



HooDoo and Who Don't: Authorial Tone of Approval and Disapproval Towards Black Magic

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**"HooDoo and Who Don't:
Authorial Tone of Approval and Disapproval
Towards Black Magic"**

by

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For many Afro-American writers, the degree to which they exploit elements characteristic of Black culture and the manner in which they treat folklore reveal an unresolved tension between the hyphenated terms of their dual identity as Americans. Working within a specific ethnic context for some is tantamount to conceding priority to a non-artistic commitment, causing them to eschew those bonds. Such seems to be the position of Clarence Major, for example. Others assume "Blackness" as a natural, integral part of their universe, both as daily existence and creative realm. Among the latter would be included Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, John Wideman, and many notable others. Still others make that very culture the hub of their fantasy; the novels of Ishmael Reed would be impossible to transpose into a non-Black context without crucial loss of meaning. Lastly, the extreme opposite pole is represented by the Black cultural nationalism of Imamu Amiri Baraka and his followers.

Probably the most problematic literary fruit to reap for the cornucopia of Black folklore hangs from the tree of Occult Knowledge. On the one hand, it seems like superstition and a culpable tie to an illiterate pagan past in a nation divided between its Christian fundamentalism and an agnostic humanism; on the other hand, it has no true equivalent in the White society's self image and neglecting it is tantamount to abjuring a unique gift in the Black heritage. Thus, the author's handling of Black Magic in his work provides an important clue to his overall vision of the function of Afro-American culture in the society as a whole, from a philosophy of total assimilation to one of cultural interface to one of Black cultural isolationism.¹ The constraints placed upon the present study prohibit an exploration of the full gamut of attitudes, leaving us with no alternative but to select a single aspect of the representation of voodoo and a limited range of authors. Nonetheless, we feel that the narrative stances assumed by those writers who seem most closely linked to the hyphen in Afro-American, the cultural interface

group, provide significant insight into the implied author and implied reader relationship and ultimately the nature of the message transmitted. Our comparison of Charles Waddell Chesnutt's frame novel, *The Conjure Woman* with three contemporary pieces, Ernest J. Gaines' short story, "A Long Day in November", John Wideman's short story, "Mr Thomas", and Ishmael Reed's series including *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, necessarily highlights the greater artistic confidence of a generation of writers whose cultural identity presents less of an immediate problem with the public than at the close of the nineteenth century, but which is still far from being a moot question.²

Indeed, Chesnutt as precursor in the domain of fictional writing faced a different public from the readership today. Turn-of-the-century America's inability to accept the notion of colored people engaging in non-essential activities such as producing literature may explain why Chesnutt tended to disassociate himself from the folkloric aspect of his creative universe. Given the racist context of the times and society, if we assume symmetry between the attitudes expressed by an author and those elicited from his reader, a White readership would be hard put to recognize itself as the mirror-image of a Black author. For Chesnutt, that symmetry called for meticulous attention to the problems of distancing between the real author and the implied author, implied author and his narrator, and implied author and the message he conveys.³ Achieving this distance was assured by the technique of the double narrator coupled with a bit of sleight of hand reminiscent of the tradition of the trickster. Hence, *The Conjure Woman* is built upon the opposition between two narrators and two separate narrative streams. The free or unbound stream of narration, so-called because it has relatively little bearing on the principal subject, is the frame piece, with a narrator who is both the implied author and a character in the fiction itself. This frame piece has as its function the motivation for the inner narration, specifically establishing a conflict between the author-narrator, evidently a member of relatively well-to-do society who has come South for reasons of health and who intends to occupy his time by turning the abandoned grape vines on his rental property into a profitable venture, and one Uncle Julius whose habits this project will disturb. A subsidiary character in the frame piece, Julius becomes the central narrator for all the folklore, from language traits to superstitions to Black character archetypes.

Besides providing a reasonable situation in which the various tales of the inner fiction will be elaborated, the frame story forms a kind of buffer zone between reality and the realism of the inner fable. Because it is this inner fable which gives its name to the work as a whole and provides the subject or main theme, conjuration, it furnishes first evidence of slight duplicity on the part of the writer. With two first-person narrators rivalling for the reader's trust, Chesnutt as real author leaves clues in the implied author-narrator's discourse regarding the attitude to be assumed. One of these clues is in the characterization of Uncle Julius whose

role as foil justifies the series of voodoo-related tales which begins with "The Goophered Grapevine," purportedly an attempt to dissuade the stranger from cultivating the abandoned vineyards on his rental property. In conformity with popular convention of the period, Julius is a reluctant witness who must be coaxed into performing for the narrator and his family, a classic rhetorical figure in the White American myth of the Negro.⁴ Already tainted with suspicion because of his egotistic interest in the grapes, the reliability of Julius as narrator is further undercut by the nature of his subject matter which, by the phenomenon of symmetry of viewpoint, the implied author encourages his similarly enlightened reader to regard from a position of cultural and intellectual superiority.⁵

