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## *Blending Nature, Superstition and Tradition in Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman*

**Keywords:** *Conjuring; Nature; South; Hoodoo; Shamaness/Conjurer; Tragicomic Situations; Slave Owner; Plantation.*

**Abstract:** *Chesnutt gained notoriety through his first book Conjure Woman – a collection of seven short stories, written in dialect, which “coloured” perfectly the local traditions and superstitions. Framed by one common narrator, John (a white carpetbagger who has moved South to protect his wife Annie's failing health and to begin cultivating a grape vineyard) is still portraying the South in idealistic terms contrasting with the other narrator of the internal storylines, Julius, who blurs the romantic image of the South and the paternal image of the Slave owner. The internal storylines are intermingled with tales of conjuring – a form of witchcraft, rooted in the African hoodoo – and all the spells are proof of Black resistance against the Whites. All the conjuring is done in and by means of nature, and all the “lessons” are learnt through metamorphosis – each character confronts his self/herself with some sort of transformation, which has to be fulfilled in order to prevent any affliction coming towards him/her. The endings are usually startling and unforeseen, yet they portray a folk culture surging a world of transition in a late nineteenth century South.*

### **I. Conjure, Tradition and Superstition in the South**

There is a fine line between tradition and superstition when we speak about African-Americans and especially slaves – they had their traditions which blended with various other exterior factors and created other ones, which at some point coincided with some of their superstitions. These two elements bond (tradition and superstition) in a knot hard to be “decomposed”. Religion got mixed with conjure, roots and herbs, hoodoo and superstitions. This practice of “magic” has a distinctive terminology – the names ranging from conjure, gopher, rootwork, cunning, mojo, hodoo, zinzin, wanga and so on, depending on the region they were present or used. (Anderson: 2005, 3) The conjure was more frequently done by women, although men were also quite skilled. However, women working on plantations were more exposed to various requests to give help with the curing of others, therefore they were the ones more prone to fulfill this job. “A general recognition and respect for slave women’s doctoring skills prevailed among enslaved communities, while at the same time the gendered division of labor on plantations shifted most of the work of sick care to black women” (Fett, 2002: 113). All the conjurers were feared, but this

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was the price they had to pay for the recognition of their authority. They were taken seriously either by taking care of their master's children or by becoming healers, and determining others to depend on them. In Chesnutt's "Conjure Woman" the "witch" is called Aunt Peggy, and is present in four of the seven short stories in the volume. She works her roots in the benefit of the blacks, and usually her gophers have to work against the white cruel masters. Two of the stories mention an old conjure man, who dies in the end, but Aunt Peggy still remains untouchable and is surrounded by mystery. All the stories orbit around conjuring and there is no mention of any white doctor or physician.

Because the institution of slavery defined black men and women as possessions and not human beings, many experiments were made on them by physicians in order to analyze the difference between races in what regarded pain, the resistance to torture and so on. Therefore medical abuse was present and used for various analyses and little by little the humiliations and pains that the Negroes had to endure contributed to the lack of trust in the whites' medical help. Consequently, they managed to cultivate their own practices and therapies, their own ways of healing without the help of any exterior source, and so root doctors, midwives and conjure people (men and women) became famous and had quite a mixed clientele. Some of the slaves who were brought from Africa transformed their homeland practices, adapted them and used them in the New World for their good and for others'. Native American medicine relied mainly on herbs and ointments and mixtures that had to be adapted to the flora of the new land. Moreover many cultures mingled so every now and then the African hoodoo was mixed with Black Atlantic religion and healing and with Brazilian Candomble – a kind of animism. (Anderson: 2005, 20)

When it comes to medical institutions and medical cures for the slaves in the post-bellum South, it is widely known that African-Americans rejected all that meant health regulations in the name of their new status and new won freedom. According to Guild in 1866 a judge in Georgia accused African-Americans of worsening an epidemic of smallpox and endangering others because of their refusal of any health help from the whites asserting that they could manage on their own. They rejected everything "white" even if they did it at their risk, because pride was more important than anything else.

Yet black slaves' health system gained no authority, even though Whites used it many a time. African-American women were the most oppressed because they had to work in the fields, or cook or take care of the master's children, and it was also them who had to heal and cure and to assist births and funerals. Healers were in great demand never fully acknowledged if ever, although slave owners depended on their healing and skills. The only two categories recognized by the Whites were the authority of the White woman domestic medicine and that of the physicians with medical training. Old women were self-reliable and the whole community of slaves had a great respect for them. But apart from respect and mutual recognition of their methods, they were the first to be blamed if a patient would die. On the other hand white physicians were given credit for any decision they took in the name of the patient. Several state governments introduced a series of laws to keep under control the practice of medicine by slaves. For example in

1784 in Virginia black were forbidden to prepare, administer and exhibit any kind of medicine or cure, otherwise they would be punished with death. After a few years the law suffered modifications, such as the equitation of the slave if the drug he has “prescribed” was not harmful, and in 1843 the slaves were allowed to sell or administer these cures with their master’s consent. (Guild: 1936, 98).

