Teaching "Wife of His Youth" as the Rewriting of King Arthur's Passing
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Abstract: Contemporary students position themselves among three entwined narratives. Initially there would be the traditional British narrative of the rise of modernity. Then there would be the African American and American narrative of multi-voices within Anglo-American culture. An innovative plan for the contemporary classroom is to articulate a third narrative that is somewhat distinct from the previous two. What the new readers of Chesnutt must imagine is the possibility of expanding national boundaries for indigenous Native American and Polynesian cultures without the extermination or assimilation of the populations. The same would be true of the previously enslaved African Americans. Hence, a provocative story of diversity subsists within the apparently transparent texts of American literary realism. What students must realize is that the literal and cultural wars embedded there may well be connected to each other; for the texts of literature and social transformation are entwined. Teaching Chesnutt means revealing the multi-voicings of power within the nation’s texts and therefore the nation itself.

Despite several informative studies about the short stories of Charles Chesnutt during the early twenty-first century (Cutter, Hewitt, and McWilliams), there remains an opportunity to explore tested pedagogical strategies for making Wife of His Youth (1899), his second collection of short stories, come alive again for diverse undergraduates. Though I have considered both volumes of Chesnutt's stories, and have read a few of his novels over the years, as a specialist of African American short fiction in general, I focus here on only several of his most teachable and accessible works. During my forty-two years of teaching his stories in both survey courses in African American literature, as well as in more advanced classes of African American short fiction, early at Haverford College and later at the University of Tennessee and later still at the University of Georgia, I have found an interdisciplinary method of interracial intertextuality particularly effective. A text speaks therefore to those that preceded it as it will speak in time to many who will follow. A text can either reinforce the earlier narratives or radically adapt them to meet the requirements of new times and generations or even evolving civilizations. Indeed the approach is sometimes interwoven deeply with humanistic inquiry of the racial self's radical adaptation of Anglo-American aesthetics to a new black idiom – an innovative way of perceiving and knowing.
American political reality. Students of various races learn to appreciate the philosophical rewriting of their undergraduate identities and ideologies—texts—just as Chesnutt reshapes classic English texts by the medievalist author Thomas Mallory and the Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. By rewriting in this instance, I mean the reprisal of English texts primarily (but not exclusively) in modern and post-modern African American voice.

First, by way of expository context, teachers would initiate discussions of a modern theory that would ground the reader's interpretation of the work within a network of textual relations. To discover the meaning of a text entails observing interwoven connections and threads (Allen 1). As meaning emerges from the relation of one text to another, it ranges across the literary space of epochs and generations. Indeed, it points to those social circumstances with which it is interactive. Regarding the medieval, Victorian, and later modern periods, there is often a desirability for African American originality. In this way, Chesnutt revises old social networks of meaning into more innovative connections of interpretation within the context of modern American democracy.

What works for understanding texts of varying epochs, therefore, helps well in comprehending diverse cultures in American society across racial and ideological divides. Intertextuality proves useful because, as Allen says, "it foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness, and interdependence in modern cultural life" (5). As Roland Barthes would remind the contemporary reader, the word "text" itself denotes a cloth woven of previous threads. The current reader benefits from the literary fibers of what has already been written and already read. In addition to being "literary," student systems of interpretation are complexly human, including the social and political dimensions of their worlds. There are shared patterns of meaning between people and the diachronic texts as well as between those texts and the students' actual social lives. Just as students' learning responds to the written and rewritten texts of the past, so will that of future students respond to the thoughts and works by current authors and thinkers. While today's learners are the products of complex institutional and social responses, they prepare for the eventual rewriting of their thought and work by others. Student lives are evolving even as the textual patterns in English are. Though students may have appropriated part of their inherited language, their world-view, to their individual voicings of the world, traditional traces influence their interpretations of both text and world. In fact, the English language has...
embedded within itself and its history most, if not all, of our cultural contradictions of past and present, differing epochs, various social groups, and even diverse ideologies (Allen 28).

