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RACISM IS A RACE FOR BLACK YET TO WIN IN AFRO AMERICA

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Abstract

Racial discrimination refers to the separation of people through a process of social division into categories not necessarily related to races for purposes of differential treatment. The struggle faced, everyday, by the dark colored people are speechless. The words are few to express their troubles but cannot be let it go as such. Their sufferings end only when their life comes to an end. The same happened in Charles Waddell Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars*. Rena's death is the result of her mixed-race. Thus, the novel dramatizes the emotional turmoil and inevitable conflicts brought on racial passing. Through, the agonizing fate of Rena Walden, a beautiful woman in search of her own identity, Chesnutt exposes the destructive consequences of the legal and social fictions surrounding race in the post-bellum South.

Key words: Racism, Black yet and Afro America.

1. Racism is a race for black yet to win in Afro America

Chesnutt's stories were more complex than those of many of his contemporaries. He wrote about characters dealing with difficult issues of illegitimacy, racial identities and social place throughout his career. Chesnutt's stories were accepted by top - ranked national magazines. Notably Chesnutt was the first African American writer whose texts were published predominantly by leading periodicals such as *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Outlook* and major publishers, including Houghton Mifflin and Doubleday.

Chesnutt's views on race relations put him somewhere between those of Du Bois' talented tenth and Booker Washington's separate but equal positions. Chesnutt imagined a "stone by stone" dismantling of race antagonism as the black

middle class grows and prospers. Filled with numbers and statistics, Chesnutt's speech or essay chronicles, black achievements and black poverty called for full civil and political rights for all African Americans. He had little tolerance for the new ideology of race pride, and he envisioned instead a nation of "one people molded by the same culture". Full-blooded people are the dark colored people.

Charles W. Chesnutt's "*The House Behind the Cedars*" problematize the concept of race by demonstrating to the reader that subscriptions to stereotypes warranted by skin color are ambiguous and consequently not at all as concrete, nor as correct, as comfortably believed. The novel "*The House Behind the Cedars*" centrally addresses the relationships between Whites and African Americans in the Post Civil War South. Those who were freed after the war no longer belong to white families; however, the text demonstrates that some still consider themselves to be in a subordinate position to their white masters. The

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events that transpire in “*The House Behind the Cedars*” emphasize the extent to which race relations are strained in the south despite any progress that has been made since the war.

John and Rena Walden are African-Americans of mixed-race ancestry. Having changed his last name to Warwick and married a white Southerner, John works as a prominent attorney in Clarence, South Carolina as a white man. As a black man he cannot survive in South among white. He could not stay for a long in North even as a visitor because his black identity would be revealed out so that he can't be there in the South. This can be expressed thoroughly through the words of Chesnutt.

“I wouldn't stay too long. The people of a small town are inquisitive about strangers, and some of them have long memories. I remember we went over the law, which was in your favor; but custom is stronger than law- in these matters custom is law. It was a great pity that your father did not make a will” (22).

Race is a main problem to be faced. Racism is generally defined as actions, practices, or beliefs that reflect the racial worldview: the ideology that humans are divided into separate and exclusive biological entities called “races”. This ideology entails the belief that members of a race share a set of characteristic traits, abilities, or qualities, that traits of personality, intellect, morality, and other cultural behavioral characteristics are inherited, and that this inheritance means that races can be ranked as innately superior or inferior to others.

The exact definition of racism is controversial, both because there is little scholarly agreement about the meaning of the concept “race”, and because there is also little agreement about what does and doesn't constitute discrimination. Some definitions would have it that any assumption that a person's behavior would be influenced by their racial categorization is racist, regardless of whether the action is intentionally harmful or pejorative. Other

definitions only include consciously malignant forms of discrimination.

According to the United Nations convention, there is no distinction between the terms racial discrimination and ethnic discrimination, and superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere.

In an annual tournament Tryon select his queen and feels proud to have Rena as his own queen too. He proposes his love to Rena and is ready to marry her. Upon discovering that Rena is not of pure white blood he decides 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.

Tryon claims that he could overlook any other flaw, including illegitimate birth, but race could not be ignored. Even Molly Walden, who is of mixed race, and thus would not have any personal issues with African-Americans, acknowledges the ridiculousness of choosing to live as a black person if given the opportunity to be white. When Frank offers to drive across the world for Rena, Molly laughs and thinks, “Her daughter was going to live in a fine house, and marry a rich man, and ride in her carriage. Of course a Negro would drive the carriage, but that was different from riding with one in a cart”. The dream becomes a day dream for Molly. Rena could not go with a rich man in a cart as her ancestry was known to Tryon.

In the novels *The House behind the Cedars* by Charles W. Chesnutt and *Autobiography of an Ex. Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson, the protagonists struggle with their African American racial identities, and make attempts to avoid and exterminate those identities, only to realize that they can never completely run away from their races. In both novels, the characters are troubled by the disadvantages by attempting to “pass” as



white. While they spend a significant portion of their lives attempting to leave behind their African American identities, they are stricken with regret and guilt in light of the many psychological sacrifices they made in doing so.

