

9-2008

Diction and Social Strata in Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of Youth"

Mark Benedict

Georgia State University, mbenedict2@student.gsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_conf_newvoice_2008



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Benedict, Mark, "Diction and Social Strata in Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of Youth"" (2008). *Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2008*. Paper 9.

http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_conf_newvoice_2008/9

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department Conferences at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate English Association New Voices Conference 2008 by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gsu.edu.

Benedict, Mark
2008 New Voices Conference September 25-27
Graduate English Association
English Department, Georgia State University
Atlanta, Georgia

Diction and Social Strata in Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of his Youth"

Mark Benedict
Georgia State University
2008

Diction and Social Strata in Charles Chesnutt's "The Wife of his Youth"

Since Charles Chesnutt was on both the color and caste lines, his linguistic precision reflects a variety of cultural aspects. In "The wife of his Youth," one can explore the caste differences between Mr. Ryder and Liza Jane through Chesnutt's choice of diction. The opening of the story postpones the plot to introduce and characterize Mr. Ryder in the context of the Blue Veins Society. Once established as a Blue Vein, Mr. Ryder necessarily exhibits a more varied and more studied diction than Liza Jane. This disparity becomes a condemnation of the seeking after upward mobility at the cost of relationships and core values. Since both characters tell the same story, Chesnutt provides a close comparison of their dictions and presents not only Liza Jane's story as more truthful but uses her qualities to revalue the Blue Vein Society.

Diction plays a central role in the portrayal of different social castes. Cynthia Lehman examines several of Chesnutt's stories to analyze the social and political dimensions. She explains, "On the subject of language, as has been stated before, Charles Chestnutt's [sic] vocabulary was reflective of an attitude of White Americans that he wished to have portrayed in the novel to exhibit social realism," (1996, p. 282). This attitude becomes apparent in most of Chesnutt's stories through the differences between Uncle Julius and the narrator. Nevertheless, in the case of "The Wife of his Youth," Chesnutt juxtaposes the dictions of two central characters, Mr. Ryder and Liza Jane. Most simply, diction or lexical choice pertains to word choice including vocabulary and syntax (Harmon, 2009, p. 161). Readers understand aspects of Ryder's character through his word choice. On the other hand, Liza Jane's diction remains relatively undeveloped due to social restrictions based on her skin tone and temporal restrictions based on her years spent in a dedicated search for her husband.

Mr. Ryder's "soft dialect," as Chesnutt writes contains more formal and neutral vocabulary. For instance, when Liza Jane refers to those whom the narrator calls, "more white than black," she calls them, "mulatters." Then again, Mr. Ryder labels peoples of mixed race as, "light." Thereby, he removes any offensive overtones to the word. It is simply an adjective, no longer a social class. Similarly, when Liza Jane refers to African Americans, she calls them, "culluds." Again, Mr. Ryder chooses a more neutral term, "black." While Black existed as a title for African Americans during Chesnutt's time, it remained rarer and even today carries fewer connotations than "colored." These racial designations are significant. Stephen Knadler writes on Chesnutt's approach to the use of white in the stories and contends, "Whiteness, as we have seen, is less a noun than a verb, less a word that has an innate meaning than a designation for the practice of Othering" (1996, p. 441). The terminology used to separate races moves beyond diction into connotations, yet those feelings and meanings must be always tied to the word's selection. Thus in the same way lexical choices of white change racial dynamics, Chesnutt's "mulatters," "culluds," "light," and "black" reflect social dynamics in the story.

Furthermore, Mr. Ryder chooses legal and literary wording when explaining the narrative. In telling the ball's guests about "the case," he qualifies the marriage as not "legally binding." Finally, as he concludes, Mr. Ryder impresses that he has tried to "discuss it impartially," much as the state calls a jury to do. Conversely, when he first asks Liza Jane for explanation, he simply requests, "tell me your story." Thus by writing legal language versus story-telling, Chesnutt compares valuation of black vernacular. Much writing exists on Black vernacular; John Wideman contends that conventionalizing black speech took place more as an

interaction of cultures than words. He explains, “Negro dialect as it was conventionalized in American literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not black speech but the colonial interface of two language cultures—one written, literary and the other oral, traditional,” (1977, p. 79). Therefore, simply by his diction, Chesnutt not only divides two strata of society, he also references how the languages interact. He further recognizes this valuation in his mention of Mr. Ryder’s search for a poem by Tennyson and Mr. Ryder’s Shakespearean quotation from Hamlet. Mr. Ryder proves his own literary attention to diction as he compares the Tennyson passages. His own word usage and selection of texts illustrate the literary ascendancy over the black oral vernacular.

