Chesnutt, Larsen uses an untrustworthy voice as a way to indict and admonish, not endorse, the white ideologies her narrative voice appears to celebrate.

So, it follows then that Chesnutt, who uses satire as a vehicle for critical inspection, is not aligning himself with the white world, nor is he celebrating its race-prejudiced beliefs, when he allows Rena the luxury of feeling the advantages of her new-found whiteness while she passes--"here, for the first time in her life, she was mistress, and tasted the sweets of power" (43). In truth, Chesnutt uses this situation to challenge the transforming power of passing, of becoming both physically and psychologically white, in an exclusive and close-minded white world. Specifically, it is Rena's own professed discontent, while she poses as Rowena Warwick, that causes me to further question the benefits of passing, of selecting white over black in a society that for the most part views non-whites as "trifling niggers" (Chesnutt 73). For instance, Rena's desire to reap the rewards afforded by passing is in direct conflict with her reluctance to deny all her black relations: in spite of "the sweets of power," Rena "had suffered tortures of homesickness; those who have felt it know the pang. The severance of old ties had been abrupt and complete. . .there followed a dull pain, which gradually subsided into a resignation as profound, in its way, as had been her longing for home" (61). The above lines make evident that passing and its inherent demand on the passer to deny his/her black past complicates and spoils this practice of becoming white, and with it, the promise of social acceptance and economic prosperity; the lines remind Chesnutt's readers that passing does not provide its participants with the utopian state of existence described

earlier by Rena. Rena's "suffered tortures"--her nostalgic ache for the life she has abandoned--presents a side to passing that is far from joyful. Rena is revealed to be a woman unable to fully reconcile herself, at least mentally, to a life where white society views blacks (herself in actuality) as an "inferior and degraded" (71) people. Hence, it is not surprising that Rena's life is tainted by her inability to forget her black past and its "old ties."

In *Passing*, Clare also feels a similar "pang," as the reality of her "passing" situation begins to take its toll on her once-hopeful spirit, leading Larsen's readers to see the negative sides of the bigoted world that gives birth to this racial facade. Indeed, Larsen is clear about Clare's motivation for passing--monetary gain, security, and social acceptance--all things that she seems to enjoy in her life as a white woman. But Larsen takes her readers beyond motivation to consequences, revealing Clare's less-than-secure and less-than-blissful white life. Like Rena, who must leave and renounce her black past in order to achieve bonafide status as a white woman, Clare also must dismiss the life and people she once knew. And Clare's subsequent sense of alienation and dissatisfaction with this white life she has created for herself is revealed in her attempt to return to the black race. Desperate for black company again--of any social standing, from the bourgeois Irene to Irene's black maid--Clare appeals to Irene, who feels threatened by Clare's beauty and passion, by Clare's supposed sexually intimate relationship with Irene's own husband, and perhaps by her own personal "awakening sexual desire for Clare" (McDowell xxvi).⁸ Begging for Irene's understanding, Clare writes, "For I am lonely, so

lonely. . .cannot help longing to be with you again. . . .You can't know in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of" (145).

Admittedly, Clare's words seem melodramatic, but they are nonetheless evidence of Clare's yearning for black fellowship and proof that whiteness demands total race allegiance from its "pale"-skinned members. Unmoved and suspicious, Irene regards Clare's correspondence as merely a "passing" whim, commenting that she "found it hard to sympathize with this new tenderness, this avowed yearning of Clare's for 'my own people'" (182). Yet despite Irene's comments (which the reader has come to suspect), Clare's letter still confirms her unrest as a white woman, emphasizes her genuine solitude and "loneliness" as a passer, and declares her grave desire to restore her black identity. These words do not appear to be the concoction or fleeting whim of an insincere woman. Instead, Clare's note attests to her displacement--her feeling of otherness--as a member of the white race.

Judith Berzon addresses these feelings of pain and homesickness for female passers in particular, suggesting that "so long as their lives are based upon a lie, they cannot be free. Rather than achieving self-realization, passing has actually impeded self-development" (146).⁹ Concurring with Berzon, Vashti Crutcher Lewis notes that "women such as Clare Kendry [and I would suggest also Rena Walden], who were reared in poverty and choose to permanently pass for white to better their lives, find that no amount of money can substitute for the sense of community a black woman feels with her own race" (41). In other words, it is not unusual for women who pass, such as Rena and Clare, to later change their minds and want to stop passing when they recognize the

implications and totality of their lies. Rena's remorse over her sudden disassociation with her black mother and earlier life, in addition to Clare's letter to Irene, illustrate both of these women's understanding that her chosen lifestyle excludes her from a continuing, open relationship with the black community of her childhood and youth. Consequently, Rena's and Clare's passing(s) imprison them, according to Clare, in "pale li[ves]" when they yearn to live among the "bright pictures of that other," their own black people. In short, passing isolates the passer from her personal and racial history, leaving her stranded in a life without "color." But more importantly, Clare implies that this lack of color holds a certain vitality and human warmth that is missing in strictly white communities; Clare's words suggest that white societies are dispassionate and cold.