Contemporary students position themselves among three entwined narratives. Initially there would be the traditional British narrative of the rise of modernity. Then there would be the African American and American narrative of multi-voices within Anglo-American culture. According to the earlier narrative, there would be the history of the 1850s in which Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* was published. By 1850-51 the first telegraph cable had been laid across the English Channel, and instantaneous photography became a new invention by William Fox Talbot. In those days, half the population of the United Kingdom was living in cities as the numbers increased from 1.1 million in 1801 to 2.7 million. The last duel officially occurred in England in 1852; then the Crimean War took place- between 1853 and 1856. Meanwhile, Henry Bessemer invented the blast furnace, facilitating the production of steel. By 1857 the telegraph cable extended across the Atlantic. When Charles Darwin’s revolutionary study, *Origin of the Species*, was published in 1859, the story of the English decade was complete.

A lesson of the 1890s, when the decade in which *Wife of His Youth* came out in the United States, depicts a far more complex, multi-voiced narrative. While the British story involves the historical development of a primarily European populous within the context of the latest technological revolution, the American account considers the far more complicated consequences of modernity for diverse American populations. The stark racial inequities resulted in a deep suspicion regarding whether the new technologies could ever resolve the political challenges of the human race. In 1890, the year often regarded as the end of the American frontier, two hundred Sioux were murdered at the battle of Wounded Knee.\(^1\) As later reported variously in the *Almanac of American History*, and by the Library of Congress, telephone services began with calls between New York and Chicago (“State of the Union” ) Despite protests by President Grover Cleveland in 1893, the future state of Hawaii became a U.S. protectorate.\(^2\) In October the famous Columbian Exhibition at Chicago took place, becoming an emblem of American modernity. Racial progress did not

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\(^1\) Such racial violence is often unaccounted for in the British narrative of the late nineteenth century.  
\(^2\) In contrast, the outrage of England at the time was whether the popular writer Arthur Conan Doyle should have published a story in which his legendary protagonist Sherlock Holmes apparently died.
suggest a similar upward trajectory. By 1895 the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass passed away and the nadir of Civil Rights in the nation was at hand. In 1896 the Supreme Court passed the now infamous Plessy vs. Ferguson ruling that legitimized the separate but equal doctrine of race discrimination in the nation. Regarding a dispute over the sovereignty of Cuba in 1898, the United States became involved in the brief Spanish American war. After all, Spain was still exercising what many considered to be too much colonial influence in the Americas. By the final year of the decade, many Southern states such as Georgia and Louisiana passed laws to disenfranchise Black Americans.

An innovative plan for the contemporary classroom is to articulate a third narrative that is somewhat distinct from the previous two. What the new readers of Chesnutt must imagine is the possibility of expanding national boundaries for indigenous Native American and Polynesian cultures without the extermination or assimilation of the populations. The same would be true of the previously enslaved African Americans. Hence, a provocative story of diversity subsists within the apparently transparent texts of American literary realism. What students must realize is that the literal and cultural wars embedded there may well be connected to each other; for the texts of literature and social transformation are entwined. Teaching Chesnutt means revealing the multi-voicings of power within the nation's texts and therefore the nation itself.

Regarding at least half the nine stories of Wife, including five of the most artfully crafted, I propose that the interdisciplinary interaction between the text and undergraduate reader benefits substantially from a comic play on the Arthurian romance at the text's core. In exemplary stories such as the title work and "The Passing of Grandison," the textual references are obvious. Yet elsewhere the connections prove more subtle according to the provocative controversies that Arthurian romance bequeaths indirectly to the present—a consequential and eventual transformation of identity and existence, a significature of racial aesthetics and ideologies, and finally even a hierarchy of political power embedded within English (pun intended) texts (See Miller, On the Ruins, 57-59). Therefore, the unifying metaphor of Arthur exists at once as reference and allusion, in other words, as figure and idea. In fact the suggestion even recurs as loosely related themes: a dishonorable Southern chivalry and eventually an emblem of public power. Such figuration appears in Wife initially as a European text intruding on a black woman's story ("Wife," "Cicely") and then...
as comic strategies that re-enliven our sense of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859-1885; "Grandison"). While the Arthurian figure would seem to disappear finally from Chesnutt's finishing tales ("Bouquet," "Web") the scenes complete a call for a revolutionary power on the student's part. The most useful pedagogical strategies for teaching the stories then is to explore initially the degree to which the Euro-American and African American texts provide contesting representations of American beauty. During the second stage of the learner's developing cognition would appear the writer's brilliant adaptation of English texts. In the final step, the learner must recognize that an ethnic's mastery of Standard English—both literally and figuratively—is indeed cultural power. To appreciate the significance of the discursive advance it is important to accept the interconnectedness of coupled propositions: Chesnutt's intertextual revision of Mallory and Tennyson in the texts and the professor's explanation of the revisionary process as it proves parallel to what actually transpires in student lives; for students are rewriting their own identities as well as redirecting the trajectory of Southern history. In exploring the impact of such critical readings on the actual teaching of Chesnutt's stories, I shall represent several student voices where they are most revealing.

