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Title:

The Heart, Not the Face: Race, Religion and Righteousness in a Civil War Era Children's Tale

Abstract:

This article analyzes the 1863 pseudo slave narrative entitled *Black and White; Or, the Heart, Not the Face* by white Northerner Jane Dunbar Chaplin. It sets this hortatory tale within the historical and literary context of "domestic abolitionism" and proceeds to analyze the conversion trope central to the work. The logic behind the characters' conversion is identified as relying on sentimentality and a truncated interrogation of white religious, aesthetic, cultural and political norms. This limited racial vision is seen as consistent with post-Civil Rights era political and social norms in which race is "pre-political" and private.

Introduction

As a religious practitioner, teacher, and researcher, I, like so many others, have found the topic of race and religion in America to be fascinating, frustrating, multi-layered and full of important possibilities and daunting challenges. The role which has, perhaps, best crystallized these contradictions for me -- and challenged my own personal assumptions and attitudes about race -- involved the ten years or so that I spent as pastor of an urban, Christian congregation which came to include among its diverse members a group of recently-arrived Sudanese refugees. Watching these individuals -- men and women, boys and girls -- adjust to American cultural and social norms and, especially, to the identity templates which have here grown up around race, underscored for me how race is much more than color and how deeply implicated are the specifics of American history and the social, economic, and cultural currents which define and maintain racial identities. Equally compelling was the way that my mostly-white colleagues, peers, and broader church community tried to make sense of who these people were. Ought "we" to view "them" through the same lens as the recipients of "missions" programs and efforts? As African Americans? As immigrants? As potentially-threatening foreigners? As fellow Christians? As fellow citizens? As fellow church members? As fellow human beings?

All of this has led to an abiding interest in how individuals -- white, black, brown; native-born and foreign born; speakers of English and speakers of other languages -- navigate race in America. It has also led me to an interest in how religious communities choose and deploy educational materials -- sermons, Sunday school materials, missions materials, etc. -- which explicitly and implicitly touch on race.

This interest, in turn, has caused me to ask the question of how other American Christians have dealt with race in the past, especially in explicitly educational materials. The antebellum period of American history, of course, overflowed with religious publications touching on slavery and, at least implicitly, on race. Not only *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but also thousands of popular books, tracts, serialized stories, and newspaper articles rehearsed and dramatized the evils of slavery and the plight of slaves. These publications frequently interwove abolitionist themes with religious ones and helped establish and refine a religious logic for resistance to slavery. They were also, as

in the work to be discussed here, often written by women and likely intended to be read by children and young people in church or home settings.

Thanks to an ambitious digitization project undertaken by the Michigan State University library, several of these often-obscure works of juvenile religious literature from the early- to mid-nineteenth century are now available in their entirety online. One of these is *Black and White; Or, the Heart, Not the Face*, an account of a young slave named Juno Washington written by white Northerner Jane Dunbar Chaplin and published by the American Tract Society of Boston in 1863.

While this could be the threshold to a potentially vast scholarly world, my aims in this present work are quite modest: they are, first, to set this 170-page story within its historical and literary context, especially relying on Deborah C. De Rosa's understanding of the "domestic abolitionist" women writers with whom Chaplin is most readily classified; second, to summarize the primary thematic and plot elements of the tale; third, to present how literal and figurative deaths in the story prompted religious or quasi-religious conversion experiences leading to true motherhood, "right feeling," and freedom; fourth, to reflect upon how the author's vision of citizenship, social change, and race implicitly prioritizes whiteness; and, finally, to discuss very briefly how these religious and racial discourses are still with us and still in need of change.