Chesnutt, in both his fiction and his private life, was concerned with how to biologically unify blacks with whites so that no person would have to experience the conflicting and painful emotions of a mixed-race experience, as both Rena and Clare do. Specifically, Chesnutt envisioned and mapped out a plan for future harmony between the races, campaigning throughout his lifetime for total racial amalgamation between blacks, whites, and "reds" (his term for those of Native American descent); he advocated a "mingling of the various racial varieties which make up the present population [1900] of the United States" ("The Future American" 97). Chesnutt's campaign situates itself primarily in his race-specific speeches and non-fictional writings but also plays a role in his fictional pieces, including *The House Behind the Cedars*. For example, while Chesnutt is sensitive to Rena's need to associate with "the bright pictures of that other," he also matches her

with the white George Tryon; this union would have fulfilled Chesnutt's dream of mixing the races, if only Tryon, a bigoted white man, could have accepted Rena's mixed ancestry. Chesnutt fully believed that racial discord could be remedied if skin color was no longer a factor. Hence, in his controversial article, "The Future American" (1900), aimed at social and racial reform, Chesnutt comments that if his plan were to succeed, "there would be no inferior race to domineer over; there would be no superior race to oppress those who differed from them in racial externals. The inevitable social struggle. . . would proceed along other lines than those of race".¹⁰ In other words, if all people shared the same hue, Chesnutt believed that oppression and subordination of humans would cease, or at least be displaced from race relations. Thus, his genetic schematic, his interest in interracial relations, celebrates a coming together of races and what Chesnutt hopes to be a resulting equality between all peoples.

Sallyann Ferguson misinterprets Chesnutt's call for color blending, however, claiming that his plan endorses the adoption of white values, and inevitably, prejudices. She states that "Chesnutt diagnoses blackness as a disease in need of [a biological] cure. His preferred remedy, however, is a pseudo-genetic scheme the implementation of which would infuse curative white blood into a socially dysfunctional race" ("Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans" 114). Yet, Chesnutt himself disproves such harsh criticism, declaring that "the outbreaks of race prejudice in recent years are the surest evidence of the Negro's progress. No effort is required to keep down a race which manifests no desire nor ability to rise. . . .The white race is still susceptible to some improvement" ("The Future American" 105, 107). That is, while

Ferguson believes that Chesnutt's plan celebrates white blood as a remedy for the "disease" of blackness, amid a "socially dysfunctional race," Chesnutt's words suggest something quite different. In fact, he acknowledges blacks as a capable body of people whose political progress and advancement have actually stirred prejudicial acts amongst white people; he is not suggesting that blacks are in any way a genetically inferior group. In fact, Chesnutt believes that whites are in fear of this dark race because they possess the political "ability to rise" and thus, white bigotry is born as a defense mechanism. Consequently, I maintain that Chesnutt's writings, both fictional and non-fictional, are not a reaffirmation of white superiority; his politically-focused articles, in addition to *The House Behind the Cedars*, advocate a mixing together of the races, not the assimilation of racial prejudices, as Ferguson indicates in her argument.

Harry Lupold, in a brief biography of Chesnutt's life, also challenges Ferguson's view of Chesnutt's amalgamation plan as it works within his various pieces; he, too, believes that Chesnutt's words do not celebrate whiteness, but instead indict white biases. Lupold writes that Chesnutt, in his desire to "elevate the whites" and do away with the "American racism [that] pervaded the nation so badly" decided to use fiction, such as *The House Behind the Cedars*, "to educate the whites to this scorn and social ostracism that were morally wrong" (4). As Lupold suggests, Chesnutt is not honoring whiteness but parodying and mocking its bigoted ways; he is, in fact, deliberately, but subtly, "educating" the whites. Arlene Elder also concurs with Lupold and myself that like many "slave narratives before him" which attempted to dispel racial prejudices, "Chesnutt [also] wished to educate whites, thereby freeing

blacks" from bigotries based upon a person's skin color ("The 'Hindered Hand'" 177, 151).¹¹

IV.
The Test of Marriage: White Husbands and Lovers

Chesnutt's and Larsen's respective critiques of whiteness are most sharp when dealing with intimate or familiar relations within the context of marriage. When Rena debates whether to inform her white fiancé, George Tryon, about her life in the *House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt includes Rena's inner conflict not so much as a lesson in the pitfalls of passing, but rather as an admonishment of the white world. Expressing her apprehensions aloud to both herself and to John, Rena asks and reflects, "Would [George] have loved me at all if he had known the story of my past? . . . I am afraid to marry him, without telling him. If he should find out afterwards, he might cast me off, or cease to love me. If he did not know it, he should be forever thinking of what he would do if he *should* find it out" (51, 53). Clearly, these emotional words reveal the mental haunting of the passing Rena, a woman whose life has seemingly triumphed above "pity," "contempt," and limitation due to her racial disguise, but who cannot, nevertheless, enter into a marriage without telling George about "it--the story of [her] past." Rena cannot rid her mind of this "it;" How would George react if he found "it out"? In fact, Rena cannot even name this "it," for the very idea itself--"I Rena am black"--is an unmentionable in her white world. Jay Delmar acknowledges that Chesnutt relies on passing as a device to show how such unmentionables would not be necessary in a world free of racial prejudice. Specifically, Delmar writes that Rena's decision to pass for white is prompted by the "stultifying influence of institutionalized [white] bigotry and prejudice which made the attempt

necessary in the first place" (99). In other words, Delmar suggests that Rena's fear of telling George indicates more about him than it does about her; his very whiteness and the "institutionalized bigotry and prejudice" that go along with it are the factors that cause Rena to pass and to live in a world of silent apprehensions. Consequently, Rena's indecision and her hesitancy suggest George is a man who just might label blacks as "trifling niggers" (Chesnutt 73), a man who will most probably relinquish his love for Rena if he knew about "it."

