

The representation of tricksters in the works of charles w. chesnutt

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Fraud, con-man, and hustler are all modern day terms to describe the age old character in African American literature known as the trickster. Today's working definition of a trickster is one who swindles or plays tricks; often a mischievous figure in myth or folklore, who typically makes up for physical weakness through cunning and subversive humor. In African American literature the role of the trickster is a reoccurring theme, especially in the time period pning from postCivil War to the Harlem Renaissance.

During slavery and the years that followed the image of a trickster changed from a humorous amoral figure to a cunning and socially conscious icon. Charles W. Chesnutt is a primary example of an author, who faithful employs the trickster motif in many of his published works. Traditionally, the role of trickster often presents itself when there is a powerless group who longs to transcend an oppressive social order (Jefferies, Schramm 20). In African American literature, the trickster is often depicted as someone who has the ability to manipulate situations in his/her favor, despite having little or no power.

Rhonda B. Jefferies states that " the primary goal of the trickster in is social nonconformity by redefining the norms of life and existence in mainstream American society (Jefferies, Schramm 20). " Since its origin in West Africanculture, the trickster figure has evolved from a folklore icon, mainly in the form or various animals, to an archetype whose behavior is both contradictory and complex. The tricksters reoccurring appearance in African American folklore, narratives, poems, novels and pop culture is no coincidence.

It is the trickster's pursuit of wisdom, cunning or power in an attempt to redefine social order that makes him/her such an attractive icon. The trickster character serves as an inspirational figure for the socially oppressed and has taken on many forms when expressed in past and present literature. Many African American folk tales, especially those from southern United States, include the appearance of a trickster. In "Brer Rabbit Tricks Brer Fox Again," the trickster takes on a classic form of a clever but lazy rabbit.

In this tale the rabbit becomes stuck in a well and finagle his way out by convincing the suspicious fox to help him escape. He manipulates the fox to get into the well under false pretenses. By convincing Brer Fox that there is an abundance of fish he needs help catching and transporting out of the well, Brer rabbit was able to leverage an escape, consequentially leaving the fox in his place. It is the rabbit's quick wit that makes him a quintessential trickster figure in many folk tales across a number of cultures. However, Brer Rabbit is just one of many depictions of a trickster rabbit in folk tales and stories throughout history.

A more modern depiction of a rabbit trickster is Looney tunes' Bugs bunny. The ways in which Bugs utilizes his physical endurance and mastery of disguise to deceive his arch enemy Elmer Fudd is a playful interpretation when compared to those in African American literature and folklore. The integration of the trickster in modern culture, whether it be in the form of animal or man, is just one demonstration of the many ways in which this popular character transcends time and culture, to eventually become one of the most reoccurring archetypes in African American literature.

Charles W. Chesnutt's relationship with the trickster archetype is most evident in his collection of short stories with the characterization of Uncle Julius. Uncle Julius appeared in seven of the thirteen short stories that make up Chesnutt's *The Conjured Women*. In the collection of stories, Uncle Julius often "conjures" up his tales from old folklore, in an attempted to persuade or manipulate certain situations to his benefit.

The description of Uncle Julius interaction with the John and Annie, the northern white couple interested in buying the grape vineyard Julius inhabits, in the "The Goophered Grapevine," is a classic example of Chesnutt's employment of the trickster motif. From Uncle Julius first impression, the audience is under the impression that Julius presence is to provide theatric and entertainment rather than fact or insight. His "performance" begins with the eating of the scuppernong grapes and ends with his fantastical account on the vineyard came to be bewitched.

John, the white northern gentlemen interested in buying the vineyard, is instantly skeptical upon meeting Uncle Julius disregard Uncle Julius account by stating "At first the current of his memory -or imagination- seemed somewhat sluggish; but as his embarrassment wore off, his language flowed more freely, and the story acquired more perspective and coherence (Chesnutt 607)." The use of the word "imagination" is a clear indicator that Uncle Julius is believed to be telling fiction. John goes on to further prove his disbelief when he goes against Uncle Julius' suggestion and buys the vineyard, and later makes a considerable profit off.

John however does take sympathy for the man who had lived and profited off the land and hired him as a coachman. While Uncle Julius is one of Chesnutt's more memorable characters, he is by no means the only representation of the trickster motif in Chesnutt's works. Grandison, from "The Passing of Grandison" is another example of a trickster character from Chesnutt's collection entitled *The Wife of his Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line*. In this story, Grandison is a slave from a plantation in Kentucky, who successfully deceives his masters, Colonel and Dick Owens, on a number of occasions.

His first act of trickery is when he is being questioned by his old master by assuring Colonel Owens of his contentment on the plantation and his disgust with the anti-slavery ideals of northern abolitionist. Colonel Owens' intentions were to select a slave his son could bring up north, who had proven to be resistant to abolitionist ideals and the prospect of running away. To Colonel Owens elation, Grandison's answers not only confirmed his view of a mutually benefits of slavery but went above and beyond to demonstrate a conceivably genuine appreciation of the resources and lifestyle on the plantation.