An almost incredible amalgamation of all the stereotypes of Black characters found in American letters, Julius is lazy and conniving, essentially a poor wretch whose actions unwittingly betray his own disbelief in the goophering story.⁶ By undermining his inner-tale narrator so flagrantly, Chesnutt induces the reader to conclude that the authorial intention is to portray a humorous side of life among uneducated Negroes. So the author-narrator goes on to point out that even as Uncle Julius spins his yarn about the historic curse put on the vineyard in contention, Julius himself consumes the grapes with gusto. The frame narrator is too delicate to push Julius into explaining the discrepancy between his tale and his actions, and this tactful manner in itself, while suggesting a kind of paternalizing affection for the old story teller, also suggests a social hierarchy which separates the two men and their worlds. When the frame narrator doggedly refuses to heed Julius' warnings about "the Goophered Grapevine", the reader senses he - the implied author-narrator - is defeating the trickster. As pointed out above, because the author-narrator enjoys the role of the *raisonneur* or philosopher and guide to the reader and their viewpoints are assumed to coincide, the victory lends itself to vicarious participation. On the surface, then, Chesnutt seems to play one reliable narrator off against one unreliable one, thus maintaining a gently scoffing attitude towards the whole question of spells as was appropriate to the expectations of his White readership.

Often attacked for his ingratiating posture towards Whites, the fact that Chesnutt scrupulously avoids providing any tangible clues to the racial identity of his frame narrator leads us to speculate about the nature of his authorial intentions. Although the deference Julius displays before the latter and his family could indicate a mere difference in social and economic class, it would most likely have been interpreted at the time the book was published as strict adherence to the customs of Jim Crow. There seems to be a tacit agreement between the real author and his implied reader that the implied narrator is a White man. As the first "serious craftsman" of his race to break "the color line in publishing," Chesnutt was considered a curiosity by those few members of the general reading public who knew he was Black.⁷ For

those unaware, there is no "Black" thumbprint in the style of the frame narrator that would arouse their suspicions that they are looking at Julius from a Negro point of view. This lacuna provides the occasion for subtle irony in the "static", i.e. unrevealed, distancing which only becomes apparent in hindsight. The real trickster of the tale is the frame narrator who veils his racial identity behind a level of language the reader recognizes as standard usage in contrast with the Black dialect employed by Uncle Julius. Although two negatives only come up positive in an algebraic equation, if the double "unreliability" of Chesnut's narrators does not imply approval, it at least leaves room for some doubt in regard to his true stance towards the element of Black magic.⁸

A very different technique allows Ernest Gaines to maintain a similarly uncommitted position in "Long Day". Here, a single narrator suffices to achieve the same equivocal distance as in the Chesnut piece because the story is told from a child's viewpoint, once again limiting narrator reliability. Obviously, a child looks unquestioningly upon the adult world that surrounds him, all the more so when he sees his own intimate world about to collapse. "Long Day" tells of a family breakup avoided in the nick of time thanks to the skills of a conjure woman with the slightly ironic name of Marie Toussaint. Insofar as we have no other witness, as readers we must rely upon the child's testimony, a testimony made all the more immediate and mimetic by the exclusive use of the present tense and Black dialect. Innocently, the child provides support for his revelations on the efficacy of Madame Toussaint's services and her solid reputation in the community as he retraces his steps alongside his father during the man's desperate attempts to find the means to preserve his marriage. In this way, the child, Sonny, inadvertently calls his own corroborating witnesses whose individual experiences with Madame Toussaint brought about the desired results. Although the scene is recorded and related from Sonny's immature viewpoint, the exchange between the father and Mr Charlie from whom he hopes to borrow the money Madame Toussaint demands establishes her services as traditionally used by the community with which she maintains close tabs.

Alternately, as the story advances, the reader associates and dissociates his own point of view from that of the child narrator. His scepticism is aroused when father and son first visit the conjuror whose know-it-all air, contradictions to the father's version of events, and adamant position in regard to the fees she must be paid make her an unsympathetic character. All logic runs counter to the radical solution she proposes as the charm to raze the wall of marital incomprehension: the man must burn the car that led to his neglecting his wife and manly role in the first place, not sell it to recover the investment it represents. Bitter as the remedy might seem, it is taken, the charm works, the wife spurns her suitor, and returns under her husband's roof. Who's to say voodoo isn't lay psychology or vice-versa? Without directly espousing the validity of voodoo in its traditional role or engaging in any polemics, the child's

guileless witness attests to a universe saved by black magic. By virtue of a displacement in time - the action takes place during the Great Depression when simple folk in Louisiana had less access to sophisticated notions - Gaines conserves the purity of the child narrator's tale. After all, we were all children then. Gaines' double-distancing device of the child narrator in a slightly backward society allows him as "real" author to remain aloof, letting the reader assume, if he so chooses, that the writer is treating voodoo practices as a common sociological phenomenon in a time period less privileged than our own.