*The initial strategy of learning necessitates the juxtaposition of English and African American aesthetics.* While Arthur's assignment to the last knight is well-known (return Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake's hand in white samite) in Tennyson's rewrite of Mallory, it is the superb structure of imagery that distinguishes the spectacle. During a wonderful summer day at noon, Arthur received the sword that must now be returned late one winter's night. In the dark, the weapon sparkles with dazzle of diamond and topaz, nearly blinding the person who holds it skyward. Though Bedivere will eventually comply with the King's wish to return the weapon to its origins, his first hesitation shows a fetish for the gorgeous hilt. His second uncertainty demonstrates later his personal conviction to bequeath to posterity the proof of Arthur's reign. So rather than abandon the blade, the last knight of the Round Table hides it in foliage by the sea. Now threatened with death at the hands of the King, he hurls Excalibur into the moonlight. More than a literal sword, the icon symbolizes power as well as a Eurocentric aesthetic.

The title story "Wife" may well challenge the student's English aesthetic altogether. Here the emphasis would seem to be about whether the debonair Mr. Ryder (former slave
name Sam Taylor) would continue to marry the "whiter" Molly Dixon or reprise Liza Jane, the slave wife of his youth. It is Jane, of course, who surprises him on his front porch twenty-five years after his escape from slavery. Her arrival in the evening (Ryder calls it afternoon) sets the tone for the disclosure of the daguerreotype she gives him so that he can recognize his earlier self. Though William Andrews has argued convincingly that this may indeed be a case of mistaken identity (Ryder's not really being Sam, 113) the narrator says that Ryder stares at the "reflection of his own face" (17). Just as the emblem of St. Paul's cathedral complements the verbal sign later in "The Bouquet," ("whites only") the daguerreotype here sets into play Jane's address on the flyleaf, Ryder's eyes now poised on Arthur's Guinevere in a *Dream of Fair Women* (1880). When the slave wife Liza Jane enters part two of the tale rather dynamically, substituting her practical assertion for Ryder's romanticized reading, she becomes a black foil to British aristocracy, in other words, of the white text within the black story.

Not even five feet tall, she stands erect, scanning the landscape restlessly as if never to have benefited from privilege. Decades of hardship have clearly taken a toll on her. Instead of regal cloth, she wears a blue calico gown matching the red shawl about her shoulders. Adorned with a brass broach as antiquated as her ancient apparel, her grey hairline shows just beneath her bonnet. She shows sublimity: "looked like a bit of the old plantation life, summoned up from the past by the wave of a magician's wand, as the poet's fancy had called into being the gracious shapes of which Mr. Ryder had just been reading" (10). Indeed, the encounter suggests that Ryder is more imprisoned within romanticized time than she is. Given his temporal delusions, he still considers himself middle-aged (the riddle of the Sphinx), but Liza has already realized that the both of them are now old. Though he fancies himself in romanticized time, she exists in modern time. Indeed, often the most distinctive quality of Victorian literature involves the celebratory remembrance of medieval time within an emerging wave of modernity.

If Ryder writes Liza's identity and therefore his own on the white flyleaf, the inscription does not mean that the British Empire is passé; for the past, as Faulkner often says, is never really so. Ryder is left to contemplate the indeterminate complexity of multi-consciousness. When Liza has exited the stage by the end of Part 2, and has already penned her location on the flyleaf, he "stood for a long time before the mirror of his
dressing case, gazing thoughtfully at the reflection of his own face” (17) As in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he speculates about whether all writings and therefore all self-inscriptions are mimetic—as Hamlet’s play within the play, the true representation of the world as it is—the self-created story of personal identities.