Chesnutt also contrasts Mr. Ryder’s legal and literary diction with Liza Jane’s superstition. While Mr. Ryder searches through literary texts, Liza Jane finds expression of confidence in locating her husband from what, “De signs an’ de token tells me. I drempt three nights runnin’ on’y dis las’ week dat I foun’ him.” Similarly in “A Deep Sleeper,” Chesnutt refers to fear of swamp and visionary dreams as part of the slaves’ beliefs. Superstition throughout Chesnutt’s tales and even in characters like Jim in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, represents an ignorance and a lack of education. He easily weaves Liza Jane’s superstitions into explanations of the fact she is a cook and looking for a job; thus, her beliefs simply reflect a given, factual part of her life.

The ultimate importance of the linguistic differences revolves around the conclusion of their story. Though Mr. Ryder’s diction sounds more intellectual than Liza Jane’s, Chesnutt does not qualify this as making him a better person. Lorne Fienberg proposes a different reading of Liza Jane in a study of Chesnutt’s short stories, “The dialect of her tale has the jarring quality of truth, when placed beside the polite locutions with which Ryder masks his linguistic past,” (1990, p. 223). Ryder is not the man he was; he does not even use his original name. Liza Jane alone in the story knows Mr. Ryder’s true name and character. Recalling Mr. Ryder’s previous work ethic, she admits that she could not even be “spectin’ much” out of the man she married. Certainly she did not expect Sam to qualify “himself by, industry, by thrift, and by study,” as Mr. Ryder says. She only knew Sam who “wuz one er de triflin’ s han’s on de plantation,” and whose only value lay in the thousand dollars the master hoped to get for him. Thus along with his upward mobility, Mr. Ryder has lost part of himself, not simply his name, but his identity. Understandably, Mr. Ryder has indeed improved his life in many ways, but the words of Liza Jane reveal paradoxically that Sam’s progress to Mr. Ryder has not also been without a loss.

Though Chesnutt does not reveal Liza Jane’s reaction to Mr. Ryder’s revelation of his identity, he uses Mr. Ryder and Liza Jane to revalue the Blue Vein Society. Ryder uses his eloquence to hide his past, but when encountering the truth recalled in simple unpretentious diction, he then causes “the Blue Veins to examine and redefine the foundations of their own exclusivity,” (Fienberg, 1990, p. 224). Fienberg continues, “Ryder’s performance proposes that henceforth not property, nor the veneer of culture, nor specious distinctions of race will constitute the dominant values of their little society, but eloquence, theatricality, moral responsibility, and human compassion.” Thus for his audience, Chesnutt challenges the traditional idea that moral superiority must be coupled with property and show. Rather, as Fienberg highlights, Mr. Ryder’s eloquence ought to be equally valued with “moral responsibility and human compassion.” Though the story ends with Mr. Ryder’s show of responsibility and compassion in confessing Liza Jane as his original wife, the story in its entirety focuses more on the astounding rarity of Liza Jane’s love. While it is Mr. Ryder who uses the sophisticated words, “fidelity” and “devotion” to explain Liza Jane’s behavior, Liza

Jane herself demonstrates these behaviors. Mr. Ryder, in fact, did not, until the end, show these moral characteristics. Liza Jane surely pricked Mr. Ryder's conscience when she assures him that Sam, Mr. Ryder's core identity, would not even consider marrying another woman until he found out about her and assures him that Sam would be searching for her, just as she was him. Chesnutt leaves readers with a conflict of interest: Mr. Ryder has become a social elite; Liza Jane has not; nevertheless, Mr. Ryder's diction is only a mask, which Liza Jane's simple style removes. In the end, his mobility does not qualify her, her values uplift him. Thus, through contrasting diction, Chesnutt not only divides the character's social levels but also reevaluates the values of society as a whole.

Selection of Comparative Diction

Mr. Ryder	Liza Jane
madam	suh
light	merlatter
black	cullud
Legal: the case discuss it impartially legally binding	Superstitious: De signs an' de token tells me. I drempt three nights runnin' on'y dis las' week dat I foun' him.
fidelity, devotion	he thought a heap er me

References

- Fienberg, L. (1990). Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth*: The Unveiling of the Black Storyteller. *American Transcendental Quarterly*. 4 (3), 219-237. Retrieved September 5, 2008, from MLA International Bibliography.
- Knadler, S. (1996). Untragic Mulatto: Charles Chesnutt and the Discourse of Whiteness. *American Literary History*. 8 (3), 426-448. Retrieved September 3, 2008 from JSTOR.
- Lehman, C. (1996). The Social and Political Views of Charles Chestnutt [sic]: Reflections on His Major Writings. *Journal of Black Studies*. 26 (3), 274-286. Retrieved September 4, 2008, from JSTOR.
- Wideman, J. (1977). Defining Black Voices in Fiction. *Black American Literature Forum*. 11 (3), 79-82. Retrieved September 3, 2008, from JSTOR.