Or just might there really be something to voodoo that no other service in our society, civil, laic, or religious, can render? Gaines has left the question more open than Chesnutt had because he never directly challenges the authority of his narrator. Still, this child's eye vision evades the real issue. Carrying the problem of narrator reliability to new heights, John Wideman multiplies the voices and points of view in his short story, "Mr. Thomas." Curiously, as the center of interest in this story who lends his name to the title, Thomas as character seems to shirk all responsibility, including narrative. That task is divided between a first-person account by a folksy character speaking in Black dialect, a neutral, "narrator-less," third-person telling which incorporates dialogue between Mr. Thomas and a young woman, and lastly, the letters this female person writes, recording all her experiences and impressions for the boyfriend she's left behind in the city. Clearly, the young lady lacks common sense, as the old woman narrator points out, effectively undermining the already suspect version of truth coming out of the letters. A few old-woman idiosyncracies that enhance the mimetic value of the portrait aside, the folk character seems to be the *raisonneur* whose vision the reader is most likely to choose as most reliable.

Several points in common with Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* appear, not the least of which are the dual nature and irony that characterize the author's point of view. Again, there is double narration with one voice speaking in Black dialect and the other in standard English. In addition, the Black voice has an oral quality which enhances the intimacy of first-person witness while the neutral voice narrates in free indirect discourse, shifting back and forth from the impersonal third-person, narratorless form to the modern-day young Black woman. Throughout the interchanging streams of narration, the reader's natural inclination for the facility of standard English usage causes him to waver over the rest of the evidence. He is drawn to the Black-dialect first person voice because she is at once intimate and seemingly commonsensical, Christian by her diction and moral attitudes that lead her to pray during adversity and talk about "God's green earth," modern in that she consults a doctor for her illnesses (p. 22); at the same time, the more familiar language and situation of the free indirect discourse attract reader confidence in this apparently omniscient - because nonsubjective -

viewpoint.

The storyline brings a young and attractive city dweller to an out-of-the-way small town to beg initiation into the arts of voodoo from a certain Mr. Thomas who keeps the general store and by reputation once ran a successful sideline in witchcraft. Much of the information in this sequence is gleaned from her letters. What on the surface appears to be a tale of misguided youthful enthusiasm seducing reluctant senility in a quest for occult knowledge turns out in the dynamic revelation of the surprise final paragraph to be either a scuffle for power in the demonic hierarchy or a pathetic case of senile jealousy and madness. The neutral language and educated background of the young woman lead the reader to excuse her errors which, nonetheless, "alinate" him in their apparent foolishness, thereby lessening the authority of her viewpoint. This alienation enhances the credibility of the Black dialect voice which disapproves of all the goings-on. Having acquired the status of mentor and guide, the old, pipe-smoking Black woman narrator brings two unexpected turns to light: first, Mr. Thomas really is a sorcerer, a fact she has not previously conceded, and secondly, he is merely the disciple of the narrator herself, the perfect lieutenant to the Lord and Master of witchcraft before whom she has come to lodge formal complaint. Nowhere in the delightfully earthy creation of this character has Wideman betrayed her secret, yet whichever interpretation is placed on this ultimate revelation, there is no incongruity when the story is viewed in retrospect. Whether the old woman is actually a jealous schizophrenic or whether she is meant to be taken at face value, the sequences of the tale take on a new dimension thanks to the dynamic revelation.

Through the authorial control this belated announcement implies, an added level of communication exchange between addresser and addressee is gained. Inherent in this dynamic revelation is the establishment of a new dialogue between the "real" author and the "real" reader, both heretofore hidden behind the scenes. Only the final paragraph, an apostrophe addressed to an absent "you" who would traditionally be associated with the reader himself brings this reader out into the open. By implication, the reader sees himself playing a role he had not anticipated, be it as the Lord and Master of witchcraft or more credibly as an engaged reader. For he can no longer remain content to play the outside narratee, having been made part and parcel to the plot, and with it, to the practice of voodoo. Whatever distance it is proper to maintain toward madness or voodoo must be ascertained by him alone. Aside from the comedy of human errors, Wideman's humor in "Mr. Thomas" hinges principally on the interaction between his implied author and reader, a kind of private joke to be shared in their intimacy, a play between belief and disbelief that ultimately draws the reader into the fantasy world of the author's making.