Larsen provides a somewhat similar illustration of an unforgiving whiteness that surrounds Clare--a whiteness that refuses to accept blackness into its company, even if the black Other happens to be a beloved spouse. In Clare's case, her fear of discovery plays out in her earlier years of passing, particularly when she becomes pregnant with her first and only child, Margery, by her white husband, John Bellew. In one of Larsen's most telling scenes, Clare shares with Irene and Gertrude, both women who publicly identify themselves as black, her emotional turmoil as she awaited the birth of Margery. She quite frankly states, "'I [was] afraid. I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too--too hellish'" (168). Clare's words clearly reveal her anxieties as a pregnant passer, a time when most women's worries focus upon the health and happiness of their unborn children rather than the color of their skins. Additionally, Clare's predicament illustrates a unique risk of passing, one that results from intimate sexual relations between a passer and a "pure" white; what will the color of the passer's offspring be? Will this color reveal the

passer's actual racial ancestry? Thus, Clare, immersed in a white community that views blacks as subordinate others, cannot help but feel the "hellish strain" of discovery by her husband, a man who detests black people. In fact, Mr. John Bellew states, with pride, that he "hates" black people and considers them to be "black scrimy devils" (172). Like Chesnutt then, Larsen allows her passer to recount her apprehensions to the readers, suggesting that passing is indeed a tricky and self-torturing business, especially for mothers. More importantly, though, Clare's "near-death" by "terror" of Margery's unknown skin color incriminates the whites around her, especially John Bellew, for his intense hatred of blacks. And so Larsen's readers are left, as are Chesnutt's, with a tentative, almost sickening, feeling about John Bellew and the white value system he ascribes to, a system that recoils from blackness.

Chesnutt also permits his readers to share in George's mental process immediately before and directly after he discovers Rena's true racial heritage--thoughts which emphasize the unforgiving nature of amorous relations who refuse to accept their beloveds' black blood. Prior to this detection, George thinks to himself that "he could not have possibly been interested in a colored girl, under any circumstances. . . .To mention a negro woman in the same room where he was thinking of Rena seemed little short of profanation" (76). Bluntly, Chesnutt is showing up George here; he is using this white man to prove that (most) Southern whites perceive blacks as inferior and consider any deliberate comparison between the two races as morally shocking. And too, Chesnutt is having some fun with George because, in reality, he is smitten by--he is in love with!--a "colored girl." Chesnutt then moves

in for the kill, exposing George's disturbing thoughts upon the accidental disclosure of Rena's blackness. Even though George cannot forget Rena's eyes "that implored charity and forgiveness" from him, he still confesses 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" (96-97). These lines make two things evident for me. George himself confides that if he had the choice, he would rather Rena had died than been black because he could have found comfort in her "cherished memory" as a white woman; he is left with the haunting remembrance of her blackness and subsequently, no "consolation." So, by confiding that he prefers Rena dead, George suggests that "lying in a shroud" is better than being black. Such an extreme reference suggests that Chesnutt is not condemning Rena for either her blackness or her failure to pass, for her white lover refuses to give her neither "charity" nor "forgiveness"--indeed refuses her even life!

Jay Delmar, who acknowledges the "institutionalized prejudices" in this novel, fails to read George Tryon's mental response regarding Rena's black ancestry as an integrated part of a larger white "institution." Rather, he suggests that Chesnutt is actually sympathetic towards George Tryon, reasoning that if Chesnutt allowed "Tryon [to be] at heart a villain who could easily spurn a girl like Rena," he would lose a white readership who expected Tryon to be a "virtuous" romantic hero (100). In my opinion, Delmar's argument makes no sense at all, for Chesnutt's white readership most assuredly would expect their own white brother George to deny a black woman like Rena. That is, George's white peers would insist that his virtues--including

his allegiance to whiteness--mandated an immediate disentanglement of himself from the black Rena altogether, not a "romantic" invitation to join their "superior" race group, the "cold, unfeeling, racist South" ("Rena Walden" 80). Hence, Chesnutt seems to redefine the heroic suitor, who is typically willing to love at any cost. George's so-called "chivalry" is shown up as an empty gesture.

Hence, as George Tryon's words illustrate the destructive role racial prejudice can play within a "mixed" relationship, John Bellew's racist proclamations indicate his own inability to love any one of color. Specifically, Clare's unpleasant union with John Bellew gives Larsen's audience the ability to judge for themselves what sort of "hero" this white man actually is; upon my every read of John, I find myself squirming uncomfortably in my seat. For me, this uncomfortableness plays itself out initially when Irene meets John for the first time, and he mistakes her for a white woman, just as he has mistaken Clare for white. At this moment of introduction, Larsen has her fun with John because he actually has convinced himself that Clare's darkening skin throughout the years means nothing. In fact, John himself "affectionately" calls Clare "Nig" (170) and ignorantly states that "'I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find that she's turned into a nigger'" (171). Clearly, Larsen offers up the white, "superior" John Bellew as the fool to prove that insight and wisdom do not necessarily follow from white blood. Furthermore, when the conversation turns serious to the issue of "Negroes" as a people, Larsen uses John's words to divulge the sheer ugliness of his white-centered prejudices: "'I don't dislike them, I hate them. And so does Nig, for all she's trying to turn into one.

