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The Telling South: Landscape as Figurative Truth in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*

Laura Carter
Literature
University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear and Dr. Deborah James

Abstract

Charles Chesnutt is a late 19th, early 20th century southern author who pushes the boundaries of race in literature. Because his literary career was short-lived in that he only published during the years 1887-1905, much is still left to be discovered about both his writings and the author himself. Chesnutt spent almost a decade working on one of his best known novels, *The House Behind the Cedars*. Because he spent so long working on the manuscript, much archival material related to the novel exists in the Charles Waddell Chesnutt collection at Fisk University. Visiting Fisk University to conduct research in their Special Collections allowed for closer examination of previous drafts of the novel. This research process provided a useful comparison with the more commonly known published edition, all of which this paper considers. In the text Chesnutt conveys serious issues of slavery and race through characters like Rena Walden and her relationship with the fecund southern landscape. Combining both the racial tensions in the South and the landscape itself, Chesnutt uses *The House Behind the Cedars* as a didactic tool, one that aims unflinching criticism at his primarily white readership. This paper explores how Chesnutt creates a kind of anti-Eden to explicitly discuss racism in *his* South.

1. Body of Paper

In 1900, African American author Charles Chesnutt published *The House Behind the Cedars*, a novel that explores the relationship between the southern landscape and racial tensions in the South during the turn of the century. The storyline focuses on John and Rena Walden, racially mixed siblings who come to two very different fates within the course of the novel because of their respective genders and how they identify racially. Rena Walden occupies the central focus of the novel and it is through her character that Chesnutt communicates the dangers associated with a fecund South. Rena also demonstrates for readers the limitations of racial space in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because she is mixed race (both white and black), she inhabits a racial space that she cannot openly claim; during this time, the understandings of race were strictly binary. Unlike her brother, who is able to successfully assimilate into white society, Rena is almost handicapped by her gender in that she cannot truly create a racial identity for herself, as seen in the initial action of being coerced to cross the color line in order to take care of her brother's child. In the novel, her racial identity undergoes multiple shifts, changing from mulatta, to white, to black within a matter of a few months. The novel suggests that these crossings over the color line damage Rena's sense of self, ultimately leading to her death at the end of the novel. When paired with nineteenth century ideas about race, we see that Chesnutt uses the fecund southern landscape in order to portray a more negative, almost festering South. This swampy, murky land, which is notably neither land nor water, echoes the racial liminality embodied by Rena.

When readers consider that the landscape is also covered in destructive plant life like vines and moss, we begin to understand the landscape as an indicator that the South is a breeding ground not only for intrusive plant life, but also for destructive behavior, especially concerning questions of racial identity. These destructive behaviors are reflected in the natural world and are especially heightened around Rena Walden's character. Read in this way, Chesnutt communicates to readers that the laws on racial identity, much like the perception of racial identity during the time of "Jim Crow," are not strictly binary. Through Rena, we see the effects of a dysfunctional southern society, one that feeds off of its own hatred and prejudices expressed in the imagery of the decaying southern landscape.

In the opening scene of the novel, Chesnutt immediately employs the use of the southern landscape to transition readers from the nicer parts of town to "the quarter of town more neglected" (Chesnutt 8). Already the narrator presents a clear difference between Rena's home and the rest of Patesville (Chesnutt's fictionalized Fayetteville, North Carolina). The narrator's description of the "neglected" location suggests that perhaps there is a reason for the property's isolation:

> The garden walks were bordered by long rows of jonquils, pinks, and carnations, enclosing clumps of fragrant shrubs, lilies, and roses already in bloom. Toward the middle of the garden stood two fine magnolia-trees, with heavy, dark green, glistening leaves, while nearer the house two mighty elms shaded a wide piazza, at one end of which a honeysuckle vine, and at the other a Virginia creeper, running over a wooden lattice, furnished additional shade and seclusion. On dark or wintry days, the aspect of this garden must have been extremely somber and depressing, and it might well have seemed a fit place to hide some guilty or disgraceful secret (Chesnutt 9).

Chesnutt gives readers the pleasant description of the garden, listing the least threatening and more aesthetically pleasing plant life that surrounds the house first. There are flowers of all kinds, beautiful and fragrant, which can be read as Chesnutt's way of offering an idealized look at the present situation. From afar everything appears to be "beautiful and fragrant;" but what initially seems beautiful also hides a tangled mass of dangerous and destructive vines, as one gets closer and closer to the house. The description of the flowers is counter-balanced by the destructive and intrusive Virginia creepers. By using these specific examples of plant life, Chesnutt suggests both the beauty and the danger of the southern landscape. Parallel to this idea of beauty and danger, Chesnutt gives us the character Rena, who is described as "strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered" (Chesnutt 7). Though Rena is beautiful, readers soon learn that her beauty will not be enough to transcend the dangers that she will later face. Thus, Chesnutt uses Rena as the embodiment of both beauty and danger as it relates to living as a person of mixed-race in the confines of a racially prejudiced environment.