John's mother and his relatives and many other African-Americans work menial jobs as they are still black and live in North Carolina. On the other hand, Rena is troubled by the fact that she has roots in two distinct cultures and identities. Rena's confusion and distress for her racial identity causes significant stress for her in regards to her love life. For both John and Rena, happiness depends on their ability to pass as white.

The fear of black identity prevents Rena and John as well, from enjoying their white aristocratic life without guilt or shame. A novel of purpose and one of more than ordinary merit is going to show that neither law nor love can conquer prejudice in matters of racial differentiation, is offered by Chesnutt in the novel, *"The House Behind the Cedars"*.

The germ of the story is framed on the free manners and easy morals that prevailed in the south before the war, and led to the intermingling of the blood of two races - Caucasian and Ethiopian, and the tale itself is an arraignment of "the senseless and unnatural prejudice" by which a race ascribing superiority to right of blood permitted a mere suspicion of servile blood to outweigh a vast preponderance of its own.

The unmerited penalty visited upon is not responsible for the circumstances through which they suffer, to whom God has given as many good gifts as are vouchsafed the superior race, and the tyranny of custom withholds all that makes these gifts valuable. Chesnutt thinks of race as being something separate and outside of language and color.

John and Rena Walden have this one drop of the alien blood in their veins which ranks them as colored. Their father was a southern gentleman; their mother a free mulatto girl. To Rena's

sensitive spirit, today was born of yesterday, tomorrow would be but the off-spring of today. The characters are passing as white in the novels of Chesnutt to illustrate traditional expectations of each race.

Traditional expectation is particularly highlighted by Mrs. Tryon's appearance in Rena's school where she is surprised by Rena's refined manner which was, "not merely of fine nature, but of contact with cultural people; a certain reserve of speech and manner quite inconsistent with Mrs. Tryon's experience of colored women. Much effort was made for Chesnutt to build this story into a publishable novel. The effort was accepted by Houghton Mifflin in 1900. It was controversial in its way of addressing racial tensions, miscegenation, and non-whites passing for white people.

A typical sentence from Mifflin's fiction is a passage from *"The House Behind the Cedars"*.

"When the first great shock of his discovery wore off, the fact of Rena's origin lost to Tryon some of its initial repugnance indeed, the repugnance was not to the woman at all, as their past relations were evidence, but merely to the thought of her as a wife".

Furthermore, Chesnutt was one of the only writers who encouraged the idea that people of mixed race had "a morally and socially defensible argument, if not a natural right, to be accepted as white". Overall he received somewhat mixed reviews from various critics. Perhaps the main motivation that spurred on Chesnutt in his writing career was a desire to improve the lot of his people. He had decided early on that the best way to accomplish his "high, holy purpose", as he called it, was "not so much (through) the elevation of colored people as the elevation of the whites"- that is, to advance the understanding of whites and thereby their tolerance.

"Rena was no philosopher, either sad or cheerful. She could not even have replied to this argument, that races must lift themselves, and the



most that can be done by others is to give them opportunity and fair play. Hers was a simpler reasoning, - the logic by which the world is kept going onward and upward when philosophers are at odds and reformers are not forthcoming" (166).

It is a touching story, and like most other really pathetic stories has an accompaniment of humor and matter here and there for laughter. The keen admiration on the part of the colored people in the book for the thing in all of their people which most nearly allies them to the whites is a most pathetically humorous thing. In Miss Molly's eyes the brown color and broad mulatto type of Mr. Jeff Wain are quite compensated for by the straightness of his black hair.

In the dance of the yellow people, in which the beautiful Rena is finally constrained to take part with the repulsive Jeff Wain, everything is definitely gauged, in social estimation, on the basis of comparative whiteness. At the beginning of the dance there are a few couples on the floor, others being "restrained by bashfulness or religious scruples, which do not yield until later in the evening"- when everyone dances. These people are pitiable in their want of real intelligence and self-respect. But the black Negro Frank, not having his natural good sense and honesty overlaid by so many false notions, is wise and good.

One drop of black blood makes the whole man black." "Why shouldn't it be the other way, if a white blood is so much superior?" inquired the lad. "A very searching questions this, which is capable of true answer only in one way. "It is more convenient as it is profitable. The inequality among people is clearly projected through the quotes of Amartya Sen. "Human diversity is no secondary complication; it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality".

Amartya Sen means to the white race. The boy goes off and passes for a white man. He succeeds in every material respect, and is white-so long as nobody knows that he has black blood. But, of course, a shadow of exposure hangs over

him, as it hangs today over many a man and woman beyond all doubt, in the North as well as in the South. The struggle faced, everyday, by the dark colored people are speechless. The words are few to express their troubles but cannot be let it go as such. Their sufferings end only when their life comes to an end. Rena's death is the result of her mixed-race. Thus, "*The House Behind the Cedars*" dramatizes the emotional turmoil and inevitable conflicts brought on racial passing. Thus, their author exposes the destructive consequences of the legal and social fictions surrounding race in the post - bellum south. Days go off but not the mind set of people anywhere in the world. It would take even a century to get mingled with each other. Race goes off to find the winner.

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