But how was Aunt Peggy (the conjure woman in Chesnutt’s stories) recognized as a conjurer and how was she different from the mammies that helped raising children on plantations? Usually these conjure people had specialized knowledge in root cures which was usually passed on from generation to generation. All their extra knowledge gave them a tacit power in the face of others – they were the second person to come to after the physician, they were responsible for the health of slaves, they sometimes carried the role of midwives and nurses for the sick. Moreover “enslaved African Americans engaged power through healing rituals by defining health as a community enterprise and healing knowledge as spiritual empowerment.” (Fett: 2002, 58).

Slave owners not only benefitted from these healing remedies, but they also borrowed them from the blacks and this dependence ensured the constant contact between black and white members of plantation communities.

Plant medicines, whether in the form of food, teas, or poultices, formed the core of rural American household health care. Yet antebellum herbalism in any region of the country was comprised of more than a body of specific remedies. Herbal practice involved a dynamic set of social relations and distinctive relationships to the natural environment. (Fett: 2002, 60).

The history of these cures comprised both cultural transformation and the desire of ordinary blacks to find fast remedies. The elite whites did not believe medical herbs were any good and definitely did not perceive them through a spiritual perspective, in contrast with the rest of the southerners (black and white). What is more the herbs and mixtures prepared by the blacks were administered to their children in order to heal them in advance against any disease that could harm them. Many elderly former slaves speak with their interviewers about their childhood mentioning their being fed with herbal preparations.

## **II. Conjurers in Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman***

“The Conjure Woman” is a collection of seven short stories which have as a main theme the power of magic and superstition in the lives of the slaves. After the war, John, a carpetbagger and a Northerner, and Annie, his wife, decide to move South because of his wife’s sickness, considering that a change of climate would improve her health. After their arrival there, John decides to buy a plantation and make a business out of growing grapevines or scuppernongs. He meets a former slave called Julius who apparently still lives on the plantation where he used to be a slave. The northerners hire him because he seems of good use not only because he knows the place but also because he has previously worked in the scuppernongs plantations and he can give them advice on this matter.

Every now and then Julius begins a story which involves conjuring, and which has at its center Aunt Peggy, a conjure woman, who is called every time the blacks cannot endure the sufferings undergone from their masters. However, each time he tells a story he has a hidden interest which he tries to turn for his own benefit, managing to convince Annie of the veridical nature of his words. The main storyline is narrated by John, and the internal one is related by Julius, creating in this way the story within a story type of narrative, with double first-person perspective – one being that of John and the other being that of Julius.

Julius makes use of two other types of conjurers: a black female slave and two black men conjurers, who in their turn make use of the roots in their own favor, all of them “working” in Julius’ interest to fulfill his aims. The northerner seems quite aware of the former slave’s perkiness, but he lets himself fooled just for his wife’s sake.

And who was poor Sandy?’ asked my wife, who takes a deep interest in the stories of plantation life which she hears from the lips of the older colored people. Some of these stories are quaintly humorous; others wildly extravagant, revealing the Oriental cast of the negro’s imagination; while others, poured freely into the sympathetic ear of a Northern-bred woman, disclose many a tragic incident of the darker side of slavery. (Chesnutt, 17).

Julius is depicted very stereotypically by John, yet his Oriental Negro imagination seems to influence Annie a lot. John sees his wife very stereotypically too, but although he seems not to take her too serious, she imposes her will on him after each story told by Julius. The conjuring and conjurers may be just a pretext for the former slave, however his imagination brings to life stories that stir the reader’s attention and Annie’s sympathy.

### **II.1. Aunt Peggy**

The first story Julius tells is called “The Goophered Grapevine” in which he speaks about a gopher which was put by Aunt Peggy on the vine so that the “niggas” would stop eating. Old McAdoo wants his profit maximized and the labor intensified, only that he cannot do that while the slaves are eating the fruit, so he solicits the conjure woman for a gopher so that every nigga that would try to touch the scuppernong would die one year after eating it. Aunt Peggy helps him and his profit turns out good that year, so he buys another slave, Henry, for more labor force. Not knowing about the conjure the new slave eats from the vine and he is taken to the conjure woman to ask for a medicine that would take the gopher out. Aunt Peggy cannot do much but to delay the effect of the gopher with one year, giving him something to drink and telling him that each year in spring he has to go and rub his head with some scuppernongs so as to live another year.