They give me the creeps. The black scrimy devils. . . .Always robbing and killing people. And worse'" (172). This bigoted proclamation exposes John's disturbing hatred for black people and his distorted idea of their societal "activities." In fact, John's notion that blacks are "always robbing and killing people" presents itself as a perfect example of stereotyping, a stereotype of pillaging, murdering "black scrimy devils" that he does not realize includes his wife and Irene. John, who should be in the know as Clare's husband, is duped by her feigned racial persona. Hence, Larsen uses the repugnant John and his repugnant appraisal of the black race to expose an extreme case of race prejudice, of "unfathomable" (Larsen 172) racist beliefs. Like Chesnutt's Rena, Larsen's Clare is also a victim, struggling to free herself from the lies she has created and a life of undeserved discrimination. Both Rena and Clare, then, ultimately attempt to escape the men who claim to love them, for their individual relationships are destroyed by their beloveds' hatred of blackness. Thus, these two novels explode the notion that there is shelter from bigotry within intimate relations--that love is able to conquer all differences or problems, no matter how unusual or difficult.

V.
The Dependence of White on Black: Constructions of
 Otherness

These hostilities toward blacks are addressed further in *The House Behind the Cedars*, particularly when George decides that he needs Rena to make his life whole. Six weeks after he has uncovered Rena's racial disguise, George heroically decides that he cannot "let his darling die of grief" (140). So, ironically, the same Tryon that wished Rena dead rather than know of her blackness, contrives a plan to bring her into his uninviting white world. Chesnutt's satiric narrator states that "If he [George] should discover--the chance that she [Rena] was white; or if he should find it too hard to leave her--ah well! he was a white man, one of a race born to command. He would *make her white*" (140 italics mine). These words suggest that George, in spite of his own prejudices, cannot forget Rena, the white woman he once loved. But they do not suggest that George, "master" of his own prejudices, will accept Rena as a black woman. He either wants to discover miraculously that Rena is actually white, or he will "make her white." Rena's feelings and her blackness will simply be ignored in George's transformation scheme; George plans to excuse her passing if Rena becomes white, physically and psychologically on his terms. And George, "born of the race to command," will hold the key to Rena's secret and thus, control her destiny. Elder insightfully characterizes this situation, reasoning that "dependence of the self upon the other reflects a society where, necessarily, one's skin color is the determinant of power and

powerlessness" (121). Hence, George attempts to control Rena by trying to "make her white," empowering whiteness, not blackness.

Judith Butler further expands Elder's argument regarding the white self's quest for control through a "power-powerless" relationship with the black Other. Butler remarks that the white individual, who claims that "he would never associate with blacks" (173), is simply denying blackness altogether, though his "own racist passion requires that association; he cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them" (171). In other words, Butler opens up Elder's claim to suggest that the white self actually reaffirms his or her own racial identity through a relationship with the black other. The white person cannot "be white" without blacks (173); he or she needs this group of "coloureds" in order to validate his or her own whiteness, and thus, his or her own superiority. For example, John Bellew's emphatic assertions that he hates blacks and would never "allow no niggers in my family" (171) actually fall flat, according to Butler, because John's definition of his own racial self calls for those very "niggers" and their opposing black skins; without any distinct Other, how can John Bellew be sure that he is indeed white? Moreover, Butler finds John's nickname for Clare--"Nig"--a symbol of Bellew's sexual and erotic attraction for blackness: "Clare is a fetish that holds in place the rendering of Clare's blackness as an exotic source of excitation. . . .[Bellew] requires the association and its disavowal for an erotic satisfaction that is indistinguishable from his desire to display his own racial purity" (171-172). That is, Clare's darkening skin, though Bellew himself denies any notion of her racial impurity, reveals some deep-rooted "erotic" desire of his for an intimate, perhaps

even sexual, encounter with a black female. In this taboo encounter, Bellew will act as the "pure" white male engaging in something so forbidden, but nevertheless tantalizing, with the black Other. Thus, Clare's changing skin color provides Bellew with a source of skin comparison, which he uses to reaffirm his own whiteness; and Clare's "transformation also gives Bellew the opportunity to dream of an erotic coupling with the repugnant, but nevertheless sexually attractive black exotic--the untouchable, compelling dark female.

In the case of George and Rena, George's desire to "make Rena white"--his very own black keepsake--becomes an obsession that both exemplifies Butler's claims and illustrates George's need to control and have Rena. For example, when George returns to Patesville to reclaim Rena, despite his initial repulsion from his newly-discovered black fiancée, this decision exposes his feelings of power as a white man. Though Delmar intimates that George's actions are prompted by romantic heroism and love, Butler is correct in her suggestion that George needs Rena in order "to be white" and to fulfill some "erotic need" for blackness. And so, it is not surprising that when George finds an unsuspecting Rena dancing with a black man at a party after the break-up of their engagement, he immediately turns against Rena and slanders her character. George questions "what more could he expect of the base-born child [Rena] of the plaything of a gentleman's idle hour?" (150), words which suggest that he must tear Rena down in order to affirm his own racial identity. He spitefully and deliberately points out Rena's illegitimacy, as she is the offspring of the black Mis' Molly and her white lover. Yet, these words also indict George, for he is a member of those privileged white males who are able to partake in those "idle"

hours of sexual and forbidden pleasure with black females.¹² In addition, his words also assume that Rena is the product of a loveless sexual liaison between her mother and lover. Consequently, Chesnutt is pushing, if not prodding, his readers to see not the failings of Rena in the above lines, but the horrific close-mindedness of the racist George; he is the unreliable and fallible character, not Rena, whose only crime is an innocent dance with a black male friend. Chesnutt means for his audience to inspect George and his willingness to label Rena, the woman he supposedly loves, as a "base-born" "plaything."

