

Kate chopin and
charles w. chesnutt
wrote the literary
history for america
post-c...

[War](#), [Civil War](#)



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The American Civil War drastically changed the society and culture of the United States. History books all tell the stories of the struggle by recently freed African American slaves. These books tell of the financial hardship, as well as the cultural endeavors these people had to endure to attempt to become equals to white Americans, as well as to acquire equal rights. Racial segregation is a big topic highly covered on this area. However, there are stories that are less often told about the close relationships between white and black, and also people of Indian decent. This is where literature books come in handy.

Post-war American literature is booming with stories of freedom, hope, and love. One topic that seemed to emerge at this time was interracial relations or marriages between blacks and whites. Kate Chopin and Charles W. Chesnutt both wrote of these types of relationships but in very different ways and outcomes. Due to being raised around the time of the civil war and living in the south, these authors wrote the truth of what they saw and experienced. By looking at Chopin's works *La Belle Zoraide* and *Desiree's Baby*, and Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth*, three different sides of interracial relations can be seen.

These tales of the south post-war help people today to understand their heritage, as well as the great mixture of people that makes up the United States today. According to the biography of Kate Chopin in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, she was born in 1850, was raised mostly by her mother after the death of her father. She was taught in St. Louis and had graduated and married by the end of the civil war. This is when she

moved to the south, where she was submerged into a new, thriving mixed racial culture in New Orleans.

She was influenced by some of the great French writers, including Maupassant, from which her style seems to mimic. Both authors' writings were observational; Chopin wrote what she saw in the world around her. Her writings upset some people due to this fact. She did not hold back or sugar coat anything when she was writing. She was categorized as a "local colorist" due to her topics. With her French background knowledge, she had a tendency to have a dangerous style of writing compared to other American authors at this time.

Also, since New Orleans had so much southern culture, mixed with Creole origins, it is easy to see why this area was fascinating to Kate Chopin. She wrote heart-wrenching love stories with shocking twists between unsettling characters. It may seem normal today, but at this time, this type of writing was as revolutionary as the war. It is lucky for the newer generations that she was willing to write this way. *La Belle Zoraide*, a story with Creole backings, was based from the author's views of her life in New Orleans. The story begins with a black caretaker telling a story to her lighter mistress that she took care of.

Just looking at the set up, the reader can tell the bond between the mistress and the negress as the latter was said to have washed and kissed her feet. Both women are older, but it is the black still serving or taking care of the white. The story also tells the reader that the Mistress is married, but is

sleeping alone, making the reader assume that her husband has died and she is now alone with her maid. The black caretaker begins to tell a story of a beautiful, captivating Creole girl with light brown skin. This brown girl also had her own black servant, as if to say since she was lighter than her servant, she was better than her as well.

There was a mulatto suitor available for the young Zoraide, but he was not pleasing to her. She was instead infatuated with a black man, but was forbidden to act upon her feelings. However, she disobeyed and became pregnant. The caretaker explained that no one can keep negros from finding a way to love each other. Because of the way this was put, it almost seems as though love is the one thing that takes precedence above all other things for the black population. After that, her love was sold far away, so the only thing she had to hold on to was their baby.

But, out of spite, the child was taken away and told that it was dead. With the loss of her lover and her child, the young Zoraide lost herself. She went crazy, and would not accept her child when they tried to give it back to her.

Beautiful Zoraide turned to a pitied and mocked old woman, who undoubtedly died alone. This shows again, just what the love of a child or another human can do when it is taken away. The story also shows how a person's power over another can unintentionally ruin their entire life.

Zoraide's mistress wanted the best for the mulatto girl, but the girl had chosen a different path. So when the mistress tried to control the outcome of her life, it backfired, causing a young girl to lose hope and her sense, and caused a young child to lose its parents. This story is a show of the emotional

pain put on blacks by white people. The next of Chopin's stories, *Desiree's Baby*, is another sad story of love gone wrong. Desiree had been found as a young child and raised by a woman who had no children. The child became a beautiful girl and married a hardworking man whom was a master of some black men. The couple had a baby together, but soon there was something wrong.

The husband became angry and distant with the wife. As it turned out, the child was not white like the parents, but was the color of a quadroon, or a child about a fourth black. The father was very angry, as he was a slave owner, and was married to a woman with black in her heritage, causing them to have a baby that appeared the same. When Desiree confronted her husband Armand about the color of the child, he was angered and put all of the blame on his wife. He wanted her and the baby to leave. It says that " he no longer loved her, because of the unconscious injury she had brought upon his home and his name"(Chopin 424).

Later, Armand burned all of his wife and child's things, and all of the letters she had sent to him. And in the end, the reader finds that Armand is also hiding a secret. Armand's mother was a black woman. This ironic turn can create anger in a reader at the injustice of such a man. For it is not just the mother, but the fathers fault as well for the color of their child. But since the father passed for so long as a white man, and has negroes that work for him, it would ruin his life and his name if it were found out that he was black. He would lose everything.