Much of the classroom debate of over the last forty years concerns whether the color-conscious Ryder should reprise his slave wife. According to the principles of medieval chivalry, and the Southern residues of the idea since the late nineteenth century, he should surely make an honest woman of her. Two-thirds of a century had elapsed between the publication of Wife and when my Tennessee undergraduates got around to reading the story in 1978. By then times had indeed changed. Several new recruits to the ideology of Women’s Liberation argued that Liza, if she had ever truly loved Ryder, should have forgiven him his slave vows so that he could then choose Dixon instead. Women, in other words, had no more right to claim men as property (the embedded ideology of slavery) than vice-versa. If the sheepsishness on polite faces were any sign, however, most of the sorority women disagreed passionately with such liberal release of obligations. Anyway, the sheer articulateness of the feminists silenced all others. Mostly the men of all races sided with the feminists who seemed to be granting men their own radical freedom.

By 2016 a leading feminist in my African American fiction class at Georgia challenges such romanticized idealism. Now freed of a Southern chivalry that had derived in part from the medieval code, she confessed to me after class that the paradox of gendered debt (Ryder keep your promise to be Liza’s husband) weighed heavily upon her. Mentored by a progressive female scholar of Afro-Brazilian autobiographies, she was seeking now to reconcile an apparent contradiction. Obviously the old sexual codes were sexist; yet during the last generation we had failed to create a new ethics of gendered relationships and personal freedoms. While the pioneering generation of the seventies had indeed succeeded in dismantling the old intellectual order, it had nevertheless failed in part to invent a new symmetry of fairness. My brilliant senior was looking for a new political adaptation of the American ideological past just as Chesnutt was seeking to reshape the Arthurian legacy. The two had really bonded.

Though "Cicely's Dream," lacks the polished symbolism and detail of the more artistically profound stories, it represents the most literal instance in which a primary
character by Chesnutt moves inadvertently between Anglo-American and African American worlds. On the literal level the story is about Union Captain Arthur Carey (mostly narrated in the story as John) who having developed a rather serious case of amnesia awakens from his stupor in the nick of time to rediscover Martha Chandler, his lost love and Boston socialite. Cary, who had served as a member of the 1st Massachusetts regiment during the Civil War, is eventually "restored to reason and his [my emphasis] world "(198). In the deeper tone, the story represents the daily struggles of freed slaves during the establishment of the Freedman's Bureau of schools for the years 1865-1872. Simultaneously, the symbolic actions of the text provide rich allusions to the biblical Moses and the dramatic Prospero, protagonist in Shakespeare's most conclusive work, The Tempest (1611-1612). In addition, the complementary subtexts prepare for a pictorial backdrop of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator as pictured in the new church at Patesville.

What may well provoke the class's inquiry into racial and cultural theory is asking whether the indeterminacy of race, indeed the popular color blindness today, is at all a good thing. Arthur's recovery comes at the expense of lost love for the tall, attractive black Cicely Green who has nursed him back to health. Since his deep tan may derive from either possibly long stays in the sun or racial ancestry, Chesnutt's tale, like Jean Toomer's "Bona and Paul" (Cane, 1923) depicts indeterminacy of identity as well. Cicely has foreseen her lover as light enough to pass for white. While she has desired him to have the physical qualities of a Euro-American, she has wanted him to remain safely within her fantasized African American world. What she has failed to do, as would be true of Sophy Tucker below, is theorize new possibilities of race as articulated within a revolutionary tradition of storytelling in English. Therefore, she is not deserving of John (who may be black) simply because she does not believe herself to be so. For the same reason, he may have well preferred the gorgeously white Martha anyway.

Nearly a generation ago now, an apparently young white woman came to my office, then at the University of Tennessee, to have a conversation about the subtlety of such stories. Rather recently, she said, her fellow white students had been demeaning the black learners on campus in the local ladies' room. Such peers, according to the view, failed to understand the importance of sorority decorum. "Well," said the student narrator, "I don't
think you're being fair. I'm black and I'm not like that." Then the others stared in public embarrassment, if not disgrace. In my case own case, the narrator was waiting for me to exclaim surprise at her disclosure. When I showed none, she pronounced, "Now you're certainly not going to sit there and say you knew I was black." "Oh, I knew." In order to resolve the somewhat humorous dispute, she proposed that someone else in the class, who was more than two-thirds white, was passing. When I immediately named Paul who sat in the last seat of the middle row, she was literally speechless.

