

The Power Struggle in The Marrow of Tradition

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[SECOND PLACE]

Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (Marrow) is a fictional retelling of the 1898 Wilmington riot in which white residents attacked and drove out of town thousands of black citizens (Bentley and Gunning, "Introduction" 4). Chesnutt's own version, set in the fictional town of Wellington, embellishes the historical account with subplots and distinctive characters, which both drive the development of the story as a whole and symbolize different sets of values and attributes. Most importantly, the characters represent different classes. Class is as central to the plot of Chesnutt's novel as race is. Marrow is about a black-white power struggle, which Chesnutt represents in the tension between the ascendant black middle class and the descendant white ruling class. Through the characters of Marrow, Chesnutt illustrates each class's reaction to this struggle, culminating in the Wellington riot.

Captain George McBane is a rough, coarse, violent man who expresses nothing less than hatred towards African-Americans. Chesnutt writes that he "had sprung from the poor-white class, to which, even more than to the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity" (Chesnutt 64). McBane, stepping through this door, had made a good living off a contract with the state for convict labor, the post-Reconstruction practice of

using criminals, often black men convicted on questionable charges, as unpaid labor, "prisoners were forced to work for little or no pay," writes Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow*. Alexander further writes, "those found with no lawful employment were deemed vagrants and convicted. Clearly, the purpose of...the vagrancy laws in particular was to establish another system of forced labor" (28). In many regards, convict labor was slavery by another name.

McBane's involvement in the questionable institution had been enough to make him quite rich, but not enough to raise his social standing. He is welcomed by Major Philip Carteret, the orchestrator of the Wellington riot, not as an equal, rather as an unpleasant but useful cobelligerent (Chesnutt 63). He is presented as an ambitious man, constantly seeking status and political power (Chesnutt 67), and he sees the power struggle as an opportunity for social mobility and recognition. Despite his wealth, he continues to be disdained by the white elite whose acceptance he so strongly desires. Cartaret views him as "illiterate and vulgar," and is put off by his thirst for violence (Chesnutt 98). "McBane had always grated upon his [Cartaret's] sensibilities," Chesnutt writes (98). McBane sustains a deep hatred for the black race as a whole, in contrast with Cartaret, whose racism is limited to a desire to depose African-Amer-

icans from positions of power and put them back, as he sees it, in their rightful place (Chesnutt 99). Cartaret, however, knows this hatred is useful in pursuit of his goal and therefore he tolerates McBane.

Cartaret's relationship with McBane is emblematic of the tendency of the white elite to use the white working class as a "terrorist arm" to execute their white supremacist agenda (Gorman 2). The ruling class, while they may have found people such as McBane "personally repugnant" (Roe 3), were happy to perpetuate racism within the white working class as a means of keeping African-Americans down and preserving the authority and power of the white ruling class. Within the white working class, groups such as the White Labor movement sprung up and tapped into the fear of black social mobility. At the time of Marrow's publishing, white unemployment was on the rise and African-Americans were taking over in many positions of power (Roe 3). The only advantage poor whites had was the color of their skin, and this they held on to as their last and only form of dominance. Alexander notes this in *The New Jim Crow*: "In the antebellum South, the lowliest white person at least possessed his or her white skin- a badge of superiority over even the most skilled slave or prosperous free African American" (27). For poor whites, unless African-Americans were at the bottom of the social order, it would be them, and this fear was exploited by the white ruling class.

Even before the rise of the black middle class, the white ruling class faced problems. At the time of Marrow's publishing, southern aristocracy was in decline and losing its grip on society. Chesnutt indicates this on the very first page of the novel as he introduces Major Carteret: "Long ago, while yet a mere boy in years, he had come back from Appomattox to find his family, one of the oldest and proudest in the state, hopelessly impoverished by the war – even

their ancestral home swallowed up in the common ruin" (Chesnutt 44). Cartaret, like so many southern aristocrats, found his family and honor ruined by the war. As he and the white ruling class as a whole struggled to regain their power, a new group was rising that posed a wholly unanticipated threat: the black middle class. Signs of this exchange of power were visible all-around Wellington, especially, as professor Bryan Wagner notes in "Charles Chesnutt and the Epistemology of Racial Violence," in its buildings and architecture (Wagner 312). In Marrow, Olivia Cartaret's aunt, Polly Ochiltree, embodies the anger and consternation of the white elite at this visible disruption to the structure of society. In the scene, Mrs. Ochiltree and Olivia pass by a new building, and Ochiltree notes that Hugh Poindexter (presumably a southern aristocrat) has been building a new house to replace the family mansion destroyed during the Civil War. Olivia corrects her: "It isn't Mr. Poindexter's house, Aunt Polly. That is the new colored hospital built by the colored doctor" (Chesnutt 123). This information provokes an outburst of indignation from Mrs. Ochiltree: "Hugh Poindexter has sold the graves of his ancestors to a negro, - I should have starved first!...The world is upside down" (Chesnutt 123). The belief that the "world is upside down" as a result of black power and influence goads the white ruling class throughout the novel, eventually culminating in the riot.