Though this is only the beginning of the natural imagery found in *The House Behind the Cedars*, as readers, we can already see a clear difference in Charles Chesnutt's South from the use of landscape by other southern authors. Writers like Thomas Nelson Page and William Gilmore Simms believed in the "terrestrial-paradise" that was the Old South (Bakker 74). This can especially be seen in Page's work and his treatment of the southern landscape. Known to be "the most popular and representative Southern writer of his time," Thomas Nelson Page believed the South to be like a "Biblical Eden… a world of perfect order, in which both sin and labor are nonexistent." (qtd. in Wilson 78-9). Glorifying the days of slavery, many other southern authors of the time, like Page, completely ignore the industrialization of the forthcoming century and remain obsessed with their idealized pastoral view of "the old life," (qtd. in Martin 20). Unlike Chesnutt, who fully addresses the racial issues of the century in his treatment of the southern landscape (specifically swamps), "other Southern writing of Page's generation goes out of its way to ignore or deny swamps: [Thomas] Dixon, for example, virtually erases the swamps in his work, despite their Carolina settings" (Wilson 79). According to literary critic Jan Bakker, "writers of the Old South created in their works an inevitable idyllic, nostalgic [Eden]," something that Chesnutt himself is working directly against in *The House Behind the Cedars* (67). Because of his direct opposition to the established ideals of the traditional South, Chesnutt creates this complicated landscape to challenge the romanticized portrayal of the Old South, becoming a "crusader for racial justice" (Martin 18). In doing so, Chesnutt hopes to "elevate the whites" to a level of understanding about underlying negative truths rooted in the corrupt ways of traditional southern values (qtd. in Martin 21). Here, Chesnutt is exposing through *his* view of the southern landscape that "the Southern pastoral covenant is in truth an illusion, or worse, a falsification," (Simpson 58). For Chesnutt, "the South [is] the seat of racism and the place where race is codified as a meaningful category," thus, it is difficult for Chesnutt to separate the connection of race with the land, and even more so, race with identity (Worden 3). For example, the foliage surrounding Rena's home is directly connected to the racial identity of the Walden family, created out of the miscegenation of Molly Walden and an un-named white suitor. Thus, through this act, Chesnutt develops a "complication" to the strictly binary ideals of racial identity during the nineteenth century.

Though the garden of the Walden home is beautiful, "[some] aspect of this garden must have been extremely somber and depressing, and it might well have seemed a fit place to hide some guilty or disgraceful secret" (Chesnutt 9). This "disgraceful secret" is that the Walden family is of mixed-blood. Though Chesnutt uses the word "disgrace" to imply that the Walden's secret is shameful, he is projecting this term ironically to point out the flawed binary system of race in the South. Living in a time in which race was categorized as either black or white, to be of mixed-blood was seen as a shameful thing. Since mixed-raced offspring were often the result of nonconsensual sex between master and slave, neither white nor black people were willing to discuss this "mixing" of the races. The "racial mixing" within *The House Behind the Cedars* is alluded to by the narrator as completely consensual, but despite this, Molly Walden (John and Rena's mother) still chooses to "[hide] discreetly behind the cedar screen," due to the judgment felt by her *white* lover's family (Chesnutt 111-12). Even after the death of this illusive male character, the Walden's remain *behind* a row of cedars, using the landscape to place a barrier between them and the society that has wrongly instilled a binary system of race. Their secret is known by most in Patesville and the family is generally tolerated by this small community. However, they remain hidden, as if to protect themselves from the harsh racist views and criticism of the South. As indicated by the title of the novel, the house itself is set behind a row of cedars, concealing it from the road. Chesnutt uses the phrase, "the house behind the cedars," several times in the novel as a constant reminder that the Walden family is hiding behind their secret and hiding from those who can negatively exploit it, using the southern landscape to do so. Neither black, nor white, the Walden's occupy a liminal racial space, stuck between both the black and white worlds. Because these characters (John, Rena, and their mother Mis' Molly) do not solely belong to one race or the other, they must conceal their "otherness" from the rest of the world, and hide in "the old gray house behind the cedars" (Chesnutt 143).

Despite the "truth" of John's race, he has been passing as white successfully for several years. After the death of his wife (who was white), John returns to his childhood home in Patesville, hoping to bring Rena over the color line and into white society to help him take care of his son, her nephew, Albert. Though he tells their mother that there will be more opportunities for Rena in white society, the fact that John has even returned to Patesville after being absent for a decade, encourages readers to question his true agenda. Because "passing" was illegal, by returning to a location in which he can be "discovered," more or less endangers John; those who "passed" into white society were essentially disposing of their old life, willingly giving up everything for a chance to escape what John later refers to as a "stain" (Chesnutt 19).