In addition to George though, Chesnutt also includes a seemingly minor character, the white and racist Dr. Green, to explore how white men's science requires blackness to show up its "authority." For instance, in a discussion with George where Dr. Green addresses the subject of passing directly and the person of Rena indirectly, he comments that "with the Yankees trying to force the niggers on us, it's a genuine pleasure to get acquainted with another real Southern gentleman without the fear of contamination" (77). Dr. Green then goes on to spout this "wisdom": "The negro is an inferior creature" while the Anglo Saxon race is "the head and front of creation," the "best people" (92-93). In his reading of these lines, Donald Gibson asserts that he is led, by Chesnutt's narrator, to the "untenable conclusion that whites are indeed superior to blacks" (xx). Instead, I would argue that Chesnutt is using Dr. Green's racist opinions to expose the warped values of those bigoted whites--to "satirize those people who deny black equality" (Hattenhauer 36). Also, of particular significance is the fact that Dr. Green requires those "niggers"--he depends on them--to voice his own distorted perception of whites as the "best" people

genetically. Without blacks, Dr. Green has nothing to compare the "superior" nature of whites to.

Instead of inserting minor characters, such as Dr. Green, into her text, Nella Larsen makes use of the highly visible and vocal Irene to further elaborate upon white bigots' distorted need for black company. Because Irene herself craves social and economic mobility--because she "desperately desires to be free of the burden of race-consciousness and to join those who reside in the rising towers of capitalist [white] American society" (Brody 1055)--she organizes the Negro Welfare League Dance. At this event, Irene is able to consort with all the "best" blacks and high-profile whites, dabbling (quite contentedly) in high society affairs and conversing with the white upper-class Hugh Wentworth.¹³ The white Hugh is unlike John Bellew, however, in that he enjoys the company of blacks, attending various "black" events and parties; he does not see blacks in keeping with Bellew's vision of them as "scrimy black devils." Of Irene, Hugh inquires (wryly) why "all the ladies of my *superior* race" are "being twirled about by some Ethiopian" (205). Irene replies that the white women dance with their "poorer darker brethren" (185) because "'you know [it's] the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it's really at the opposite end of the pole of all your accustomed notions of beauty'" (205). While Irene's explanation directly supports Butler's argument concerning the "eroticism" of blackness, her words also inadvertently critique why these whites are socially and sexually attracted to blacks in the first place. That is, these white women and men find the opposite "colour" appealing, sexually compelling. And Irene herself,

who ironically longs to emulate white people's actions and ideals, nevertheless understands to an extent that the white women enjoy a certain thrill by "twirling" momentarily about with "strange," "repugnant," and "different" beings other than themselves. She understands whites' investment in difference and thus, in maintaining the racial status quo. These Others and their blackness help the whites to not only proclaim their whiteness but to innocently role-play white sexually consorting with black. In short, Irene acts in this scene as a sort of voyeur--a distant observer of the races--with Hugh Wentworth, watching and studying the interactions and sexual magnetism between whites and blacks. And so, whether Irene is aware of it or not, her conversation with Hugh actually divulges the forbidden sexual desires of the white world that she so adores and illustrates the white person's need for and dependence upon blackness.

VI. Race as Class

Irene's union with--her struggle to belong to--the "rising towers" of white America is especially noticeable in her tumultuous relationships with her husband (Brian, a black doctor who finds his work irrelevant within America's prejudiced confines) and with Clare Kendry Bellew. Brian wants to move to Brazil where he feels he can provide medical services without racism lurking in the background. Brian vehemently tells Irene, "'Lord! how I hate smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways. . . .I wanted to get out of this hellish place years ago'" (186, 232). Yet, Irene craves the recognition and acceptance of white, financially secure American people and deliberately chooses to overlook Brian's grave "disgust for his country" (187). Simply put, Irene cannot tolerate any sort of glitch in her plan to protect "that security of [social] place and [material] substance" (190) she has created for herself and her family, including Brian's need to escape a land that he sees as divided by skin color. The narration says: "Nor did she [Irene] admit that all other plans, all other ways, she regarded as menaces" (190) to her carefully constructed lifestyle. Irene will stop at nothing to protect her family's social position as bourgeois blacks who are allowed to consort with whites; she has worked hard to shine within white and black communities alike. Mary Mabel Youman stresses that Irene cannot concede to Brian's wishes because she rejects any change that threatens her status as one of the "better," socially accepted blacks, one who quite outwardly thinks like a "white" American: "For [Irene] would not go to Brazil. She belonged in the

land of rising towers" (Larsen 235). In turn, because of Irene's "passing" into the "conventionalized, mechanized, non-humane white world" (Youman 236)--her insistence upon this mindframe and way of life--I agree with Ms. Youman that it is Irene's "values that are rejected" by Nella Larsen (236). To me, then, it is evident that Irene, who cannot trade her societal achievements, "security of place," or the "rising towers" for the "menacing" land of Brazil, finds in whiteness a certain class status--the various social and economic privileges which are unattainable in her black world.

Larsen also ridicules these same distorted values--Irene's need for "ascendancy and white security" (Brody 1059)--in Irene's battle to rid her life of Clare, who Irene, as I stated earlier, believes to be a threat to both her position in society and to her marriage. In fact, Irene, who longs to "keep her life fixed, certain" (Larsen 235) becomes a silent ally with the unsuspecting John Bellew, who Clare hopes will somehow discover her racial duality so that she will be free to openly mingle with blacks. But, if Clare is free to consort with "Negroes," Irene fears that Clare will usurp--perhaps replace--her in the position of a leading black socialite and wife to Brian. Thus, Irene takes on the role of manipulator, attempting to "stabilize" Clare's life, as she does Brian's, through verbal warfare. When Clare begins to attend publicly black-dominated events, ranging from dances to tea parties, Irene reprimands Clare for re-entering black society and ignoring the dangers and "silly risks" (Larsen 195) connected with such acts. But Clare confesses that she cannot help herself; "'You don't know, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh'" (200). Coming full circle in her race

innocent Rena is not made to suffer a lifetime of race hatred at the hands of bigots.