Aunt Peggy is a very powerful character and she seems to control from the shadow all the supernatural powers, being that person who knows all the hidden secrets and the only one who can turn things back to their initial state again. She is a sort of shameness, living in the woods, isolated from others, her only contact with her “brothers” being in the moments in which one or another come to ask for her

help. Aunt Peggy is not very outlined as a character, she seems static and even can be considered an episodic one, yet she is the one who fuels the climax and she is the one who “puts out the fire” when things do not evolve on the expected path.

Julius mentions her in four of his seven stories, opening and closing the series with a story in which Aunt Peggy prepares a gopher with a specific purpose. She is presented as being materialistic also because she helps anyone who pays her good money, be it Master Ole Doodle MacAdoo or the maid (Chloe) in the last story “Hot Foot Hannibal”. She does not care whether the spells are against a white man or a black one, she does not ask any questions, and she fulfills her “mission” flawlessly.

Mars Dugal' hearn 'bout Aun' Peggy's doin's, en begun ter 'flect whe'r er no he could n' git her ter he'p him keep de niggers off'n de grapevimes. One day in de spring er de year, ole miss pack' up a basket er chick'n en poun'-cake, en a bottle er scuppernon' wine, en Mars Dugal' tuk it in his buggy en driv ober ter Aun' Peggy's cabin. He tuk de basket in, en had a long talk wid Aun' Peggy. De nex' day Aun' Peggy come up ter de vimya'd. De niggers seed her slippin' 'roun', en dey soon foun' out what she 'uz doin' dere. (Chesnutt, 8)

As the stories are told by Julius, the reader is offered a first person point of view narrative, yet Aunt Peggy’s voice is not heard once along the storylines. Julius recalls through his own words the deeds and words of this conjure woman. He offers details about her mixtures, yet she does not utter a single word as a separate character.

She sa'ntered 'roun' 'mong's' de vimes, en tuk a leaf fum dis one, en a grape-hull fum dat one, en a grape-seed fum anudder one; en den a little twig fum here, en a little pinch er dirt fum dere,—en put it all in a big black bottle, wid a snake's toof en a speckle' hen's gall en some ha'rs fum a black cat's tail, en den fill' de bottle wid scuppernon' wine. Wen she got de goopher all ready en fix', she tuk 'n went out in de woods en buried it under de root uv a red oak tree, en den come back en tole one er de niggers she done goopher de grapevimes, en a'er a nigger w'at eat dem grapes 'ud be sho ter die inside'n twel' mont's. (Apud)

What is interesting in Julius’ stories is that by means of magic and supernatural, a former negro slave tries to trick two northerners and is almost successful in his attempt. He knows that whites, and especially those from the North, consider conjure a dangerous activity, which has influenced many of their slaves too. Therefore he tries his hand at scaring away the new comers by using harmless but “veridical” stories. He mingles conjuring with magic, with superstition and also with nature, because in all of his stories everything is related to nature. The rootwork is made from herbs and plants which have a mystic power and a powerful effect on the “target”. Hence without the use of nature his stories would lack point. Julius’s secret interest in his telling the first story is that he had yearly revenue from the grapes and from the deserted plantation, and from here deriving his attempt of scaring away any potential buyer.

Aunt Peggy comes back into the scenery in Julius' third story "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" – in which he tells the story of a cruel slave owner who used to beat his slaves and who did not care for anything but profit. He would put them to work from day to night and give them less food to eat so that he could maximize his revenue. He would not let them sing and dance and was against children so he did not allow them to have a mistress – Julius emphasizes here the importance of these factors in the lives of the slaves. Fed up with this situation Solomon, one of the slaves, goes to Aunt Peggy and asks for her help to make their master friendlier. She gave him some roots that he would have to put in his master's soup for dinner and told him to come again after a month – the only effect of the conjure would be that of a harsh nightmare for the master. The next day the master leaves with business for some time and a new negro is brought on the plantation becoming the target of the overseer's beatings and cruelties. It was only after his master's return that Solomon understood that the nightmare Aunt Peggy was talking about took place and Master James turned into the negro for a few days to see what it is like to be a slave. From that day on Master James changed his manners completely, was more generous and understanding with his slaves and was prosperous.