Upon John's return to Patesville, the narrator immediately draws a comparison between human existence and Nature, using time as the driving force: "Time touches all things with a destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but a brief mockery, to be surely and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age, the dry leaves and bare branches of winter…" (Chesnutt 3). The "mockery" in the above passage seems to address Chesnutt's views on change. Time, regardless, continues to pass. This "destroying hand" applies to Chesnutt's view of the South. Where time is supposed to act as an aid, Chesnutt implies that time has the ability to makes things worse. Thus, time is not the answer to the South's problems and without *real* change, time will continue to destroy any chances the New South has of flourishing. In *The Dispossessed Garden*, literary critic Lewis P. Simpson asserts that the South's overall aversion to modernity and its desire to keep the institution of slavery inhibit it from becoming a potential "New South" (44). By beginning the novel with the idea of duality (that time can both help and hurt things), Chesnutt sets up a pattern that he will use throughout the rest of the novel. By exposing the dual nature of time personified in the opening paragraph, Chesnutt is able to lead into exposing the dual nature within the people of Patesville and white readers in general.

In dialogue with the racial issues of the South during the Jim Crow era, the depictions of the southern landscape within the novel are directly tied to race as it relates to the Walden family, specifically Rena. In the white society that Chesnutt gives readers, the landscape is nearly absent. This "lack" of landscape is just as telling as the intense descriptions Chesnutt gives readers later in the novel, once the color-line has been re-crossed. By leaving out the landscape, almost entirely, Chesnutt alludes to the "perfection" of white society, as if it is immune to its own destructive views on race. However, like the flowers in bloom in front of the plantation home John lives in, the "perfection" is just a façade. The only elaborate description of white society is that of John's home. Now that he has become a "gentleman" and moved up in his station of life, John's house is as impressive as his assimilation into white society. The extravagance of John's home is in direct contrast with the "unpainted house…[and] the rotting bridge across the old canal" of his childhood home (Chesnutt 9-11). Now, as an adult, his house "[is] a fine old plantation house, built in colonial times, with a stately colonnade, wide verandas, and long windows with Venetian blinds. It [is] white, and stood back several rods from the street, in a charming setting of palmettos, magnolias, and flowering shrubs…It was all…very impressive" (Chesnutt 45). Chesnutt purposefully places John in this environment, paralleling John's character to that of the lifestyle of a member of white, southern aristocracy. Because John has spent the past ten years disassociating himself with the life he had in Patesville, it is only natural for him to

occupy a home that resembles a plantation house because it represents his ability to assimilate into white society successfully, and is the exact opposite of his childhood home. Compared to the teeming and festering South that surrounds the house behind the cedars, this monster of a home represents institutions developed in the Old South, like slavery and racism. Later, we find that this is the house of John's wife's ancestors and it is clear that old southern money was responsible for its construction.

However, like the house behind the cedars, John's home is also "situated in the outskirts of the town…and stood back several rods from the street," suggesting that he still needs his privacy, especially because of his secret (Chesnutt 45). Though John is an active member of the society that he has adopted, it is clear that he still worries that his secret may be exposed. Like the, "garden walks… bordered by long rows of jonquils, pinks, and carnations, inclosing clumps of fragrant shrubs, lilies, and roses already in bloom," that provide a calming outside look to the house behind the cedars, John's own home is located "in a charmed setting of palmettos, magnolias, and flowering shrubs" (Chesnutt 9, 45). The flowers and shrubs that surround John's home are the only natural elements in this section of the novel and in white society, seeming to suggest that white society is immune to the dangers of the southern landscape. However, because John's home is not "fully" immersed in white society and rests on the outskirts of town, this placement suggests that John himself is not fully immune to the dangers of the landscape or of society. Though he identifies as a white male and has been actively passing in white society, John is still in danger of having his secret exposed. Overall, the absence of landscape in Chesnutt's white world heightens the reappearance of landscape with full force once Rena re-crosses the color line and returns to Patesville.