Arguing that Rena's death is pre-determined by her failure to wed George, SallyAnn Ferguson states that Rena's "crime--refusal to miscegenate--makes her elimination inevitable. Because Rena does not stop being black, she dies" ("Rena Walden" 82). Here, Ferguson seems to adhere to her former claim that Chesnutt's approach to racial amalgamation sanctions, or endorses, an all-white world, including racial biases. Accordingly, because Rena refuses to marry George and continue passing--to "miscegenate"--Chesnutt kills her off. In contrast, Hattenhauer more convincingly argues that "any doubt of Chesnutt's approval of Rena is inconvenienced by the fact that he has given her his own values. Like Rena, after her fall [or George's discovery], Chesnutt did not try to get through life by passing. Like Rena, he tried to help his people by being a school teacher" (44). Clearly, Hattenhauer's words challenge any suggestion that Chesnutt kills Rena because she fails him, a fellow mulatto, in some way. For similar reasons, I would argue that the near-white Chesnutt is able to recognize Rena's plight, and thus, is unwilling to sacrifice her to a world filled with George Tryons and Dr. Greens.¹⁴ Her death, then, is a peaceful and early escape; Rena's final "passing" is not punishment for any sort of "crime" of her own doing. Rather, it serves as a haunting reminder of America's racial divide.

In the closing pages of *Passing*, Clare is also released from the earthly world of race hatred and color divisions. Ironically, Clare achieves her black identity just prior to the moment of her death. While attending a "black" party with Irene, Clare falls (or is pushed)

VII.
Race as Fatal: The Deaths of Rena Walden and Clare
Kendry Bellew

Significantly, both novels take a similar approach in freeing Rena and Clare of their continuing struggles with relations that, for the most part, only seem to "admire and recognize whiteness" (Socken 56). In the conclusion of *The House Behind The Cedars*, death through sickness frees Rena. It is a conclusion that appears to follow the tragic mulatta's historical fate: a life that closes in apparent tragedy. However, I would argue that, unlike earlier narratives in which the tragic mulatta dies because she cannot choose between two races, the novel suggests that Rena dies before she is completely ostracized by the very whiteness that comprises part of her being; the innocent Rena is not made to suffer a lifetime of race hatred at the hands of bigots.

Arguing that Rena's death is pre-determined by her failure to wed George, SallyAnn Ferguson states that Rena's "crime--refusal to miscegenate--makes her elimination inevitable. Because Rena does not stop being black, she dies" ("Rena Walden" 82). Here, Ferguson seems to adhere to her former claim that Chesnutt's approach to racial amalgamation sanctions, or endorses, an all-white world, including racial biases. Accordingly, because Rena refuses to marry George and continue passing--to "miscegenate"--Chesnutt kills her off. In contrast, Hattenhauer more convincingly argues that "any doubt of Chesnutt's approval of Rena is inconvenienced by the fact that he has given her his own values. Like Rena, after her fall [or George's

discovery], Chesnutt did not try to get through life by passing. Like Rena, he tried to help his people by being a school teacher" (44). Clearly, Hattenhauer's words challenge any suggestion that Chesnutt kills Rena because she fails him, a fellow mulatto, in some way. For similar reasons, I would argue that the near-white Chesnutt is able to recognize Rena's plight, and thus, is unwilling to sacrifice her to a world filled with George Tryons and Dr. Greens.¹⁴ Her death, then, is a peaceful and early escape; Rena's final "passing" is not punishment for any sort of "crime" of her own doing. Rather, it serves as a haunting reminder of America's racial divide.

In the closing pages of *Passing*, Clare is also released from the earthly world of race hatred and color divisions. Ironically, Clare achieves her black identity just prior to the moment of her death. While attending a "black" party with Irene, Clare falls (or is pushed) from an open window; she immediately dies. Her fatality occurs directly after John Bellew's entrance into the party and recognition of Clare as "a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (238). Although Irene does not disclose who causes Clare's death--an "enlightened" John Bellew, a jealous Irene, or Clare herself--John's timely, though ugly words finally proclaim Clare's blackness and in an odd way, set her free. Certain that Irene is Clare's murderer, Youman reads Clare's death as "Larsen's indictment of [white] values" (239). In other words, Clare's death at the hands of the white-loving Irene re-emphasizes the distorted nature of white society, specifically those people (like Bellew) who truly believe that Clare and others with black blood are Other and "dirty niggers."

Youman's incriminating remark regarding Clare's demise is particularly relevant to both Larsen's overall objective--her critique of whiteness--and the issue of Clare's grouping within the tragic mulatta tradition. In their readings of Clare's struggle to return to the black race and subsequent death, critics tend to differ in their perceptions of this character as a tragic mulatta type. Cheryl Wall maintains that Clare's plight "adheres to the [tragic mulatta] pattern: the victim caught forever betwixt and between until she finds in death the only freedom she can know" (109). Wall's comment, however, is a bit misleading in its representation of Clare as "the victim caught forever betwixt and between." Indeed, Clare is a victim of a race-prejudiced society, but a victim also of her own doing; as I commented earlier, Clare has spun her own web of lies, particularly within her marriage to Bellew. Clare Kendry Bellew is definitely not literature's typical tragic mulatta in need of psychological integration. Rather, as McLendon suggests, she is a "revision" of this literary figure because Clare does not feign whiteness in order to reconcile her two-ness. Like Rena, Clare is *not* searching for a remedy or cure for any sort of inner turmoil because she is both black and white. Clare passes in order to gain opportunities, and when these opportunities were before her in all their tantalizing "white" glory, they asked too much of her. In short, the rewards of being white demanded that Clare submit to white bigotries, including the perception of blacks as "damned dirty nigger[s]." The black-white Clare could not, even for the inviting riches of whiteness, remain in a world that believed in such hateful, ludicrous labels. And so, as Youman suggests, Clare escapes from these "white values" through a liberating salvation: death.