Actually, I had been doing the racial "reads "all my life. As I often tell our English majors, people are only varieties of text. Harriett Jacobs had written in 1861, "I had not lived fourteen years in slavery for nothing. I had felt, seen, and heard enough to read [my italics] the characters, and question the motives, of those around me" (148). During the next class, students were stunned to hear the student-narrator's story. Over nearly an entire term, they hadn't imagined that this apparently white woman wasn't really white at all; they had never really considered that Cicely needed to appreciate herself before she would marry John (Arthur Carey) or anyone else. She may indeed have earned first place at the exhibition held to honor student achievement at the church by the end, but she had yet to learn the most humanistic lesson of all. The same was true of them.

During the second stage of cognizance, then, students learn to appreciate the way that African American texts subsume and transform English masterpieces. In the Tennyson text, passing means the death of Arthur (the literal title in Mallory) (see Sollors), moving from one realm of existence to another, but in Chesnutt's imaginary world the diction demonstrates more African American agency than prejudiced whites would prefer to believe. While Tennyson's Knights are loyal to the king, Chesnutt's Grandison is devoted to his slave family. Tennyson's narrator receives dramatization in the story, but Chesnutt's is more omniscient. Finally, Bedivere speaks within the Grand Style of English power and beauty while Chesnutt's figure is a former slave who tricks his way humorlessly out of the traditional narrative altogether.

Of all Chesnutt's stories, "The Passing of Grandison" proves to be the best case of African American comic reinvention. Nearly a light-hearted boy's adventure story worthy of Mark Twain, Richard Owens Esquire (Dick) wants to impress the Southern damsel Charity
Lomax to marry him in Kentucky. Planning to prove his worthiness by stealing Grandison, a supposedly faithful slave, he hopes his heroic acts will appeal to her finer Quaker sympathies. In a complementary sub-plot, he actually shows complicity with his slave-holding father. Both men presume divine authority over their slaves; and, in varied, fashion each helps prepare for a finale in which the trickster ironically secures his family's freedom.

"The story was never really known to but two persons until after the war." Already the narrator functions as a complementary trickster, arguing that textual censorship derives from historical causes. The Colonel, aware of a bond between political and consecrated space, refuses to tolerate dialogue about his commercial priorities: "[But] his negroes were outward and visible sign of his wealth and station, and therefore sacred to him" (177). Part of the irony is that Dick believes rather foolishly that he can extricate himself from the commercial narratives that have shaped his life.

Having failed to trick Grandison into escape during their two weeks in New York, Dick "did not even scold Grandison; how could he, indeed, find fault with one who so sensibly recognized his true place in the economy [my italics] of civilization, and kept it with such touching fidelity?" (188). Elsewhere he fails to consider that the great chain of being (hierarchy of power) is not a natural order of things; in fact, the structure of power improves the lives of a few world citizens by impoverishing many more. During the final step of the slave's spiritual journey, Dick strolls down the road to "where the white washed inn" [my italics] comprised of stone rises high beyond the trees on the roadside." As was customary in England and Ireland all the way back to the Middle Ages, he orders a sandwich and glass of ale (192). Having now luxuriously taken a window seat at the colonial inn, he recognizes Grandison in the distance. Though Dick had hoped that the mission would succeed, Grandison refuses to live out the political script that Dick who would manipulate the slave's escape has righteously declared for him. Now seated on a flat stone, the slave awaits the young master's return while turning away from the "awe-inspiring" cascades. Each man is now the voyeur of the other.

The inn signifies a repressed atrocity that has been white-washed from history. The first peoples, as the Canadians call them, are nearly vanished from the landscape. Indeed, the edifice suggests an inestimable cost in human treasure. Pivoting from the falls, then Dick fancies that his voice transcends the water's roar as he and the cascades
set each other's sound into natural relief. In as sense, the natural sound becomes the voice of God. As much as any time in his life, Grandison recognizes that his "owner" is only a man.

In the Tennyson text, passing means the death of Arthur (the literal title in Mallory) (see Sollors), moving from one realm of existence to another, but in Chesnutt's imaginary world the diction demonstrates far more African American agency than prejudiced whites often prefer to believe. In fact Grandison only "passes" for the contented slave, the delighted "Good Negro." While Tennyson's Knights are loyal to the king, Chesnutt's Grandison is devoted to his slave family. Tennyson's narrator actually receives significant dramatization in the story, but Chesnutt's is more omnisciently distant. Finally, Bedivere speaks within he Grand Style of English power and beauty (of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Tennyson) while Chesnutt's figure is a former slave who humorlessly tricks his way out of the Great Tradition narrative altogether.