Despite his tenuous grip on power, Major Carteret fantasizes about a return to former glory for the southern aristocracy. He believes, as Chesnutt writes, "in the divine right of white men and gentlemen, as his ancestors had believed in and died for the divine right of kings" (64). This right would be exercised by winning the power struggle, by putting African-Americans, as he sees it, back in their place. As Chesnutt writes, "Carteret hoped to vindicate the su-

premy of his race, and make the state fit for his son to live in" (102). His plans for the riot are based in fear and resentment of losing his power to and being ruled by an "inferior race" (Chesnutt 64).

A prominent theme throughout the book is Carteret's belief that he and his class should dictate the order of society. This is shown by how he treats the black characters with whom he comes into contact. He treats his child's nurse, Mammy Jane, with an affection that, while condescending, seems genuine. She is allowed, even welcomed into his house. This starkly contrasts with his blatant refusal to allow Dr. Miller to set foot in his home. "In the south, we do not call negro doctors to attend white patients," he tells Dr. Burns in Chapter VII. "I could not permit a negro to enter my house upon such an errand" (Chesnutt 88). "If Miller were going as a servant, to hold a basin and a sponge, there would be no difficulty," observes a fellow doctor, Dr. Price (Chesnutt 86). Carteret is comfortable with African-Americans around him as long as they remain servants, but not in any other role. He sees himself and his class as the gatekeepers of society.

William Miller is the embodiment of the black middle-class Carteret so loathes and fears. He is a successful and accomplished doctor, the son of a rich stevedore (Chesnutt 48). Intelligent, measured, and philosophical, Miller is respected and accepted by his white colleagues (Chesnutt 84), though this does not prevent him from being subjected to segregation and discrimination. On the train down from Pennsylvania to Wellington, he is separated from Dr. Burns, his white traveling companion, at Richmond, and forced to move to the "colored" car. Ironically, had he been Dr. Burns' servant, he would have been permitted to stay, but because Burns indignantly claims him as his equal, he is told to leave (Chesnutt 77). Such is the ambiguous po-

sition of the middle-class African-American in *The Marrow of Tradition*.

The rise of Miller's class was considered by the white elite a "historical impossibility" (Wagner 313). Carteret's white supremacist campaign is first and foremost one waged against the successful middle-class African-American, aimed at erasing the class "from public memory" (Wagner 332). The black middle class provokes a white identity crisis. "Anxious and disoriented, they [the white characters] denounce the signs of 'Negro Domination' they see everywhere in their city, signs that range from newly built African American public institutions to individual characters whose appearance of middle-class prosperity belies their supposed inferiority," writes Wagner (312). The black middle class challenged white elites' perception and portrayal of African Americans and thus threatened their hold on society.

If the black middle class was the manifestation of all that the white elite feared from African Americans, the black servant class was the ideal place for them to be. "The negro is capable of a certain dog-like fidelity," opines Major Cartaret, "a certain personal devotion which is admirable in itself, and fits him eminently for a servile career" (Chesnutt 59). The black servants in the novel, particularly Mammy Jane and Jerry, embrace their servanthood and express disapproval of those of their race who seek social equality with white citizens. They view the power struggle as unnecessary and unseemly. "I's fetch' my grandson Jerry up ter be 'umble an' keep in 'is place," Mammy Jane tells Carteret. "An' I tells dese other n-----s 'll dat ef dey'd do de same, an' not crowd de w'ite folks, dey'd git ernuff ter eat, an' live out deir days in peace an' comfo't" (Chesnutt 71). Jerry, for his part, constantly seeks the approval of Cartaret and the other white "gentlemen" of Wellington. "To please the white folks was Jerry's consistent aim in

life," writes Chesnutt (194). He relies on his ingratiation with them to protect him from violence during the riot, which it ultimately does not.

In stark contrast to Jerry's policy of accommodation and appeasement stands Josh Green, one of the black working class. Green's father was killed by the Klu Klux Klan under the leadership of McBane, and Green hates McBane and thirsts for revenge (Chesnutt 113). At the start of the Wellington riot, instead of fleeing like most of the town's black population, Green forms a small group of like-minded black men with the intent of fighting back against the white supremacists. "De w'ite folks are killin' de n-----s, an' we ain' gwine ter stan' up an' be shot down like dogs," he tells Miller. "We're gwine ter defen' ou' lives, an' we ain' gwine ter run away f'm no place where we've got a right ter be" (Chesnutt 217). Miller is unwilling to join the men, believing resistance to be futile. Green, disappointed but undeterred, presses on anyway (Chesnutt 219). Green, like McBane, views the power struggle not as an abstract battle of wills and ideologies, but as a physical battle to be fought.