Consequently, Clare dies in what is *Passing's* most unresolved question--Who Killed Clare? Butler suggests that we, as Larsen's audience, can read this moment "as rage boiling up, shattering, leaving shards of whiteness, shattering the veneer of whiteness" (173). In other words, Clare's death is most likely connected to two active rages: Bellew's awful labeling of Clare as a "damned dirty nigger" and Irene's intense desire, as either murderer or onlooker, to salvage her beloved "white" life. Clare's demise, then, foregrounds the cruelty of whiteness and the loyalty of its members to "white values," as Youman puts it. Thus, it seems evident that why Larsen leaves the mode of Clare's death a mystery is not nearly as important as why Clare dies. As a black woman herself, Nella Larsen lived within a disjointed place--a racially explosive time--similar to Clare's, where racial tensions were high. Jacquelyn McLendon acknowledges Larsen's personal investment in the text of *Passing*, commenting that Larsen "writes herself"--writes what she knows through her own life--and in turn, "engage[s] with and challenge[s] the dominant [white] ideologies" (153). That is, Larsen manipulated into words what she observed, lived, and battled against in her own time of being: white domination and rule during the 1920s. Thus, perhaps Larsen allows Clare to die because her own world--a land engaged in racial strife--was not yet ready for Clare, a woman who ultimately rejects the fruits and advantages of whiteness.

VIII. The Evolution of the Tragic Mulatta

"The family divested all its blackness into [my mother]. She was their Other, and she fulfilled that role, by marrying the darkest man and living the blackest life. . . .But my mother was never a tragic mulatto. She became a voluntary Negro" (Haizlip 267).

In the *sweeter the juice*, Haizlip chronicles her search for her black mother's siblings, all who disappeared when they chose to be "white" some seventy-six years prior. Haizlip is quick to point out though, that her mother, abandoned by her siblings--confronted with the reality of an "absent and rejecting family" (267)--is not the traditional tragic mulatta who chose to be "white." Instead, Haizlip's mother decided to be black, a "voluntary Negro," embracing the "dark" people of the world and becoming wife and mother to the popular and well-to-do Reverend Julian Taylor. Hence, Haizlip's mother escapes the tragic mulatta type altogether, for she consciously chooses black over white, never living or acting as "white." This woman, who purposefully side-steps the tragic mulatta's fate, suggests that contemporary authors after Charles Chesnutt and Nella Larsen have perhaps revised this trope further, producing pieces that paint these not-black but not-white females in different contexts.¹⁵

The problems this trope presented were clear, I believe, to both Chesnutt and Larsen who attempt to alter this image of a mentally tortured mulatta who cannot find stability in either race. Still, Rena and Clare are not what we, in the 1990s, would consider strong, independent characters; in both cases, circumstance rather than personal

choice dictates the outcome of Rena's and Clare's lives. That is, Rena returns to her black home, where she ultimately accepts and respects her blackness, but only after George Tryon mistakenly discovers her racial two-ness and shuns her. And Clare, though she immerses herself in black society and delights in her new-found relations, only becomes "truly" black after Bellew uncovers her secret: You're a "nigger, a damned dirty nigger." So while Rena and Clare are not the traditional tragic mulattas, torn apart by their racial ancestries, they do not unequivocally embrace their blackness either. However, their plights--Rena's decision to return to the House Behind the Cedars and Clare's will to live amongst "Negro laughter"--represent small stepping stones in the evolution of the tragic mulatta and her re-figuring in works by later authors. Hence, Chesnutt and Larsen manipulate the framework of the tragic mulatta in order to achieve their larger, collective goal: the examination of those very whites who "lap up" (Black Feminist Criticism 3), to use Christian's expression, the struggles of those of mixed race.

But, what author--what text--first snubbed the tragic mulatta tradition, subsequently turning away from this dominant literary trope? Christian asserts that this ground-breaking author is Zora Neale Hurston, particularly her depiction of Janie Crawford, also a near-white female, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Christian writes that Hurston is "transitional" (Black Feminist Criticism 8) because she breaks free of the tragic mulatta convention through the determined though tragedy-stricken Janie, and thus provides her readers with a "journey from this image of the tragic mulatta to a more varied, more complex view of the black woman. . . . Hurston moves the image of the

black woman beyond stereotype" (Black Feminist Criticism 8, 11). That is, Hurston's novel, published only eight years past Larsen's, stands apart because Janie does not surrender or resign herself to life's circumstances. Instead, she rises above, facing all hurdles head-on with a resilience and strength that other mulattas before her, in one way or another, submitted to. In fact, Janie tries to completely avoid encounters with white people altogether, side-stepping the mulatta's typical conflicts with them. Janie Crawford is a woman at "peace" (Hurston 184) with herself.