The morale of the story is, in Julius' opinion, that those who are good to poor people will be prosperous - this situation being about his godson who was a lazy and rebellious young man, and who, in his attempt to get employed by John and Annie made a lot of mistakes and was disposed of. John realized that Julius is trying his hand at this and he resented the idea of having Tom around his household doing nothing all day, however the next day he found the boy working in the garden – Annie was impressed by Julius' story and offered him a second chance.

Consequently Julius fulfills his goal again, and by using Aunt Peggy and a few supernatural elements manages to impress Annie again. Even if Annie seems easy to fool and sensitive to everything – or at least this is the image created by John – she is not refused or prohibited anything. She may represent the prototype of a gull woman, but she satisfies her demands every time.

Julius makes use of Aunt Peggy in two more stories: Sis' Becky's Pickaninny and Hot Foot Hannibal. In the first one Aunt Peggy helps a desperate mother to reunite with her son, and in the latter she helps a young couple to get together by putting a gopher on the master's favourite slave, to whom the young black woman was promised. Aunt Peggy offers all sorts of treatments that can cure for a day or more powerful ones that can change the situation completely. For Sis Becky she makes a concoction which she gives to the child to drink in order to turn him into a mocking bird and fly to spend one day or two next to his mother. When the remedy's effect fades she creates a strong potion which determines the master to take back the woman on his plantation, reuniting her with her son. Hot Foot Hannibal deals with a different story, that is Hannibal, the master's favorite is chosen to work in the house and promised Chloe, the misses' maid for a wife. However, Chloe does not love him, nor does she like him, therefore she sends Jeff, the man she loves, to Aunt Peggy to ask for a remedy of the situation. Consequently Aunt Peggy gives Jeff some sort of voodoo doll which represents Hannibal and which has to be buried in the house. The effect of the doll on the poor fellow is to make him clumsy and determine him to make a mistake each time he passed by the

place it was hidden. It is only in these two stories that Aunt Peggy gets a voice of her own through Julius' words:

So de nex' night Jeff went back, en Aun' Peggy gun 'im a baby doll, wid a body made out'n a piece er co'n-stalk, en wid splinters fer a'ms en laigs, en a head made out'n elderberry peth, en two little red peppers fer feet. 'Dis yer baby doll,' sez she, 'is Hannibal. Dis yer peth head is Hannibal's head, en dese yer pepper feet is Hannibal's feet. You take dis en hide it unner de house, on de sill unner de do', whar Hannibal 'll hafter walk ober it eve'y day. En ez long ez Hannibal comes anywhar nigh dis baby doll, he'll be des lack it is,—light-headed en hot-footed; en ef dem two things doan git 'im inter trouble mighty soon, den I'm no cunjuh 'oman. But w'en you git Hannibal out'n de house, en git all th'oo wid dis baby doll, you mus' fetch it back ter me, fer it's monst'us powerful goopher, en is liable ter make mo' trouble ef you leabe it layin' roun'. (Chesnutt, 88)

She is very confident in her power as a conjure woman and she knows that her cures cannot fail ever. The ending is sad because, seeking revenge, Hannibal weaves a scheme and Jeff gets to be thrown out of the plantation and sold down the river, letting Chloe alone, deserted and suffering; she finally commits suicide.

Nevertheless, these two stories both serve Julius' purposes – Sis Becky's situation impresses Annie, who, being in a loss of heart, reanimates her feelings, and the story of Hannibal and Chloe staying as a testimony of love's ways of mocking at people – in this way Julius manages to reunite Annie's sister with her former lover. Although his stories might seem mischievous and serving his own personal purpose, some of them are meant to repair some situations in the relationship between John and Annie. Even John admits the effect of the stories upon his wife:

My wife had listened to this story with greater interest than she had manifested in any subject for several days. I had watched her furtively from time to time during the recital, and had observed the play of her countenance. It had expressed in turn sympathy, indignation, pity, and at the end lively satisfaction. (Chesnutt, 67).

Therefore, it seems that the stories do have a healing effect and also are a way of entertainment for those times. Storytelling was a specifically slave activity and superstitions were very important among the blacks. They believed in them and many times the rumour/legend was passed from generation to generation. Uncle Julius makes use of various superstitions along the road, among them being present the rabbit foot which brings luck, the voodoo doll and the mischance brought by opening an umbrella in the house.