Domestic Abolitionists

In her admirable book *Domestic Abolitionism and Juvenile Literature, 1830-1865* Deborah De Rosa argues for a greater recognition of the impact of the female authors who were churning out religious and popular material for children and young people in the antebellum era. She notes that such women, though relatively neglected by scholars and maligned by Nathaniel Hawthorne (for one) as a "d—d mob of scribbling women" (De Rosa 2003, 7), nonetheless

took advantage of the acceptability of domestic fiction, the rising cult of motherhood and childhood, and the increasing market for juvenile literature as means to create a literary space that would permit them to walk the tightrope between female propriety and political controversy.... [and to become] *domestic abolitionists*, women authors who developed a discourse that permitted them to negotiate personal views and cultural imperatives (1).

By adopting a sentimental and devotional tone and by addressing their works, at least ostensibly, to young and female audiences, such women were able to hew to conventional gender norms while at the same time advancing "sentimental and quasi-seditious critiques of slavery's impact upon American childhood, family, economics, politics, and democracy" (10). Such critiques were aimed at affecting a "change of heart." In the words of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom De Rosa cites, the "one thing that every individual can do" in order to fight slavery is "to feel right" (10). Thus a radical politicization of sentiment was for these writers the key to "private acts of resistance that would ultimately restore domestic principles and American ideals" (77).

To prompt this "right feeling" the domestic abolitionists "created the sentimental pseudo slave narrative, a hybrid genre that combines characteristics and strategies from three popular forms: the sentimental novel, the juvenile narrative, and the adult slave narrative" (40). This form allowed these writers to satisfy the literary demand for slave narratives while simultaneously crafting an argument against slavery built upon the unassailable ideals of motherhood, family, religious faith, and private virtue.

Embedded in this form were assumptions about the nature of slavery, the slave protagonist and about the readers of such fiction. First, slavery was assumed to be inherently cruel and dehumanizing, which it certainly was. Writers deliberately confronted the "happy slave" myth and

presented slavery as a perversion of the American domestic ideal. Second, the slave-protagonists were assumed to be driven by the American ideals of independence and freedom as well as often -- as in the story to be introduced below -- by rarified religious sentiment, which may be more questionable.

The most radical assumption, however, involved what the domestic abolitionists expected of their readers. The reader is continually admonished to put him- or herself in the place of the degraded slave or the struggling freedman. In the story below the author goes so far as to place a white child in a minor plot stream which parallels that of the black protagonist, as if to remind the reader in the very structure of the story -- as well as in the narrative -- that black and white souls are similarly valuable and may be similarly endangered by an American society which elevates wealth, pleasure, and ease over human freedom and motherly Christian virtue.

The Story

Black and White purports to tell the story of Juno Washington, the grand-daughter of "Old Milly," who claimed to be an African queen. Juno is an orphan raised by the community of slaves on the Washington family plantation in an unidentified Southern location. The opening chapters describe plantation life, the slaves' longing for liberty, and the cruel Northern overseer. The master and his wife are painted, somewhat surprisingly, as having sympathy for the slaves' plight yet as being too distracted by wealth and luxury to act boldly on their behalf. "Uncle Jake," the elder spiritual leader of the slave community, dies in chapter two after stressing that both black and white are equally God's creation and that His ways are inscrutable. Patience in suffering, then, according to the dying patriarch, is what is required. By chapter three Juno is grown and reveals herself to be prideful and self-righteous, yet no more so "than are many in Christian families, with God's Word in their hands and his sanctuary at their door" (29). She meets Abe, a black freedman who has come to do carpentry on the plantation and who, unlike Juno, can read. He reads to the slaves and for this is made to leave the plantation while taking with him "everything that belongs to him." He interprets this as including Juno, whom he has chosen to be his wife. Though they express fear of discovery and capture, the couple travel uneventfully to a northern city, meet a sympathetic pastor who marries them, set up a tidy and thrifty household, and have a child. Juno and Abe soon, however, confront the disdain of their white, upstairs neighbor, a drunkard who runs a seedy grog shop and who cruelly dominates and abuses his wife and children. In response to his derision, Abe asserts, "I'se hired dis place honestly, massa ... and though I'se got a *black* face, may be I'se got a *white* heart" (47, emphasis original).