He went on questioned Grandison about the fairness of his treatment and the kindness of his master before promising him a bead necklace for his future wife and deeming him "abolitionist-proof." Although the interaction described was only a brief portion of the story it proves to be a pivotal moment in the plot and leaves the audience to assume that Grandison is loyal slave with no intention of running away. But, as we later find out,

Grandison was not at all ignorant to the ideals of abolitionism and actually aspired to be a free man.

He eventually achieves his goal as we see in the very last chapter but not without an unexpected twist Grandison then goes on to successfully deceive his young master, Dick Owens, and forges his loyalty several times during their travels to New York, Boston, and eventually Canada. Throughout the journey, Dick Owens provides the Grandison with a number of opportunities to escape by leaving him alone on many occasions and supplying him with money that he could easily utilize to run away. Once Dick Owens realizes Grandison too dense to run away, or so he thinks, he solicits the help of local abolitionist, by writing an anonymous letter. However, Grandison unwaveringly loyal puts a quickly sidetracks Owens ploy to liberate his father's slave. Day after day Grandison continues report to his young master every morning and night, leaving Owen to pursue more drastic measures. So, Dick Owens decides to leave Grandison alone for a couple of days, with one hundred dollars to his disposal, in a sly attempt to get Grandison to runaway. Upon his return, Dick Owens finds his efforts were unsuccessful, and with much frustration and annoyance decides to take one last attempt by venturing to Canada, where slaves are free.

Nevertheless, Grandison faithfully follows his master orders and does not attempt to runaway, despite the fact there are no laws binding Grandison to Dick Owens in Canada. At this point, the young master decides to give up his efforts and solicits three men to kidnap Grandison. During this exchange Owens escapes and return to Kentucky alone. Dick Owens concludes that

Grandison is too ignorant to recognize his opportunity for freedom and goes on to marry the motive behind his attempt at nobility, Charity Lomax.

Once again it is not until the final chapter that the audience learns; it was Dick Owens and his father who proved to be most ignorant. In the final chapter, Grandison surprisingly returns to the plantation tattered and exhausted from his journey back to Kentucky. He recounts his story of being gagged and dragged to the " gloomy depth of a Canadian forest," where he was locked in a hut and given only bread and water. He appeases his curious spectators by ending his story with his heroic escape and return to the plantation, all the while never revealing his true motives.

It is not until Grandison, along with his new wife, family and friends disappears that his intentions to liberate true intentions are revealed. Once thought to be a model servant, blinded by his obedience and loyal dependence, Grandison outsmarts both his masters, by playing into slaveholder stereotypes and common misperception of the south. Grandison's successful escape with family and friends exposes him as the true trickster. Because of his convincing portrayal of an ignorant and content slave, and willful patients he was ultimately able to turn the tables on his masters and end up the victor in an unlikely turn of events.

When comparing the presence of the trickster in " The Goophered Grapevine" and " The Passing of Grandison," there are few parallels between the two stories. The general theme of a southern black man deceiving his white superiors apparent in both, but the similarities stop. The two main stories are vastly different in respects to how each trickster if portrayed.

Because the audience in “ The Goophered Grapevine” is warned very early on to be wary of Uncle Julius credibility, he is at a disadvantage.

However, Grandison has a very different introduction because he first enters under the impression that he is one of the most loyal and trustworthy slave on the plantation. On the one hand, we have Uncle Julius Characterization as suspicious figure throughout the story from beginning to end, and on the other hand there is Grandison, who appears to be a very pious, simple minded slave with no ulterior motives. Another difference between the two stories is that theatricality proves to be Uncle Julius main downfall, while somehow becoming Grandison’s greatest asset.

The introduction and characterization, of Uncle Julius and Grandison, manipulates the audience perception and ultimately determines their success in deceiving and manipulating their audience for their own personal benefit. The trickster, whether presented in modern cartoon or in tradition folktale, is an archetype that continues to reappear in art and literature. The classic depiction of a trickster as a rabbit in old folklore and myths while common is not the only form a trickster may take.

Overtime and across cultures, the definition of a trickster changes, but not so much so that it unable to provide an entertaining lesson. The appeal of the trickster to African American writers is the theme of an oppressed group overcoming the challenges of social norms. Charles W. Chesnutt is a prime example of the trickster’s mass appeal, in African American literature. By representing the trickster as Uncle Julius and Grandison in “ The Goophered

Grapevine” and “ The Passing of Grandison,” Chesnutt adds to the long history of the trickster as an icon.

Work Cited 1. Chesnutt, Charles W. " Literature Of The Reconstruction To The New Negro Renaissance, 1865-1919. " The Norton Anthology of African American Literature. Ed. Henry L. Gates and Nellie Y. McKay. 2nd ed. New York, Ny: W. W. Norton &, 2004. 604-12. Print. 2. Schramm, Susan L. , and Rhonda B. Jeffries. " African American Trickster Representations in the Work of Romare Bearden. " JSTOR. JSTOR, Sept. 2000. Web. 29 Nov. 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3193835>