## **II.2. Tenie, a Black Slave**

Julius' narration of his second story is determined by Annie's wish of building an outdoor kitchen, and is governed by the presence of Tenie, a supposed conjure woman. Being on their way to the mill to buy lumber Julius overhears the two husbands conversation and begins his story about the place where and from which Annie would have her new kitchen. Po' Sandy was a slave who belonged to

Master MacSwaine and who was often lent to other plantation owners for his labor. Because of this fluster of a life he could not have a family – and when he was finally brought a wife – Tenie, he was already tired of all the lending and was feeling he “had no home, no wife, no life. I wish I was a tree, a stone, a rock, just to stay on the plantation for a while” (Chesnutt, 19). But, what he did not know was that Tenie was a conjure woman and when he heard him speak like this she thought she could fix things.

Sandy, is I eber tol' you I wuz a cunjuh 'oman? I ain' goophered nobody, ner done no cunjuh wuk, fer fifteen year er mo'; en w'en I got religion I made up my mine I would n' wuk no mo' goopher. But dey is some things I doan b'lieve it's no sin fer ter do; en ef you doan wanter be sent roun' fum pillar ter pos', en ef you doan wanter go down ter Robeson, I kin fix things so you won't haf ter. Ef you'll des say de word, I kin turn you ter w'ateber you wanter be, en you kin stay right whar you wanter, ez long ez you mineter. (Chesnutt, 19)

Thus, she suggested to turn him into a tree, and every now and then he would turn him back for a while to eat and to talk; so Sandy was turned into a big pine tree. His life as a tree was not easy because woodpeckers sometimes made wholes in his arms, sometimes men came and cut a few branches and each time Tenie turned him back to human he had scars and wounds all over. Seeing all this suffering she decided to turn him into a fox so that they could run away. But before she managed to change the spell the master wanted a new kitchen and they needed more lumber and since Sandy was the thickest tree, he had to be cut.

Tenie went mad and after the building of the new kitchen she asked the master for permission to spend her time there with her husband. All the slaves found out about the conjure made by her and they avoided both the place and Tenie because they all said it was haunted by Sandy's spirit.

Still, Tenie does not seem to be such skillful a conjure woman, as compared to Aunt Peggy she does not make the right decisions and juggles with Sandy's life and their happiness together. Her decision to resort to conjure after embracing religion seems to have driven her on the wrong path. Her end is dramatic, she goes mad, and her lover dies because of the lack of synchronization between her conjure and the cutting of the pine tree. Julius again makes use of a female character in order to fulfill his objective. After Julius ends his story, Annie is totally convinced she does not want her new kitchen anymore – although she admitted the story was absurd and hard to believe – she wants a kitchen elsewhere made with new lumber, not with that from the old white house. After a few days Julius took the opportunity to ask Annie if he could use the old house for their church meetings, with him being their leader. “And what about the ghost? asked John. Julius said that it would not interfere with a religious worship.” (Chesnutt: 1899, 30).

Again Julius tries his luck and succeeds in persuading the two to fulfill his wishes. He knows that Annie is sensitive and that she reacts to stories that imply magic and extraordinary facts so he invents stories which comply with the given situation so that he could obtain what he needs in the end. He again uses conjure – only that this time it is Tenie who makes the “spell”. Of course all the spells are related to nature – it being part of their lives and becoming Sandy's life. The



landscape has always been their home, they work in nature and live in communion with it.

### II.3. The Conjure Men

The two conjure men in Julius' stories are the only male characters in his narration and they are depicted as being selfish and acting only to fulfill their needs. They both seek revenge and are portrayed as negative characters. Contrasting with the two women (Aunt Peggy and Tenie) they do not use their roots to help others, or because another slave has sought refuge in the power of their conjuring. They are not very skillful either – they either cannot complete a conjuring ritual or cannot cheat death.

The first mention of a conjure man is in Julius' fourth story called "The Conjuror's Revenge". From the very beginning - its title, the reader is warned about the nature of the conjure man – revengeful. It is a story about Primus, a black slave, who one night, after coming back from a party, saw a shoat on his way home, took it and ate it, without knowing that the shoat belonged to a conjure man who lived around. After hearing about the animal, the conjure man decided to take revenge for Primus' deed by turning him into a mule. Therefore Primus had to endure the misfortunes of a life as a mule, but after a while, being on his deathbed the man decided he should repair some of the harm he had done in his life. The conjure man decided to turn Primus back into a man, but unfortunately he did not manage to fulfill the process until completion because he died and Primus had to live all his life with a club foot.

The story in itself did not seem to impress or move Miss Annie as the other did, but Julius had set a goal in his head and went on with it. Immediately after John expressed his desire to buy a mule to work the land, Julius began the story and tried to persuade John to buy a horse from a man he knew. It seems that his story had the anticipated effect, as John bought the horse, but unfortunately it was a sick horse and it died after a while. It was only then that John realized that Julius had a deal with the horse trader and probably had a material benefit from their deal, as he wore new clothes a week after the transaction took place.