Chapter five depicts a long religious reverie in which Abe expresses complete confidence in God's wise providence and his submission to God's will in whatever form. Juno, however, resists these religious sentiments and claims her own sufficiency. The following day, the couple's domestic bliss is interrupted by the untimely death of Abe, who "in his great haste to give satisfaction at his work" falls from a ladder. This crisis becomes the catalyst for Juno's religious awakening. Though she is tempted to follow Abe in death, her care for her child prevents her from doing so. Her motherly sympathy extends also to those under the thumb of her tyrannical neighbor -- "Oh, how she pitied her oppressed white sister" -- as well as to the previously-unnoticed destitute around her. She "pitied every child of sorrow and loved the whole world" (64-65). For the first time she acknowledges the illegality of her escape from slavery, but, prompted by maternal care, adopts a stance of resistance -- a "mother's fearful love" (68) which becomes the source of private "anti-slavery lectures" directed at little Hannibal, her son. Chapter six closes with a paean to this trope of motherhood: "If there is on earth one sight which casts a lingering halo over our

fallen nature, to show that some trace is yet left of our first glory, it is the sight of the poor, pitiful and benevolent toward each other; the mother whose little ones may be supperless to-morrow, feeding those who are so to-day; one whose home is such in name only, sheltering those who have no where to lay the head!" (70).

In chapter seven Juno's broadened compassion is expressed by her rescue of Susie, the abused daughter of the liquor-seller. This sub-plot dominates the middle chapters and provides the author with a vehicle for re-iterating the themes of self-abnegation and service, especially when Susie is explicitly instructed by Juno and, later, by Mrs. Loring, the wife of the kindly pastor who adopts her. The concluding chapters involve the story of how Juno's fellow slaves from the Washington plantation obtain their freedom and, through dramatic coincidence, are re-united with Juno in her adopted northern city. Uncle Jake's admonition that they remain patient in their afflictions is vindicated in this series of events which involves the death of the slave owner's wife; his re-marriage to a woman who, with her son, cruelly abuses the slaves; the owner's decision to free the slaves in his will; and, following the owner's death, the slaves' shrewd and careful reliance on the law and on a sympathetic, Quaker executor. Thus the divine and mysterious hand of Providence, as Uncle Jake predicted, brings about their freedom. The story concludes, we are told, "twenty years ago."

From Death to True Motherhood

Running throughout this tale is the theme of conversion from prideful self-righteousness and self-sufficiency to a state of "right feeling" -- a feeling which embraces reliance on God's providence, compassion for others, a heightened maternal sensibility, and disgust at vanities of the flesh and the evils of slavery (moral malignancies which are often associated with one another). This conversion journey is nearly always prompted by the death of a character, usually a virtuous or sympathetic one. The death of Uncle Jake in the opening chapters sets this pattern. Uncle Jake dies urging patience, and the slaves' ultimate deliverance vindicates their choice to follow his advice rather than respond to their captivity by violence, rebellion, or mass escape. In this sense the slave community as a whole responds to Uncle Jake's death by relinquishing pride, adopting the "right feeling" of faithful perseverance, and realizing, as a result, both literal freedom and the transcendent freedom flowing from Christian obedience and long-suffering.

However, Juno's conversion from pride to "right feeling" is, appropriately, the most explicitly developed. Her new religious awareness, prompted by Abe's death, is expressed by true motherhood -- a recommitment to raising her child and a generalization of her maternal sympathies to the "whole world," even white Susie. This, in turn, leads her to several types of freedom: the economic freedom flowing from her thrift and industry, the freedom to cross racial barriers by finding common cause with white women as they together express maternal care, and, ultimately, her formal freedom from slavery.