Crossing the color line for the first time, Rena makes the shift from mulatta to white easily, at least on the surface. Like the landscape, Rena's white complexion hides underneath it a "dangerous" truth; "the notion that a few drops of blood…manifested no external sign" is what makes Rena as "dangerous" as the place in which she lives (Fox-Genovese 794). According to John Sheehy, "the line between the white world and the black is clearly demarcated, and membership in either world is predicated upon physical qualities rendered as metaphysical" (414). Rena is forced to choose between having the black or white race with which to actively identify. Not only does she take on a new racial identity, but she also adopts a new name—evolving from Rena Walden into Rowena Warwick. This name, a name her brother has chosen for her, literally separates any part of her old identity from the new life that she is trying to have across the color line. From the beginnings of Rena's journey over the color line, there seems to be a promising future for her in white society, as she is embraced without question, aside from the women who seem to be in jealous awe of her beauty. Now that Rena is Rowena, her duties as a woman have changed in that she has moved up in society. In Patesville, "the Hill was the aristocratic portion of the town," where the white people lived, representing a hierarchy of race; in the white society of South Carolina, as the sister of prestigious lawyer, John Warwick, Rena now has a similar privilege (Chesnutt 16). However, when crossing the color line, "Rena becomes something quite different: a white *woman.* In attempting to transcend race, Rena encounters gender" (emphasis added, Ryan 40). By becoming "white," Rena's gender is highlighted and emphasized due to her recent transition, and is especially brought to attention when she is awarded the title of "Queen of Love and Beauty" at the medieval tournament that both she and John attend (Chesnutt 39). This is not to say that Rena's gender is meaningless when she identifies as a woman of mixed-race, or later a black woman, within the novel; however, it is clear that Chesnutt wants readers to realize the differences in societies, especially the gender divide in differing racial identities. Now that she is white, Rena must uphold the "genteel southern belle" image, created out of idealized views of white women by the men who so desperately wanted to "protect" them. The title that she "wins" adds another level to John's previous objectification of her, as well as delivers the message about the "ideal" southern woman. Chesnutt is clear in his description of Rena that she is in fact beautiful, but there are other qualities that she possesses (like her self-driven intelligence gained through the reading of her father's books) overlooked by the men who control her life.

When John asks Rena to move to South Carolina with him, he is also asking her to adopt a new racial identity as a white woman. Although she has reservations about going with him, ultimately she decides to accompany him, which marks a shift in not only geographical location, but also racial identification. John's ability to persuade Rena to enter white society disrupts her everyday life, but this is a disruption that John deems necessary if she is to succeed by his racial standards. John tells both Rena and their mother that if she is to stay in Patesville, "she must forever be—nobody!" (Chesnutt 20). Here, readers understand that John subscribes to common narratives about race in the late nineteenth century that place African Americans on the bottom rung; for John, if Rena remains in Patesville and continues to identify as a woman of color—when she could identify as a white woman if she goes with him—she is forever doomed to be "nobody." Moreover, in a society based on models of patriarchal power, Rena likely feels as though she must respect her brother and his decision to take her across the color line, even under the guise of giving her the opportunity of a "better" life. Her gender puts her into an automatic position of inferiority, as women were deemed the weaker sex throughout much of history. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women were still

lacking positions of power in which they could enact their own. By using his authority as the dominant male figure in Rena's life, she ultimately has no choice, and must cross the color line with him.

However, in their house in Patesville, Rena does have some agency. She is allowed to do as she pleases; the opening of the novel describes her walking back from town *on her own*. By accepting her brother's invitation to stay with him in South Carolina, Rena loses any of the agencies that she previously has, like doing errands around town and walking unaccompanied, becoming utterly dependent on John. It is *his* house, *his* rules, and *his* society that she is becoming a part of. Because of this, Rena is used as a pawn in the novel by her brother John, and later her fiancé George Tryon, in order for them to fulfill their own self-motivated desires. Her loss of agency by leaving the house behind the cedars is just as damaging to Rena's character as being forced to accept a new racial identity. This is the beginning of Rena essentially "losing" herself; without agency, she is nothing but a body. Taking this even one step further, Rena is nothing unless she is a "white" body, at least in the eyes of her brother John, and later her fiancé George[1]. John is able to convince their mother to let him take Rena back to South Carolina by explicitly discussing qualities of Rena's outward appearance, saying, "here she must forever be—nobody! With me she might have got out into the world; with her beauty she might have made a good marriage" (Chesnutt 20). This passage demonstrates that John has already removed the "old Rena" from the potential "new Rena" in his mind. Even in the beginning of the novel, before we know who Rena is, the racially ambiguous figure seen by John (later found out to be Rena), is objectified based on her beauty: "'A woman with such a figure,' thought Warwick, 'ought to be able to face the world with the confidence of Phryne confronting her judges,'" (Chesnutt 8-9).

By objectifying her beauty, which can be considered more beautiful if their secret—"the blood of an old race" can be expelled from her identity, John sees Rena only as a body that he can use to his advantage, and not as a human being (Chesnutt 22). Now that his wife has died, John needs someone new to take care of his child and instead of re-marrying, he relies on his familial tie to Rena. By using guilt to coax his mother into letting Rena leave with him, this return to Patesville is strictly business on John's part. According to literary critic Melissa Ryan, "like Rena, John inhabits a white body, but he can also construct for himself a white identity, and abstract legal self…if John exercises the privileges of whiteness, he is white; in other words, he is defined by his reputation, or his 'name'" (45). John is able to do these things for himself because he is a man; when he leaves Patesville, he creates a persona whom he names "John Warwick" and becomes a successful lawyer, with no questions asked about his background.