Subsequently the conjure man helped nobody but himself, however after getting sick he had second thoughts and wanted to repair the mistakes he had made.

He kep' gittin' wusser en wusser, en bimeby de rheumatiz tuk holt er 'im, en drewed him all up, 'tel one day he sont word up ter Mars Jim McGee's plantation, en ax' Pete, de nigger w'at tuk keer er de mules, fer ter come down dere dat night en fetch dat mule w'at his marster had bought fum de po' w'ite man dyoin' er de summer. (Chesnutt, 50).

Therefore, before his death his conscience made him reconsider his deeds and he tried to undo the spell.

I's be'n a monst'us sinner man, en I's done a power er wickedness endyoin' er my days; but de good Lawd is wash' my sins erway, en I feels now dat I's boun' fer de kingdom. En I feels, too, dat I ain' gwine ter git up fum dis bed no mo' in dis

worl', en I wants ter ondo some er de harm I done.[...] But I doan want ter die 'tel I turn Brer Primus back ag'in. (Chesnutt, 52)

Unlike Aunt Peggy, the conjure man tries to undo the spell that cause so much harm and he almost succeeds, but unfortunately he dies before successfully fulfilling his mission. On the other hand Aunt Peggy makes no mistakes – and if something awkward happens because of her root work is not because of her, but because of the people who came to ask for her help. They are the ones who usually forget about the gopher, or forget to come to her after the specified amount of time indicated by Aunt Peggy. Certainly, the conjure women are more responsible and they are not depicted as revengeful, on the contrary- they are the ones who help those in need.

But, no matter the traits of the conjure man, Julius is cunning enough to know where to insist and which tactics to abuse in order to impress the northerners and persuade John or Annie into believing his stories and determine them to act in his desired way.

The second story which has at its center a conjure man is Julius' sixth story "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt". It is the story of a black slave, Dan, and his sweetheart Mahaly, who were very much in love. But the son of a conjure man was very much in love with Mahaly too and wanted her for himself. Consequently Dan and the conjure man's son have a confrontation in which Dan is wounded with a knife and on the spur of the moment he deadly hits the man on the head. The next morning the conjure man finds his dead son and promises to take revenge for this deed. He goes and works his roots and finds out who was the killer and immediately comes up with a plan. Meanwhile, Dan knows that it will not take long before the conjure man will find out who killed his son and for fear of not being conjured he goes to Aunt Peggy and asks for a life charm – a charms that protected from any type of root work. Aunt Peggy makes him the life charm which he has to go and bury under an old oak tree.

But it did not take long and the conjure man realized that Dan had a life charm so he went down to the oak tree and burnt it. After that he went to Dan and told him that Aunt Peggy did not give him a good charm, but that she rather took revenge on him for some past misunderstandings and that her rootwork was meant to do him harm. Therefore the conjure man offered his help, and told him that in order to get rid of the witch's spells he will have to turn Dan into a wolf, and that wolf had to kill the black cat which was the shape that this witch took at night. Said and done, Dan goes to the conjure man and he turns him into a grey wolf. Bt what he does not know is that the same day the conjure man cheated Mahaly into doing the same thing and turned her into a black cat. Consequently that night the wolf (Dan) catches the cat (Mahaly, his sweetheart) and kills her. It is only after he kills her that he realizes what happened, he seeks revenge for this and goes to the conjure man with the pulse to kill him, attacks him and deadly wounds him. Before dying the man tells Dan to take a sip from a special bottle in order to turn him back to human, but what Dan does not know is that the sipping is in fact another conjure that would make him a wolf his entire life. "Wolf you is en wolf you stays, All de

rest er yo' bawn days.”(Chesnutt: 1899, 80). From that day on the gray wolf is solitary and haunt the grave of his former beloved lover, Mahaly.

Julius ends the story in a pessimistic tone, persuading John not to clear a specific path of land, claiming that it was there that Mahaly was buried and that each and every person that had disturbed the gray wolf’s haunt was unlucky for a long time.

En eben now, fifty yeahs sence, long atter ole Dan has died en dried up in de woods, his ha'nt en Mahaly's hangs 'roun' dat piece er low groun', en eve'body w'at goes 'bout dere has some bad luck er 'nuther; fer ha'nts doan lack ter be 'sturb' on dey own stompin'-groun'. (Chesnutt, 81)

This time however Julius’s story is not that efficient, because John decides to clear the land and finds no trace or proof of the presence of a grave or weather bleached bones. What he does find is a bee hive in a tree’s trunk from which Julius had been getting honey. It is only then that John realizes that his story was meant to keep off the land those who might have been too inquisitive and interfere with his monopoly.