So instead the man made a choice, to give up his love and his child, in order to save his life as he knew it. This turn of events shows that even though love between two people can be strong, the fear of losing everything is stronger. Armand was fearful of his situation; possibly fearful of his negroes working for him, as well as the white people in the area. Because Armand and his wife were of the same mostly white race, their child ended up showing the black inside. And, sadly, that color is all that mattered at the time. Like the writings of Kate Chopin, Charles W. Chesnutt also wrote stories of the Deep South.

His parents were free people of the south. Chesnutt was well educated and became a writer of the stories of slavery. As a light colored black man, he focused on the opposite of Armand in the past story. He encouraged blacks of all shades to honor their past. Because of his writing skills, and perhaps the fact that his readers didn't know he was a black man at first, he became one of the first black fiction writers to be taken seriously by a white press(Chesnutt 458). The idea of a black person staying true to their past is beautifully portrayed in the story of Mr. Ryder in *The Wife of His Youth*.

In this story, Mr. Ryder is a light skinned black man, who commonly is seen as white. He is an older gentleman, who seems to be a well suited bachelor. He was well read, educated, with a nice house and furniture. Many women pursued him, but none won him over until Mrs. Dixon came into town. He was planning to ask her hand in marriage. He wanted to do this in order to ensure that he continued to be seen as a white man, and because he was taken by her. As he tried to decide how to address Mrs. Dixon at the ball he

was throwing for her, he was approached by an older black lady, who asked for his help.

She was trying to find her husband, who was a free black man, sold by her owner for profit. He had tried to go back to her, but she had been sold as well for punishment. She had been looking for her husband Sam for twenty-five years, making her way through life as if that was her only goal. The reader can see here another example of the everlasting love between this woman, and hopefully her Sam would feel the same. At the ball, when it is Mr. Ryder's turn to speak, he tells the crowd of this older lady that he has met just earlier that day.

He mentions how rare it is to find people with that kind of devotion to the person that they love. But he explains a part of the story that was untold by the woman. He asked what should be done, if her husband was actually a light skinned, well educated man that could not find her either. And if the man found her all these years later, should he call on her and complete the bond of their slave marriage to make it legal. Mrs. Dixon confirmed that he should acknowledge his past wife, even though he thinks he may have found another to love. Mr.

Ryder is pleased with this response, as he goes to get the elderly lady, explaining that it is his wife. This portrayal of devotion is unlike Kate Chopin's stories. This work is uplifting and seems to be written in a hopeful way. There are some differences in the fact that this ball was to be taken place twenty-five years after the end of the war, and Mr. Ryder had been

born a free-man. This made his transition into the white population much easier. Also, it shows that it was not only the wife that stayed true, but also Mr. Ryder, as he had stayed single all that time as well.

The community encouraged him to continue his life with his former wife, as if it would have been wrong to have it any other way. There is a large difference in social acceptance, as today it is acceptable to divorce, but then, it was unheard of, whether the marriage was technically legal or not. There are some common ideas between all of these stories. First, these stories give a sense that love is unconditional and unbreakable among the black culture. However, when the story becomes about interracial marriages or children, society and culture seem to play a bigger role in what is acceptable.

According to Bratter's essay, the acceptance of interracial marriages is increasing as the number of these couples is increasing. However, with this increase of marriage is also leading to a higher rate of divorce between mixed-race couples. The rate of interracial marriage divorce has found to be about 10% higher than the divorce rate among same race couples. Whatever the reason, these studies have shown that even though the divorce rate may currently be higher for mixed-race couples, the overall divorce rate continues to climb.

This shows that society's idea of acceptance is changing. As in *The Wife of His Youth*, after all that time, the man still took his wife back. The encouragement of the ball's crowd shows an obvious change in society, not just racially, but culturally. Another common piece to each of the stories is

the acceptance of the light skinned mulatto into white society. It seems to be that people really were judged based on the color of their skin. Light skinned black people could be passed off as white people, or were treated almost as third class citizens, above the blacks but below the whites.

Zoraide and Sam Rider are both aware of their true African American roots and choose to stay true to those roots, even though they can pass at white or mulatto. Armand, however, turns his back on his mulatto wife and child, even though he knows the he also carries some African American blood inside him. It is if he is angered at himself, and his wife, that they could not produce a white-looking baby. Armand and Zoraide still live by the ideas that their skin color makes them who they really are. Zoraide knows that she is not white, and should be able to choose from the black men if she cannot be considered white.

Armand, however, is so obsessed with his status, he does not want to have anyone question his or his wife's race. Back in that time, Jim Crowe Laws tried to categorize who was black and who was white. A black person was seen as any person with any history of black in theirfamily. This was known as the " one-drop rule"(Davis 5). By this law, and the fact that that a person's rights depended on their race, it is understood why Armand may do this. In contrast, in today's society, much of the population may have mixed ancestry somewhere in their past line. However, this does not classify their rank or their worth.

In America today, people are judged more on their education and their skills than they are on their looks. Looking at these works, many comparisons can be made about America's past, and the people that once made it. These writings are the history book for American culture after the civil war. Americans can learn much about the past through these stories. Even though these stories may not be historically accurate, they give the tone and ideas about American's past culture. It is helpful to see these cultural changes so that Americans can know where they come from and how far the American culture has come.