This is only possible for John because of his obsession with his ability to successfully pass and identify as white; "his easy assumption of this identity stems largely from his refusal to accept the imposed category of blackness" [1](Sheehy 409). This stark rejection of his black identity, the other part of his mixed blood, emphasizes John's desire to be a white man, because, "God, the Father of all, had made him white; and God, he had been taught, made no mistakes,--having made him white, He must have meant him to be white" (Chesnutt 111-12). Read in this way, Chesnutt uses John's character to represent an approval of the institutions of the Old South. He lives in a plantation home, was married to a white woman, and practices the laws which restrict African Americans under "Jim Crow." John desperately wants the same for his sister.

Now seen as a "white" body, more privileges have opened up for Rena; John states, "you have arrived. Your debut into society is a little more spectacular than I should have wished, but we must rise to the occasion and make the most of it. You are winning the first fruits of your opportunity" (Chesnutt 41). When initially discussing the potential opportunities for Rena with their mother, he knew first hand that the white world would have more to offer her, and admits later that, "had [she] been homely…he would never have disturbed her in the stagnant life of the house behind the cedars" (Chesnutt 46). Though John is happy that she has been received so well by a society that he has adopted as his own, he is still cautious; he does not want his secret, their secret, to be accidentally exposed in the excitement of Rena's sudden appearance. Though he has forcefully convinced both Rena and their mother that this is what is best for her, John does not want to disrupt the image that he has created for himself in South Carolina. To expose his secret at this point would be to undo all of the work that he has spent the past decade trying to achieve; "he had taken his precautions too thoroughly…and yet he could not but feel, at times, that if peradventure—it was a conceivable hypothesis—it should become known, his fine social position would collapse like a house of cards" (Chesnutt 47).

John's unsettled behavior in regards to the issue of their race, their "true" race, is heightened when Rena is present. Though he is somewhat paranoid that his secret maybe discovered, as indicated by the location of his house in white society, "there was a measure of relief in having about him one who knew his past," (Chesnutt 47). However, when Rena dreams of her mother's illness and desires to return to Patesville to care for her, John is apprehensive and tries to convince Rena that dreams "go by contraries," insisting that their mother is most likely not ill at all (Chesnutt 63). This statement made by John seem[2]s to suggest that his fear of her return to Patesville could possibly reveal their

secret. Rena, after having the dream for a third time, decides to re-cross the color line in her brother's absence. In this second crossing of the color line, the landscape reappears in full force, making the subconscious fears John expresses about the "excitement" surrounding her arrival in white society a reality when she is back in black society.

By returning to her old home, and crossing the color line for the second time in the novel, Rena re-emerges herself in an environment that her new white identity cannot survive within. In her return to Patesville, she has essentially undone the "work" that John has done in creating the "new Rena," stripping herself of the opportunities of her white life by re-associating with a piece of herself that was supposed to be disposed of. It is also back in Patesville where readers see the return of the southern landscape. Emphasized in the blatantly racist character of Dr. Green, the pairing of landscape and racial discrimination clearly comes together in the description of his home:

> the most aristocratic portion of the town, situated on the hill known as Haymount, or, more briefly, 'The Hill…' [his] spacious brick house, which occupied an ideally picturesque site, was overgrown by a network of clinging vines, contrasting most agreeably with the mellow red background. A low brick wall, also overrun with creepers, separated the premises from the street and shut in a well-kept flower garden… (Chesnutt 92-93).

This reappearance of the landscape is meant to remind readers of the racial prejudices in the South. Though the landscape seems to disappear in white society, white characters in Patesville are not exempt from the figurative meaning behind the exploitation of the southern landscape offered by Chesnutt. The language that Chesnutt uses suggests that even Dr. Green's family is isolated from the rest of the community, establishing an issue of class as well as race. Clearly indicating an underlying hierarchy of race within the town of Patesville, Dr. Green lives *on top* of the hill. Like John's plantation home, Green's house is also away from the street, indicating perhaps his fear of the "other." It is also important to keep in mind that Dr. Green's home is covered with destructive elements of the surrounding landscape. Vines and creepers are attached to his home; the brick walls are literally teeming with the damaging plant life. Like the vines and creepers that cover the house behind the cedars, here the narrator implies that establishments like this one cannot survive in their current environment. Also, the fact that his flower garden is "shut in" is almost as if Dr. Green is hoarding, cultivating, and protecting his ideals of the Old South. Green's actions reveal an underlying fear that "the African chattel had come into the Southern garden of paradise as an intruder, dispossessing the garden of the Western pastoral imagination, transforming it into a garden of the chattel, and threatening to transform the South into an image of completely nonpastoral character" (Simpson 61). Losing the landscape, in this case Dr. Green's flowers, would actualize his fear of losing his "superiority of blood and breeding" to a race that is deemed "lesser" during this time period (Chesnutt 95). So he protects it.