The Wellington riot is the violent culmination of the *The Marrow of Tradition*, and of the story's class and racial tension. It determines each character's destiny and hints at Chesnutt's premonitions for the future of race and class in the American South. It starts with Dr. Miller, who, returning from a house call, is approached by groups of terrified African-Americans, who tell him the whites in Wellington are threatening to kill every African-American they meet (Chesnutt 216). Anxiety seizes Miller as he thinks of his wife and son, and he urgently drives towards town. Despite his middle-class respectability, he is stopped and searched multiple times by white men with guns (though most are apologetic) and encounters several black bodies lying in the streets (Chesnutt 222). Miller is met along

the way by Lee Ellis, the young white man who works for Major Cartaret's newspaper. Ellis is shocked by the violence of the riot, but cannot find the words to condemn it. "He could not approve of the acts of his own people;" Chesnutt writes, "neither could he, to a negro, condemn them. Hence, he was silent" (223). Ellis, the young, liberal, likeable middle-class professional, should have exemplified hopes for eventual solidarity with the black middle class, an opportunity for both middle classes to unite against the elite (Wise 173). But he chooses racial solidarity over class solidarity (Wise 174).

Mammy Jane is killed in the riot, while Jerry is involuntarily conscripted by Josh Green into the defense party. "I don' wan' ter fight," he protests. "De w'ite folks ain' gwine ter pester me; dey're my friends" (Chesnutt 229). Green maintains his hold on Jerry, however, who is dragged along with the crowd to Miller's hospital, which Green's men convert to a fort (Chesnutt 229). As Green's party bunkers down in the hospital, a crowd of angry whites gathers outside, including George McBane (Chesnutt 231). "McBane's decision to remain in this violent scene long after the other white leaders have withdrawn sets him apart from the same white elites whose acceptance he so dearly desires," writes Gene Gorman in *The Southern Literary Journal* (2). While Cartaret is uncomfortable with violence, McBane revels in it. He loudly threatens Green and his men with death if they fight, but is interrupted by a gunshot, and the battle commences (Chesnutt 229).

Major Carteret arrives on the scene highly distressed, having found out Mammy Jane has been killed. He loudly implores the mob to stop, but is misheard, and the crowd, seeing him, cheers the architect of the campaign, the "champion of 'white supremacy,'" and proceeds to set the hospital on fire (Chesnutt 232). Jerry jumps out the window, calling for help from Carteret, but

is shot immediately, his trust in and ingratiation with the “white folks” failing to save him. As the hospital continues to burn, Green realizes that if he and his men stay in there any longer they will die “like rats in a hole” (Chesnutt 233). They rush out to meet the white mob. Green is shot by McBane but stabs him in the heart before dying, fulfilling his promise to avenge his father’s death (Chesnutt 234).

Major Carteret returns home to find that his son has the croup due to being left, in the midst of the commotion, in a draft by an open window. (Chesnutt 235). The illness is life-threatening, and Carteret calls around to every doctor he can think of, but none are available. None, that is, except for William Miller. Despite the life of his child at stake, Carteret hesitates, but he gives in. He finds himself on Miller’s doorstep, pleading for help (Chesnutt 240). “Fiat Justicia” this chapter is called, but irony plays the leading role. Carteret, the consummate gentleman, the aristocrat, the white supremacist, is reduced to begging for the life of his young heir from a man who represents the class he most disdains and fears.

Carteret standing on Miller’s porch is the face-to-face manifestation of Marrow’s defining power struggle. In “Caste, Race, and Gender after Reconstruction,” an analysis of Marrow in light of the social issues of

Chesnutt’s day, Nancy Bentley and Sandra Gunning argue that Chesnutt’s portrayal of Miller implies that he believed the black middle class would lead African-American progress. They add, however, that Chesnutt makes Green, not Miller, the true leader of the story. Miller turns down the opportunity to be a figurehead of the resistance, leaving Green the symbolic leader of his people (Bentley and Gunning, “Caste” 254-55). But while Green may have been the leader, Miller is the last man standing.

The ending of *The Marrow of Tradition* reveals Chesnutt’s premonitions for the outcome of the power struggle and for the future of class and race in the American South. George McBane and Josh Green kill each other, implying conflict in store for the white and black working classes. Lee Ellis aligns, if reluctantly, with his race over his class, dashing, at least temporarily, hopes for solidarity with the black middle class. Mammy Jane and Jerry are killed, demonstrating that no amount of subservience to the white powers-that-be will be enough to afford African-Americans security and protection. Dr. Miller, however, emerges not only alive, but in a position of power over Carteret. His victory in the power struggle demonstrates Chesnutt’s belief that progress for African-Americans lay with the improbable, miraculous black middle class.

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