In fact, it's enjoyable to detail the writer's artistic strategies for revising the imaginary literature of the English masters (pun intended). Often Chesnutt replaces straight-forward representation with African American dissembling and even comic jesting. Then, too, he looks beyond the limited geography of the British Isles in order to triangulate Old and New Worlds—the United States, England, and Canada. Ultimately his achievement means redefining which authors and citizens "own" English.

Within the context of intertextuality, a black undergraduate in our class of African American fiction at Georgia said she despised both Grandison and his story until the end. Early on the protagonist had seemed to her an Uncle Tom who played the submissive role forced upon him by American history. He was therefore a puppet and an enemy. Not only a mock epic figure that is imagined within the classic English portraiture from Mallory to Tennyson—from the medieval to the Modern—Grandison apparently becomes a buffoon within the grand style. Grandison becomes a walking caricature of his people. What the student had come to appreciate, however, was that the African American text had transformed the figure from fool to sage, hence revealing that Chesnutt could transform the process of an English reading of reality. Though the undergraduate had presumed in this instance that Chesnutt was writing from a traditional view, the author had used such presumptions to trick her into a misreading of the protagonist's character. By the end,
however, the author had compelled her to realize that the English language might well empower her to redefine her identity.

Teaching *Wife* involves reversing the way that students often perceive symbolic space, a linear progression of time, and therefore the beauty existing within it. Indeed, Martha Cutter recognizes that Chesnutt's parody inverts the structure of the slave narrative (Cutter, "Passing," 46). After all, Grandison must position the North Star to his back while conniving to steal his family away to freedom. As several critics understand (McWilliams, Duncan, Ferguson, and Simmons) the House of Owen (hardly the House of Atreus) is a comic metonym for African American story; indeed, changing the structure of the slave narrative leads eventually to an alteration of the Canadian and American stories as well. On the level of international politics, then, what seems at first glimpse to be a boy's adventure story resembling *Tom Sawyer* (1876) or *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) emerges as a subversive text.

At least a blend of political text and aesthetic expression continues to stimulate conversation about Chesnutt and his work. "The Bouquet" exemplifies a scene of each kind, providing a graphic stained window of a Christian parable as literally a moral window on the racist discrimination within the Christian church. Indeed, the literal plot tells of the elementary school girl Sophy Tucker who, having idolized her white Miss Mary Myrover (ironic sign of the biblical Mary's), a somewhat benevolent descendant of the old Confederate regime, finds herself racially banned from the teacher's funeral and burial site. But the figurative design involves the more pedagogical issue of whether the child, the co-protagonist, has become indoctrinated into the segregationist assumptions of her Southern history. At Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, the banished child approaches the church as a potential interpreter of racial representation. Circling the church to a side, she climbs a window sill that projects high near a ledge. The cathedral is indeed old, having been built in colonial times when the glass was imported from England (286). Ironically, the window depicts Jesus' blessing the little children. Sophy ponders the meaning of the pictorial narrative beyond the political frames. After the death of Miss Mary, the child ventures to the white cemetery wherein the Colonel's tomb has become a family "shrine." Though the white dog prince, the teacher's pet, has allowed the child to enter, Sophy herself must now rely on the canine to deliver the full-blown yellow roses to the grave of the deceased teacher. Then
she reads a warning sign, "This cemetery is for white people only." And yet the sign is a textual crux. If the stained glass depicts the equality of all races before God, then the segregationist sign certainly profanes the sacred engraving that preceded it. Which racial text has Sophy really learned to read?

Students are more than willing to take the bait of whether teaching about difference or ignoring it is appealing. In fact, the issue returns the student to the unresolved dilemma in "Cicely's Dream" of whether race neutrality is a good thing at all. Regarding the current story, often the future teachers in the classroom are curious about whether Miss Myrover desperately needs to make money for herself and her mother after the Civil War or whether she really only needs to assuage her lingering guilt.

Angered that Myrover is only instructing Sophy in the social etiquette of becoming a black servant to the larger society, white liberals in the class are furious that teachers would favor a methodology of rote learning over the higher objectives of enlightenment. In this case, the professorial technique means to encourage prospective educators to positon themselves as the teacher and imagine a diverse kind of instruction. Future teachers learn then that literary form becomes a means to enlighten those who read it. Form is indeed function.