Today this re-shaping of the near-white mulatta continues not just in fiction, but in real-life accounts of mixed-race women--accounts that remind us, as readers, that to live as a tragic mulatta type is no longer a desirable option. For example, in *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity* (1994), Lise Funderburg shares the story of the black, white, and Cherokee Zenobia Kujichagulia, a woman whose father and his siblings, to this day, still pass for white. Yet, Kujichagulia identifies herself as a mixed-race black and Cherokee and considers her father's racial subterfuge and her other relatives' passings painful and ridiculous: "They basically just pass for white, and it's a they-don't-know-what's-wrong-with-the-rest-of-us kind of thing. [Some] do the stereotypic tragic mulatta crap. . . .I think they even consider themselves tragic" (279). Kujichagulia's words emphasize that the tragic mulatta figure is not celebrated by near-whites living in the United States today; in her words, this type is, put bluntly, "crap." Instead, people of "color" who are capable of passing typically choose to celebrate their multiple heritages, embracing their "darker" selves. Thus, the character of Janie Crawford

and Zenobia Kujichagulia illustrate the striking evolution of the traditional tragic mulatta: this once-popular figure is now an outcast in present-day America. I can only hope that the demise of the tragic mulatta type is tied to the rise of more complex literary representations of race and an improvement, finally, in race relations.

IX. Endnotes

¹ Fishkin offers an extensive survey of scholarly articles that discuss whiteness in terms of its construction and how it is informed by and inextricably tied to blackness, including contemporary discussions of whiteness within the fields of television, music, and dance.

² Morrison specifically calls for a new integrated strategy of reading and analyzing the American literary canon because, in her opinion, literary critics and scholars continue to uphold the false notion that these writings are "free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States" (5). In other words, "the contemplation of the black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature. . .it is [crucial] to see how inextricable Africanism is or ought to be from the deliberations of literary criticism" (5, 9). My work fits within Morrison's critique.

³ Ellen Craft doesn't disguise herself as a white woman but as a white male because according to William, "it was not customary in the South for ladies to travel with male servants; and therefore, notwithstanding my wife's fair complexion, it would have been a very difficult task for her to have come off as a free white lady, with me as her slave" (290).

⁴ Stanley, Marie, Gulf Stream. New York: Coward-McCann, 1931. Qtd. in Berzon: 96.

⁵ In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," W.E.B. Du Bois discusses the mulatto/a's feelings of inner angst and turmoil as a result of his or her "two-ness." Specifically, Du Bois states that the near-white "ever feels his two-ness,--A [white] American, A Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (1013).

⁶ Chesnutt, Charles. Journal. Fisk University Library: Charles Chesnutt Collection, March 16, 1880. Qtd. in Ferguson "MELUS Forum: Chesnutt's Genuine Blacks and Future Americans," 109.

⁷ Hattenhauer provides his own example, and thus definition, for the satire that he sees at work in *The House Behind the Cedars*. He specifically defines as a part of the Chesnutt's satiric structure the ironic wordplay throughout the text. Hattenhauer states, "Another aspect of this text's satirical technique is the narrator's ironic wordplay. For instance, when George compliments Rena, the narrator says that she 'colored deeply'" and calls Rena's delinquent father "'a distinguished man who did not give his name to his children'" (38). For the purpose of my own argument, I too will include such ironic moments within my definition of Chesnutt's satire. However, I do recognize that satire is typically more obvious to the reader for it acts as a blatant "censure and ridicule [of] the follies and vices of society" (Dictionary 828) while irony, as Hattenhauer himself illustrates in the above examples, usually is more subtle and hard-to-

detect: this literary device demands that a person both locate and understand "a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning" (Dictionary 460).

It is also helpful to understand satire and irony in terms of Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of "signifying," which subsumes these two rhetorical tropes. Specifically, Gates defines signifying as "the textual world that a black text echoes, mirrors, repeats, revises, or responds to in various formal ways" (xxxi).

8 McDowell's argument that Irene cannot be trusted, as narrator of the text, because she is "clearly deluded" (xxvi) about her "erotic feelings" (xxviii) for Clare is interesting in that it encompasses the issue of sexual "passing." Unfortunately, this is a complex issue that I do not have room to explore in my text.

9 While I focus my discussion here on females, I realize that the novels also represent male passers and their individual emotional responses to passing.

10 Chesnutt quoted in Ferguson, "MELUS Forum: Charles W. Chesnutt's 'Future American'": 99.

11 Obviously, the primary goals of slave narratives varied, but this specific desire to "educate" whites is found in several of the texts.

12 In her writing, Hortense Spillers points out that George's vision of black females as "playthings" for white males ignores white men's historical part in creating these "tragic mulatta/o" figures through sexually violent acts upon black (enslaved) females. Spillers claims that "America's 'tragic mulatto' designates the violent mingling and commingling of bloodlines. . . .[A]n undisguised sexuality [is] mapped on the body of the mulatto character" (167-168).

13 The character of Hugh Wentworth represents Carl Van Vechten, friend to Larsen as well as patron and writer during the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, Larsen dedicates *Passing* to Van Vechten and his wife, Fania Marinoff.

14 I do recognize, however, that direct parallels between author and character are "tricky" to make and to prove. But these connections seem particularly relevant to the reader's understanding of Rena's and Clare's deaths. I formulate similar connections between Larsen and Clare on pages 40-41.

15 Christian specifically mentions the black character of Eva in Morrison's novel, Sula as one such character that has fallen far from the traditional tragic mulatta mold because "she is forceful, conniving, intriguing. It is rumored that when she could no longer support her children she had a train run over her leg so that she could collect money for the rest of her life" (Black Feminist Criticism 28). In other words, Eva is unconventionally strong-willed and controls her own life's circumstances. In addition, Christian discusses the character of Janie Crawford in a similar context, a topic I engage on pages 43-44.

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