Ishmael Reed represents the antithesis of the concept of authorial stance. His unabashedly humorous intention draws on slapstick while his reordering of priorities revalues all aspects of Afro-American culture by making them functional in his creative universe. His irreverent, satirical intent, mock-serious tone, and fractured levels of language seem like a kind of hoodoo in themselves, working a spell on the reader who falls under their power. Reed's linguistic pyrotechnics speed the pace to a dizzying crescendo that leaves no pause for reflection and little relevancy for the static term, "stance." Be that as it may, the fact remains that his comic vein reinforces the hold of certain traditions by tacitly raising them to the level of respected values in contemporary White society. Such is the context in which prefatory notes on the order of the following from *Louisiana Red* set the tone for the new double-speak Reed is steadily evolving:

In order to avoid detection by powerful enemies and industrial spies,
19th-century HooDoo people referred to their Work as "The Business."

Consequently, when the wife of Reed's hero, Ed Yellings, wants to leave him because "Her husband would never discuss his Business with her", two possibilities - besides the scatological - present themselves: either the note is a red herring or Ed Yellings will not share the secrets of voodoo (p.15).

The confusion is compounded by yet another preliminary note, this time on the nature of gumbo - Ed's product - which requires an "occult science" to make (p.6). From Ed's Black Magic Bayou cooking to the Loup Garou Kid's parodic metamorphosis as the Son of the Prince of Evil in *Yellow Back Radio*, Reed's fictional universe is steeped in voodoo. Exclusively Black, voodoo provides the magic cure to end "Louisiana Red," the name given to all the woes on earth. Voodoo becomes the code name for Soul, Black unity, community, High John de Conqueror, all those weapons in the arsenal of human dignity that historically have allowed Blacks to survive in a hostile White environment. With Reed, writing in the satirical mode obliges him to make all choices in advance. In recompense, satire frees him from the need to create a scapegoat narrator to hide behind since as a mode it is inherently distanced. No sleight of hand: Reed's broad farces face the public head-on, but the tacit contract between writer and reader calls for comedy, thereby limiting writer responsibility outside of his imaginary realm. By implication, this very limitation makes the choice to work in the comic mode a narrative stance in itself.

Perhaps we should have anticipated as a foregone conclusion that writers who see themselves as a "cultural interface" necessarily must opt for distancing when dealing with a subject that is totally alien to one of the two systems they wish to make compatible. In the final analysis, by distancing their stances, a technique which simultaneously attenuates respon-

sibility and approval, all of the writers discussed above remain faithful to the principles of interfacing: they deal with a subject that is taboo, incompatible with the lifestyle of a majority of the public, in a manner that diminishes the barbarian overtones connected to voodoo and humanizes those who engage in the practice without destroying the tinge of exoticism indispensable for conserving the integrity of a divergent tradition within the dominant culture.

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- 1 - The notion of interface - writers from specific ethnic backgrounds working behind cultural barriers and attempting to span them to share their unique vision - was pioneered by *Melus*. See "Toward a definition of Interfacing" by S.E.Solberg, *et al* in *Melus*, Vol. 5, N° 2 (Summer 1978), pp.2-14.
 - 2 - Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman*, 1889 (rpt. Ridgewood, New Jersey: Gregg Press, 1968).

Ernest Gaines, "a Long Day in November" (from *Bloodline*), in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), pp.359-402.

John Wideman, "Mr. Thomas," in *Callaloo*, Vol. 1, N° 4 (October, 1978), pp.19-29.

Ishmael Reed, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (New York: Avon, 1975).

Ishmael Reed, *Yellow Back radio Broke Down* (New York, Avon, 1975).

All subsequent references to the above editions will be made parenthetically in the text.
 - 3 - See Geoffrey N. Leech and Michael H. Short, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose* (London: Longman, 1981), p.280.
 - 4 - See, for example, John Wideman, "Surfiction" in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 21 (Summer, 1985), pp.633-639, in his annotations of Chesnutt, p.634.
 - 5 - For the concept of the reliable narrator, see Wayne C.Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p.84, pp.158-159, chapter VII.
 - 6 - Sterling Brown, "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," in *Journal of Negro Education*, April, 1933, rept. *Callaloo*, February-May, 1982, pp.55-89.
 - 7 - *Encyclopedia of Black America*, W. Augustus Low and Virgil A.Clift, eds. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), pp.224-225.
 - 8 - The shadow of doubt is also cast by the developments of the frame story: after hearing so many tales of enchantments and spells, the narrator and his wife pointedly avoid taking a particular road they recognize as haunted from Julius' tales.