Other characters, in minor roles, also enact this process of death, relinquishment of pride, true motherhood/true sympathy, and freedom. Clearly, this conversion theme is seen by the author as universally applicable. It is *the* answer for each of the troubled, distressed or abused characters in the story. It would seem, also, that the path of death, humble acceptance, true sympathy, and freedom is the author's prescription for the troubled nation as it struggles -- in the year of the Emancipation Proclamation -- to free itself from slavery and to envision a future of racial harmony and justice.

"Right Feeling," Race, and Citizenship

This narrative and its conversion theme relies on a particular logic which involves a number of interlocking assumptions. The first is that the private sphere is the ultimate determinant of public life: the "hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." It is only through private acts and private conversions that problems are solved in the story, and it is apparent that the author desires for her readers the kind of private conversion experienced by her characters -- one which results in true sympathy for black Americans and which leads to the resolution of the problems and perversions surrounding slavery and other ills. This, in turn, is wrapped up with the second assumption, which is that "right feeling," and "true motherhood" (i.e., post-conversion sensibilities) trump social norms and even, occasionally, laws. Juno, for instance, does not hesitate to defy the law when she escapes from slavery or when she rescues Susie. The ideals of maternal care and the establishment and maintenance of a Godly home are seen as superseding the formal, legal claims of ownership by the slave master or the drunken father. True motherhood and true sympathy are thus radical notions which allow the characters to maintain virtue while defying law and convention.

The problem with this logic is that it frames the issue of slavery and the degraded position of African Americans as one which is most effectively solved by the transformation of private dispositions, rather than by changes in law, public policy or in the broadly shared understandings about race within the culture. Interestingly, Joel Olson (2004) describes a similar state of affairs in his analysis of developments in American political life and racial discourses, especially since the Civil Rights era. It is impossible to do complete justice to Olson's argument here, but his conclusion is that, over time, as legally-sanctioned markers of race have been eliminated, white Americans have tended to see race as largely private or "pre-political" and centering on questions of "tolerance" and its malign cousin, "prejudice." Under these circumstances, when the problem of race and racism becomes largely a matter of private feeling, the historically-constructed and historically-contingent facts of race move to the background. The legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, segregation and the machinations of an economic system which perpetuates an economically useful underclass become irrelevant and the only thing that matters is a "feeling" about the racial "other." The hard facts of white privilege, or what Peggy McIntosh (1990) has so evocatively called the "invisible knapsack" of whiteness, disappear from view. Chaplin's tale would seem to foreshadow this direction by implying that the problems of race can be solved by a conversion to right feeling -- that history can be overcome by sentiment -- and that no public deconstruction of white cultural power (e.g., the power to define what "true" sentiment *is*) is necessary, or, in fact, can even be imagined.

The final assumption undergirding the logic of this tale is, however, the most troubling. It is that while slavery is not immutable, race, as such, is a taken-for-granted reality. The physical, linguistic, aesthetic and religious attributes associated with whiteness are normative, while those associated with blackness are exotic or aberrant, even when held up for praise. For instance, the narrator's voice is standard English, while Juno's voice (and that of other African Americans) is dialect. Clearly, the narrator is "normal," while Juno is "other." Other aesthetic choices and judgments -- notably, in a tale which relies so heavily on sentiment -- are also white-centric. Though the author goes to great (perhaps excessive) lengths to depict Juno as praise-worthy, her physical attributes are presented as *inherently* repugnant: "It would be highly improper for us to compare our heroine to a flower, if only the face and form were referred to. But if it is of the *heart* that we write, we may forget the ugly features and uncouth form, and keep the semblance still" (7, emphasis original). Thus there is a thematic tension which runs throughout the book. Motherly virtue and sympathy can override law and (at times) convention, but it cannot change the black characters' "natural" racial state and the "ugliness" of their non-white bodies.