Though Rena's own home is also covered in vines and creepers, the exterior of Dr. Green's house is covered with negative elements of the landscape as a reflection of the conversations held within, particularly the conversations in regards to race. This can be seen in the following passage when Dr. Green discusses the present state of southern society with George:

> …but they have not broken our spirit, and cannot take away our superiority of our blood and breeding. In time we shall regain control. The negro is an inferior creature; God has marked him the badge of servitude, and has adjusted his intellect to a servile condition. We will not long submit to his domination. I give you a toast, sir: The Anglo-Saxon race, may it remain forever, as now, the head and front of creation, never yielding its rights, and ready always to die, if need be, in defense of its liberties (Chesnutt 95).

Unlike Rena's home, which is covered in vines to metaphorically discuss the racial prejudice she and her family are facing, this is an example of the negative side of human nature Chesnutt is projecting into his landscape. Using Dr. Green as an example, Chesnutt informs readers through the exterior of Green's home that his ignorance informs the environment he inhabits. This explicit aversion to the African American community held by Dr. Green is similarly shared by Rena's fiancé George. The declaration of George's own feelings towards the African American race foreshadows his harsh rejection of Rena once he discovers her true racial identity.

In the second half of the novel, George discovers Rena's secret. Incidentally, while waiting for Dr. Green's return, George sees Rena, though at first he does not realize it is her:

> Between the colored glass bottles in the window he could see a young woman, a tall and slender girl, like a lily on its stem. […] Her face was partly turned from the window, but as Tryon's eyes fell upon her, he gave a great start. Surely, no two women could be so much alike. The height, the

> graceful droop of the shoulders, the swan-like poise of the head…surely, no two women could have them all identical! […] She moved slightly; it was Rena's movement… (Chesnutt 97)

Here, Rena is directly described as a flower. Like the flowers in the garden of her home, Rena "like a lily" is beautiful, but is masking something dangerous. From far away, Rena appears to be white, which is the "danger" of her character; her exterior is an untruth, as discovered by her fiancé George. This idea is revisited when Rena becomes a school teacher and "mistaken" for white by George's mother. On the surface, Rena is a "white" woman, yet she is of mixed-blood, which he discovers after his realization that it *is* in fact her. Upon his realization, his face twisted into "astonishment and horror;" this is so horrifying to George because not only is he finding out that Rena is not white, but also seeing her in an environment where white people would not socialize willingly with black people (Chesnutt 98). The language that Chesnutt uses to relay George's feelings towards Rena after "discovering" her secret further emphasizes the true nature of his character:

> no Southerner who loved his poor, downtrodden country, or his race, the proud Anglo-Saxon race which traced the clear stream of its blood to the cavaliers of England, could tolerate the idea that even in distant generations that unsullied current could be polluted by the blood of slaves. The very thought was an insult to white people of the South (Chesnutt 100).

Rena later says to her brother John, "he looked at me as though I were not even a human being;" as if the woman that he loved was no longer the same woman because she was not "white" (Chesnutt 124).

Once Rena re-crosses the color line and begins to identify as a black woman—signaling to readers that black and white are her only options for racial identification—she decides to teach school in Sampson County; this decision requires Rena to journey through thick, wooded areas and over several sand-hills. Transitioning from Rena's house behind the cedars, to her new location deep within the forest foreshadows the eminent dangers awaiting Rena's character. Before even getting to their final destination, Rena and her travel companion—a gentleman by the name of Jeff Wain (who readers later discover is untrustworthy), are heavily immersed in the southern landscape: "the road to Sampson County lay for the most part over the pine-clad sand hills,—an alternation of gentle rises and gradual descents, with now and then a swamp of greater or less extent. Long stretches of the highway led through the virgin forest, for miles unbroken by a clearing or sign of human habitation" (Chesnutt 158). The chapter of the novel that begins Rena's position as first grade school teacher is even entitled "The Schoolhouse in the Woods" (Chesnutt 162). Through this explicit re-emergence of the southern landscape in black society, Chesnutt asserts that since Rena has re-crossed the color line, she has now entered an even more dangerous territory for herself. Because of the racial prejudices that she will face from various members of Sampson County (George's mother), the connection of Rena with the landscape has intensified. Through the landscape in this section of the novel, Chesnutt makes it clear to readers that nothing positive can come from Rena's re-crossing the color line.