However, successful or nor in his attempt to block any unwanted “guests” to his beehive, Julius’ story presents another “case” of a conjure man – again revengeful – but this time the crime is not the stealing of a shoat, but rather a more serious one – the killing of his only son. The revenge may be justified in his case, yet the reader does not get the feeling that the conjure man is a victim of fate; on the contrary, he is seen as mischievous and cunning. Again if it was to be compared to Aunt Peggy, the conjure man seems to belong to someone – he was a father, his human nature is somewhat present, unlike Aunt Peggy who is always depicted as living isolated, on the outskirts of plantations, not having any relatives, family or friends.

### **Conjuring and Conjured**

The nurses, doctresses and midwives were crucial to the Southern plantation in their curing of the others. Unlike the conjure people who hid and practiced their conjure outside the plantation, they were the ones who cared for the sick on the plantation. Curing them required intensive expertise, not to mention vast experience but also skill in herbs and plants. The entire slave community depended on the nurses, who not only cared for the sick, but also had to work the fields, care for children and bear theirs. As Sharla Fett implies

Enslaved African Americans differed considerably from slaveholders in their recognition of the skills of doctoringwomen. Defining skill in relation to collective need, spiritual revelation, and teaching from older generations, enslaved African Americans left much richer descriptions of the content and meaning of slave women’s health work. A general recognition and respect for slavewomen’s doctoring skills prevailed among enslaved communities, while at the same time the gendered division of labor on plantations shifted most of the work of sickcare to black women. (Chesnutt, 113)

The black women slaves were the ones who had to be multifunctional, but who on the other hand had a mutual recognition among their community. They were to be respected and trusted, as they were the ones to preserve the health of their families and neighbors.

Among their curing skills, conjuring was the only thing to reflect the effects of healthcare and healing upon the “sick”. Spiritual forces were invoked, magic herbs were used in order to heal and protect the victim. Black slaves frequently resorted to these measures in their struggles against their masters but also when they had some unsettled business with another slave on the plantation. Personal conflicts or disagreements were solved by means of conjuring, and with the help of the tamers of spiritual powers they tricked or bewitched enemies. According to Fett’s opinion, the “targets” offered a first person view history of his/her afflictions and created the collected folklore from the 1870s to the 1940s. As a subgenre of African American oral literature, conjure stories frequently shared a common narrative structure, more specifically four stages: first – the internal conflict which generates the second stage – the bodily effects of the hoodoo, third – the search for a healer, to help against the conjure set towards them and finally the last stage identifying the person and returning the “trick” back to its source.

In Julius’ stories the narrative perspective is a third person point of view, and he is making it clear from the very beginning of the story the initial problem-situation, the person who is performing the conjure and the target, and also the expected changes for the future. Julius seems to separate his “victims” in two teams: the whites as targets, the cruel masters who can only be stopped by means of hoodoo, and the internal plantation conflicts, which can only be solved by resorting to the help of a gopher/conjuration.

### **III.1. White Targets**

Julius makes use of various types of conjuration and speaks about various dramas – the lack of a family life on the plantation, the separation of a mother from her child, the unfulfilled love story between two slaves and so on. His stories trigger a lot of pity for the victims from Annie’s part – she is sensitive to sad story endings and uncherished love, and this is the feebleness that Julius tries to exploit. However he is witty enough to know how to present the stories which involve White cruel masters, so that Annie could pity not so much the white target of the conjure but the ones who suffer from his oppression.

The first white target for conjuration Julius mentions is Master Jeems from “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare”. A cruel slave owner does not care for anything but his own prosperity – he wants more profit therefore he forbids the slaves everything – even their parties after a long working day. He does not allow them to have sweethearts or to bear children, he does not give them enough food, he only puts them to work on the plantation from light until dawn. Therefore, the slaves cannot take it anymore and Solomon (a black slave) goes to Aunt Peggy in search for help. She gives him a mixture that poured into the master’s soup will have an intense effect, offering Master Jeems a terrible nightmare which will supposedly make him become a kinder man. The conjure works and after a supernatural event through

which the master is turned into a black slave and is forced to work on his own plantation, he finally changes and becomes wiser and open-hearted.

Master Jeems is presented as a harsh and blunt man, yet Julius slips along the story some details that may justify the man's cruel character.