This logic would seem to consign black Americans to what Olson has identified as the role of the "anti-citizen." The "anti-citizen" is one who, even when emulating majority mores and manners, can never be fully incorporated into the polity of the nation because of some inherent, or "natural," difference. Olson contends that, far from being an anomaly of American political history, the notion of an "anti-citizen" is at the heart of the American understanding of democracy. An excluded "other" is constitutive of the essential cultural and discursive dichotomies around which Americans define themselves (free versus enslaved, brave versus cowardly, Godly versus Godless, and so on). He argues that black Americans became the essential "anti-citizens" not because of their skin color *per se*, but rather that the very notion of black skin as a marker of "natural" inferiority was invented in America as a convenient means to maintain a docile and disenfranchised workforce. Thus he argues, in effect, that African Americans were not slaves because they were black, they were "black" (i.e., identified as "naturally" different than whites and inferior to them) because they were slaves.

Women, in contrast, were also viewed as "naturally" different from, and inferior to, men, but, rather than being "anti-citizens," Olson contends that women were able to function as what he calls "dependent citizens." While unable to vote or to speak in public in antebellum America without (often violent) opposition and ridicule, they could, however, exercise influence within the home and among circles of other women. De Rosa makes clear that the "domestic abolitionists" were remarkably effective even when confined to this role of "dependent citizenship." It is little wonder, then, that Chaplin seems to be prescribing something which looks very nearly like dependent citizenship for her African American characters: *If you are patient, and if you subscribe to the mores of white America and if you are exceedingly pious, thrifty and diligent, then you may be admitted into the circle of American public life as an "honorary" white citizen, i.e., one with a "white" heart. After all, she seems to be saying, we women have done so, why not you?*

The fatal problem, of course, is revealed by Chaplin's characterization of blackness as immutably ugly. Unlike motherly sympathy and virtue, which may be won through conversion, the state of blackness "of the face" is defined as an unalterable "natural" phenomenon. And unlike the "natural" place of women within the ideal domestic tableau of America, blacks were forever destined to be marked as strange, even when held up for praise. No matter how white the heart, the blackness -- and its "ugliness" -- remained.

Of course, this is anything but "natural"; it is a problem which is lodged within white perceptions and judgments and which is wrapped up with the cultural power of the white majority to create discursive reality in its own image. The very existence of the pseudo slave genre speaks to this cultural power wielded by white Americans -- even white women in their "dependent citizen" position -- to tell the story of *black* America in *white* words. Without their own voice, the best that blacks could hope for in Chaplin's fictional world was to receive either the pity of the white reader or to be perceived as quite like white America on the "inside," but, "naturally," unalterably different and bizarre when viewed from the "outside."

Conclusion

What did this portend for a post-slavery America and what does it mean for us today? Clearly, Chaplin was anticipating a time when the state would rid itself of race as a formal marker. Yet, as we have seen, even the admittedly radical, sentimental conversion advocated by Chaplin was bounded by white assumptions and provided limited ground for common understanding, much less for a critique of white attitudes or for the creation of a robust, multi-racial democracy. In contrast, Olson advocates a new kind of "abolitionism," which he calls "the abolition of white democracy."

By this he means a thorough-going deconstruction of the history of American democracy which reveals its racial dynamics and its proclivity to produce "others" who are marginalized due to some supposed deficiency. Only after such a critique, Olson believes, can a more radically inclusive democracy be envisioned which is not predicated on whiteness as the assumptive cultural, discursive and political center.

For American Christian congregations, perhaps the lesson which can be drawn from this look at Chaplin's attempt to engage and enlighten her readers is that sympathy and pity are, in themselves, an inadequate foundation for creative and just action. As the activist and churchman John Perkins (e.g., 1998) has so forcefully and frequently said, people of faith ought to -- and can -- go beyond charity to understanding and activism which crosses lines of race, gender, and social class. Doing so may require radically altered sentiment, but perhaps more crucially it requires an educational approach which allows for questioning of fundamental assumptions and for the emergence of real dialogue leading to real, mutual understanding.

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