In saying this, the epitome of Chesnutt's use of race and landscape comes at the end of the novel with the death of Rena Walden. Because Rena cannot occupy one racial space in its entirety, she must die in order to escape the prejudices of the white world and the "stain" of her black blood. In other words, because the environment cannot sustain Rena's racial ambiguity, it must kill her because she does not fit into the (false) binary system of race established during this time. Representing the binary system of race, Chesnutt develops two choices for Rena within the novel in the form of two paths. This can be seen in the following passage:

> Her forward step had brought her to the junction of two paths, where she paused doubtfully. The route she had been following was the most direct way home, but led for quite a distance through the forest, which she did not care to traverse alone. The intersecting path would soon take her to the main road, where she might find shelter or company, or both. Glancing around again in search of her missing escort, she became aware that a man was approaching her from each of the two paths. In one she recognized the eager and excited face of George Tryon…advancing confidently along the other path she saw the face of Jeff Wain, drawn, as she imagined in her anguish, with evil passions…What should she do? (Chesnutt 188).

Here, Chesnutt has metaphorically set up the choice of both white and black society, from which Rena must choose one. In each path, there is a man that will *make* Rena's racial identity either white (George) or black (Jeff). It is also important to note how each representative of society is described. George as the figurative representation for white society is more positive, while Jeff and the path for black society described as "evil." Despite the distinctions between each path, Rena runs away from both, ignoring her initial fears of "traversing the path alone." Thus, she

chooses to disregard the choices in front of her and run into the forest instead, avoiding a decision that forces her to accept the societal norms of a binary system of race. Because Rena literally and figuratively does not make a choice in regards to her race, there is "no place" for her to go, and she dies the "tragic mulatta." The detrimental force of human nature as expressed through the southern landscape is what truly kills Rena. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

> She had only run a few yards when she found herself in the midst of a clump of prickly shrubs and briars. Meantime the storm had burst; the rain fell in torrents…The storm increased in violence. The air grew darker and darker. It was near evening, the clouds were dense, the thick woods increased the gloom. Suddenly a blinding flash of lightning pierced the darkness, followed by a sharp clap of thunder. There was a crash of falling timber. Terror-stricken, Rena flew forward through the forest, the underbrush growing closer and closer as she advanced. Suddenly the earth gave way beneath her feet and she sank into a concealed morass…and realized with a horrible certainty that she was lost in the swamp. (Chesnutt 189)

Rena's refusal to choose either white or black society kills her; she is destroyed by the teeming and creeping plant life that personifies the racist, negative views of the South. According to literary critic Daniel Worden, "[Rena's] retreat to what should be a safe haven is instead the sacrifice of the individual" to the flawed society (12). This statement that Chesnutt makes about choice through Rena's avoidance of both paths comments on the established racial binaries of the nineteenth century. During this time, any mixture of African blood made a person black, i.e. the one drop rule. However, what Chesnutt is arguing is that race is more complicated than just black and white; by essentially sacrificing Rena to the elements, Chesnutt wants readers to understand that asking a person to choose which racial category to identify with is damaging. Rena is meant to die as an example of the dangers of human ignorance. Because Rena and her family are mixed-race, there is no way to compartmentalize them in the society in which they live. When her body is found, it is located "in the edge of the swamp," resting between the forest and the highway that could have led her to safety (Chesnutt 190). Even in death Rena is caught between two spaces, one that would have provided her safety and the other that destroyed her.

The House Behind the Cedars centers on Rena and her unfortunate fate; she is the essential part of relaying Chesnutt's message about the dangers of racism to his readers. Chesnutt obsessed over his creation of "Rena" for ten years, which is how long it took to be published as *The House Behind the Cedars.* Looking back through archived publication correspondences housed at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, the earliest version of *The House Behind the Cedars* was mentioned in a letter dated September 8, 1891 to Houghton, Mifflin & co. (Box 4, Folder 1). In this letter, Chesnutt mentions a short story collection that he was working on; "[he] would call the volume 'Rena Walden and Other Stories' or simply 'Rena Walden,' that being the story for the sake of which [he wished] to publish the volume" (Box 4, Folder 1). Later, in a letter to John Chamberlin from 1930, Chesnutt would even refer to the novel as, "[his] favorite child, for Rena was of '[his] own people'. Like [Chesnutt], she was a white person with an attenuated streak of dark blood," (*An Exemplary Citizen*, 257). This storyline was important to Chesnutt and he worked hard to ensure that it was published. Chesnutt's clear fascination with the way that landscape has the ability to mirror human nature does not begin with the publication of *The House Behind the Cedars*. Previously titled "Rena," it is clear to see that the story was always meant to focus on her character (Box 9). There are several passages included in the original manuscripts that are excluded from the end product. In the original, there are excerpts that Chesnutt decides to exclude that discuss the southern landscape. One passage is as follows:

> [A]round the lower end of Front Street and adjacent to the river, lay the part of the town known as Campbellton, a straggling settlement of the poorest whites. The streets of Campbellton were overgrown with weeds and grass, the fences dilapidated; the open ditches full of green-coated stagnant water, bred the frogs that made night vocal and the malaria that kept half the people alternately quaking with chills and burning with fever (Box 9, Folder 4: 2).