By the final step of reasoning (and pedagogical strategy) therefore, the English language becomes a means for enhancing the power of American ethnicities. "The Web of Circumstance," the rather naturalistic conclusion to Wife, makes no mention of an Arthurian figure, except to imply a subtle parallel between political power and polished artistry. In this instance, the implied intertextuality exists between Tom Paine's Rights of Man (1791), which sought to justify the French Revolution, and the African American story (1899) that seeks itself to vindicate itself as the liberated voice of lack expression. Subconsciously the blacksmith Ben Davis recognizes that he might eventually take ownership over the aesthetics in his life. If he could channel his economic power, thereby realizing his potential as a citizen, he might succeed in the world. His mulatto assistant Tom misrepresents him as stealing Colonel Thornton's twenty-five dollar whip so that Tom himself may frolic in the garden with Davis' wife Nancy. This world is indeed the fallen Eden. When Davis, who arrives home early from work, hears Tom (the biblical snake in the
grass) scurrying about the family garden, the power of allusion is complete. It is infidelity that precipitates the collapse of the Davis order, a mock-epic of the legendary Camelot.

While a future teacher may imagine herself a redeemed Myrover in "The Bouquet," a pre-law student would envision himself a far more progressive litigator than those in "Web of Circumstance." The trick is to convince readers to assume political roles that they will face one day and encourage them to theorize new options of democratic equity than those of preceding generations. When the protagonist Ben Davis receives a five-year sentence for the theft of the whip, it is American jurisprudence that really is on trial. Chesnutt, the Ohio lawyer, is the omniscient author behind the scenes. After all, a white murderer receives only a year's time and a teenager then only six months for the commitment of fraud. Shortly afterwards, a white Catholic migrant to Georgia and a leader of the student court, returns to the next class outraged. The Davis experience, she fumes, was a flagrant miscarriage of justice. In rare accord, the foremost black conservative in class promises to inquire into statues that allowed white society to steal Davis' property while Davis was in prison. Indeed, the inequities of the legal system enraged the future litigators for days.

Meanwhile, the future teachers had foregrounded the intertextuality between Tennyson's portrait of Guinevere and Sophy Tucker's reading the Jim Crow sign in the white graveyard. Now the future attorneys who were constantly increasing the stakes of racial epiphany perceived the legal intertextuality between the Dred Scott decision that upheld slavery in 1857 and the abuse of black plaintiffs at the University of Georgia in 2016. What was lost to all but the most sophisticated English majors in the class, however, was the sheer beauty of the Colonel's whip. Imported by his brother from New York, the possession could not even be purchased in the Carolinas. The object d'art, wrapped in multi-colored and interlaced threads displays an intricate design, nicely finished with a green lash at the hilt. Finally, a piece of octagonal glass is literally embedded there as an emblem of the Colonel's power.

It is satisfying for students to learn that American pluralism and Arthurian legend, while often inversely entwined, can be mutually enriching. It is no coincidence that by the final third of Wife of His Youth, Chesnutt alludes to the wondrous figuration that closes "The Passing of Arthur." Indeed, the great poetic narrative encapsulates the political and literary values of England for the last millennium and a half. In a concluding footnote, Mallory
remembers that Bedivere insisted that the Arthurian legend "be written." The knight believes that the civilized world should inherit the artifact of both the story and Excalibur. If Arthur’s great sword (symbolically the language in which the story is told and now our language) is indeed the symbol of power, it belongs to whoever truly commands its force. This, of course, would ultimately be the students in the class. Indeed, the adaptation and evolution of an ancient English leader has become African American; he has morphed into both Grandison and the narrator of his tale. Hence, the genesis of Arthurian legend turns full spiral, the medieval tale’s being read in reversed time. Arthur is author, creator of the imaginary realm. And who wields his English (Excalibur) is indeed King. What must every diverse and traditional student of English therefore learn? With every writing of the language, of the African American tale (indeed the American story), we make it new, make it ours. Students learn of their power to change the world.
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Chicago Renaissance from Wright to Fair (2012). His honors include the Daryl C. Dance Award for Lifetime Scholarly Achievement from the College Language Association in 2014, during which time he was serving as the Donald J. Hollowell Professor of Human and Civil Rights at Georgia. Professor Miller, who received the Albert Christ-Janer Award for Distinguished Achievements in 2013, had been honored with the American Book Award in 1992.