

Chesnutt's Haunted America: Historical Consciousness in "The Goophered Grapevine"

Charles W. Chesnutt utilizes a frame narrative in *The Conjure Stories* to bring about heteroglossia and put the two competing voices of John and Julius in conversation with one another. However, the frame narrative structure also enables Chesnutt to blend time and fluidly move between the past and present. By embedding a story within a story, Chesnutt is able to recontextualize the present with the darkness of the past. Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" is a Gothic inspired allegory that illustrates the slaves' intimacy with the land and how slavery is perpetuated in a capitalistic postbellum America.

Chesnutt rhetorically foregrounds the significance of Julius's story by using words and phrases that carry a deeper double meaning and are tinged with irony by the end of the short story. When John takes his wife, Annie, to see the estate he is looking to purchase, they happen upon Julius sitting on a log. As they approach Julius, he gets up to move out of their way, but John reassures him: "'Don't let us disturb you,' I said. 'There is plenty of room for us all'" (5). John's invasion of Julius's space and privacy and his justification of doing so by claiming there is enough room for *everyone* foreshadows his decision to purchase the property. By the end of the story, readers are left to challenge John's hypocrisy as he takes away the land Julius has a historical and cultural claim in. Although John would argue that by employing Julius he made "room" for him, taking the land away from Julius simultaneously takes away his independence and once again subjugates him to his status as property.

Chesnutt continues his use of ironic double meanings in John's sinister description of the estate. John's menacing language veers into the Gothic with its ominous imagery and is suggestive of a gloomy and mysterious past: "The vines—here partly supported by decayed and broken-down trellises, there twining themselves among the branches of the slender saplings

which had sprung up among them—grew in wild and unpruned luxuriance, and the few scattered grapes they bore were the undisputed prey of the first comer” (4). The fact that grapes are still growing in what is described as a neglected and rotting area is a reference to a violent history that still thrives in the present. The word “prey” has multiple meanings that also denote the continuation of a brutal history. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies four different definitions of “prey” that were relevant during the late 19th century: “An animal that is hunted or killed; something which is procured as or serves for food. A person who is pursued or controlled by another person; a victim of something harmful or undesirable” (OED). A medieval use of the word is even “Something taken in war or by pillage” (OED). John’s use of the word “prey” insinuates his unconscious acknowledgment of a shady and immoral past and his role in the perpetuation of it as predator. His reference to the previous master of the plantation as “first comer” is euphemistic and suggests an imperialist ideology that John later exhibits by purchasing the land. Julius is just as much a “prey of the first comer” as the grapes that still grow on the vines—the various definitions of “prey” point out that it can refer to both food and an exploited person. The land therefore becomes associated with Julius’s body and the bodies of all the slaves who have ever labored in its field. By purchasing the land, it is as if John is simultaneously purchasing Julius. “Prey” also alludes to the natural cycles and hierarchy of the food chain that is likened to the hierarchy established between John who uses his whiteness and wealth to obtain land and dominance over Julius.

Chesnutt uses Gothic elements such as darkness and untamed wilderness when John is on his way to visit the plantation with Annie to suggest that John is encroaching on land with a deep history. When John crosses into this territory, he also crosses into a Gothic realm: “We drove out of the town over a long wooden bridge... and once or twice through the solemn aisles of the

virgin forest, where the tall pines, well-nigh meeting over the narrow road, shut out the sun, and wrapped us in cloistral solitude. Once, at a cross-roads, I was in doubt as to the turn to take..."

(5). While the ominous imagery illustrates a Gothic landscape, it also gives the eerie sense that John is an unwelcome visitor. The language of "virgin forest," "cloistral solitude," and "cross-roads" goes so far as to connote John's intrusion into a sacred and religious space. The cross-roads foreshadow the significant moral decision John must eventually make between buying the property and taking Julius's advice to leave it alone.

Henceforth, the short story blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction as the literal overlaps with the figurative in Julius's allegorical story of the plantation. According to Julius, when Master Dugal realizes his slaves were eating the grapes from his land, he consults a witch that puts a spell on the land so that anyone who eats the grapes would die within twelve months. When a new slave, Henry, arrives and eats the grapes without knowing about the spell, Aunt Peggy agrees to help him reverse the curse, but Henry was never the same from then on: "En nex' spring, w'en he rub de sap on ag'in, he got young ag'in, en so soopl en libely... But in de fall er de year his grapes 'mence' ter straighten out, en his j'int's ter git stiff, en his ha'r drap off, en de rheumatiz begin ter wrastle wid 'im" (10). Master Dugal views Henry's cycling between youthfulness and old age as a profitable opportunity by selling him for fifteen hundred dollars when he is young and buying him back for five hundred dollars when he is old until the land withers away and Henry dies. On one hand, Henry's story is literally about his tragic death, but on the other hand it is figuratively about the connection and stake slaves have to the land in which they toiled. Henry's physical body and the "fruits" of his labor become inextricable. The conflation of the bodily and the grapevines emphasizes the dehumanization of slaves, but it is also a reflection of the white landowner's corruption and disconnection with the land.

Master Dugal's possession with greed makes readers question what is truly cursed—the land itself as Julius claims or a deeper white supremacist ideology that justifies capitalizing off of slave bodies. When a Yankee promises Master Dugal that he can double his profits, “Mars Dugal des drunk it all in, des ‘peared ter be bewitch’ wid dat Yankee” (12). Master Dugal's bewitchment with money parallels with John's greed. Even though John thinks Julius only told him the story to secure his own economic gains, John naively misses the historical value the story attributes to the land because of his skewed moral compass that is concerned with profit. The ultimate decay of the land when “de leaves withered en swivel’ up, en de young grapes turn’ yaller, en bimeby eve’ybody on de plantation could see dat de whole vimya’d wuz dyin’” (12) that leads to Henry's death links the abuse of slaves with the exploitation of the vineyard. In other words, racism is sowed in the land. John following in Master Dugal's footsteps suggests that the real “curse”—that of believing in racial superiority and supporting racial oppression—has yet to be broken.

By the end of “The Goophered Grapevine,” readers realize that questioning the factuality or motive of Julius's story like John does is beside the point. Whether fact or fiction, Julius's story unearths an oppressive reality that black bodies continue to face postbellum in a capitalistic America where they are still subjugated by white, wealthy landowners. Chesnut's story is ultimately a story about how much work the nation must still do to heal its open wounds. It does not support demolishing America's violent past like the Yankee does or perpetuating it in a capitalistic economy as systemic violence like John does, but rather it supports acknowledging and remembering a gory past like Julius does so history does not repeat itself. The ironic ending is not hopeful as it stands for an America that is bound to repeat its mistakes.