Not unlike the natural imagery found in the final version of the novel, Chesnutt does not exclude the haunting imagery of a land that is bound to destroy those who occupy it. According to literary critic Anthony Wilson in his piece: *Shadow and Shelter: the Swamp in Southern Culture,* many believed that "the actual devastating effects of malaria [were] still believed to be caused by breathing swamp air…" during the post Civil War era in the South (64). The passage continues with even more description of the area around Mis' Molly's (the mother of Rena and John) home:

> But the immediate surroundings of Mis' Molly's house were more pleasing. Between the front piazza and the street stretched the flower-garden…a border of cedars, closely set, ran round the edge of the enclosure and almost hid the house from the street. But within that magic space what a profusion of floral treasures! Clumps of fragrant shrubs; beds of verbenas, long borders of jonquils; pinks and carnations; lilies and roses—white roses, yellow roses, red roses; (Box 9, Folder 4: 2).

Much like the description that remained in the printing of *The House Behind the Cedars*, the flowers and fragrant shrubs are a front for the secret of the Walden home. Considered within the context of the argument established here, we understand that the phrase "floral treasures" is a loaded one, suggesting that these so-called "treasures" are nothing more than a diversion from what exists in reality: dangerous swampland. Unlike the novel as it is known today, Chesnutt reveals the secret that drives the plot of the finished novel immediately after describing Mis' Molly's garden in detail, saying, "—few of those who admired her garden ever entered her gate. She belonged to an unpopular caste. A free colored woman, she was despised by the whites for her taint of negro blood, and envied by the blacks for her fairness of complexion" (Box 9, Folder 4: 3). By explicitly revealing Mis' Molly's secret, and in turn the secret of the Walden family, Chesnutt directly exposes the prejudices of the South, blatantly forcing readers to deal with the racist views of the people who inhabit the area head on. *The House Behind the Cedars* as it is known today, challenges readers to make a connection between the destructive forces of the landscape and the racial issues at the time on their own, while in earlier drafts, Chesnutt lays before his readers *his* truth—being sure that the message of this story is not missed. Chesnutt wants readers to know directly that this novel discusses the racist tendencies of the South and attitudes towards people of mixed-race.

Another example of this can be seen when John tries to convince his mother to let Rena cross the color line with him. This can be seen in the following:

> 'Don't cry mother. You'd lose her sooner or later, anyway. Some trifling mulatto would come along some day and marry her, and in a few years her beauty would fade, and she would become like the rest of them. You'd probably have to take care of her children while she went out washing to support a lazy husband and a lot of hungry brats…' (Box 9, Folder 6: 80).

In this passage, Chesnutt ironically exposes stereotypes of African American people held in society. It is his aim to show readers how their behaviors directly cause racist attitudes, which he expresses through the character John. Though John technically has mixed blood, he does not identify as racially mixed. Throughout the final version of *The House Behind the Cedars*, John rejects his black identity, doing everything that he can to construct the perfect white image of himself, even living and passing in white society for the past decade. He is not black, he *is* white. Thus, in this manuscript excerpt that does not appear in the final product of the novel, it makes sense for John to be the character using these stereotypes of race while trying to convince his mother to let Rena cross the color line with him.

The archived material held in Fisk University's Special Collections, clearly indicates that the *The House Behind the Cedars* underwent many changes in order to become the novel that readers know today. Chesnutt spent ten years perfecting the story that would later become the novel as it is known today. Through the many drafts of *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt conveys the dangers of the racist attitudes held in the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the destructive landscape that he develops in the use of vines and Virginia creepers. By cleverly disguising the dangers of the landscape behind the flowery and fragrant gardens within the novel, Chesnutt encourages readers to look a little closer to see what is truly happening in the world around us. Chesnutt communicates to readers through the southern landscape that though it may appear beautiful, the destructive beliefs of human nature are hidden behind a façade of acceptance and tolerance. Moreover, Chesnutt portrays the mixed race character Rena as a kind of sacrifice to fully drive home the message to his readers. Racism is a destructive force of both the natural world and human nature within *The House Behind the Cedars*, rendering the choice between black and white one fraught with danger. Because she does not choose either the white or black world in which to live, she dies at the edge of the swamp, consumed by the natural world that metaphorically expresses the dangers created by the people living in the South at that time. By combining the destructive forces of the southern landscape and racial tensions in the South, Chesnutt makes clear that for him, the South could never be a positive space, and must change in order to become a better place for everyone—especially those who are of mixed-blood.

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3. Endnotes

1 This is not to say that because Rena is objectified by both her brother and George that she does not have any agency. Notably, when Rena re-crosses the color line, her actions dramatically shift. Writing George a letter informing him that she did not want to ever be in contact with him again, and defiantly stating that she *is* black to George's mother demonstrates this shift in Rena's character, and represent her agency.