Dey wuz one time de niggers 'lowed, fer a spell, dat Mars Jeems mought git bettah. He tuk a lackin' ter Mars Marrabo McSwayne's oldes' gal, Miss Libbie, en useter go ober dere eve'y day er eve'y ebenin', en folks said dey wuz gwine ter git married sho'. But it 'pears dat Miss Libbie heard 'bout de gwineson on Mars Jeems's plantation, en she des 'lowed she could n' trus' herse'f wid no sech a man; dat he mought git so useter 'busin' his niggers dat he 'd 'mence ter 'buse his wife atter he got useter habbin' her roun' de house. So she 'clared she wuz n' gwine ter hab nuffin mo' ter do wid young Mars Jeems. (Chesnutt, 30).

Thus Master Jeems is not very lucky in his own love life therefore he becomes more bitter and cares about nothing. He is a perfect target, he deserves a good lesson, which he finally receives and changes for the better.

The second white target is the white master in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny", where Aunt Peggy helps a mother to reunite with her son. The master here is not a cruel slave owner or a violent man, however he has a weakness for bets and horse races. He never manages to win and when given the chance to buy a good horse he realizes he does not have enough money, so he is in the position to trade a slave for a horse, thing which at first seems a good business, but when the horse trader asks for Becky, the master is in a difficult situation. Unfortunately his passion for horses is bigger than the benefits of a working woman on his plantation and he accepts the trade. 'I needs a noo nigger 'oman down ter my place,' sezee, 'fer ter cook en wash, en so on; en dat young 'oman'll des fill de bill. You gimme her, en you kin hab Lightnin' Bug.'" (Chesnutt, 59). The master insisted that the trader should take Mose, the little boy, together with his mother but the latter declined and therefore Becky was separated from her son.

Little Mose suffered a lot after his mother's departure and Aunt Nancy – the nurse of the plantation took him to Aunt Peggy for a conjure, and she gives the boy a drink and turns him into a mockingbird which flies to Becky and comforts her for a day or two. But this was not enough and after a while aunt Nancy asked Aunt Peggy to work her roots in order to bring back the poor suffering mother. So Aunt Peggy for a fair price worked her roots and sickened the horse and conjured Sis Becky determining the horse trader to come back for his horse in exchange with the slave woman. The master accepted the trade because he did not want a sick horse, and neither did the trader need a sick and powerless working hand. Consequently the two (mother and son) were reunited by means of Aunt Peggy's skill in conjuring.

Julius makes use of this story in order to convince Annie that having a rabbit foot with you all the time will bring fortune and luck in the household. Being in a low spirited mood Annie is somewhat revived by Julius' story and immediately after she takes the rabbit foot from the former slave in order to keep it as a good omen. It is also in this story that Julius mentions this superstition as being very important among the slaves because this rabbit foot will bring luck and fortune only

if it belongs to a rabbit that was caught in a dark night with a full moon by a crossed eye hunter.

The white target in this story does not have much to suffer, maybe because this white master has some sort of moral values when it comes to his slaves, being depicted as kind and calm.

Now, Kunnel Pen'leton did n' lack ter trade Sis' Becky, 'ca'se she wuz nigh 'bout de bes' fiel'-han' he had; en 'sides, Mars Kunnel did n' keer ter take de mammies 'way fum dey chillun w'iles de chillun wuz little. But dis man say he want Becky, er e'se Kunnel Pen'leton could n' hab de race hoss.[...] Kunnel Pen'leton did n' wanter hu't Becky's feelin's,—fer Kunnel Pen'leton wuz a kin'-hea'ted man, en nebber lack' ter make no trouble fer nobody. (Chesnutt, 59).

His only punishment is that he cannot continue his passion with the race horses because the horse gets sick and he has to return it to the seller. The story has a happy ending not only because the boy reunited with his mother but also because after he grew up he earned sufficient money to buy his freedom and his mother's from their master and to become free slaves in a house of their own.

### **III.2. Blacks Against One Another**

In his stories of conjuration Julius does not mention the whites as targets of conjuring and rootwork, but also depicts interior conflict between the slaves on the plantation. They resort to conjure when they do not find any other possible way to defeat their antagonists. Therefore conjuring is an all ruling method which is used, adopted and accepted by everyone in the South.

Julius begins his story series with a conjuring tale that has as target the slaves on the plantation because of the intense desire of the master to double his profit. Thus he turns to Aunt Peggy for help and asks her for a gopher that will keep all the slaves away from his grapevine, otherwise every one of them eating scuppernongs will die poisoned because of the spell put on the vine.

This first story does not have a black against black conflict, but rather a white against blacks one, yet it is another slave that takes Henry to Aunt Peggy after eating grapes from the vine, and asks for her help. Nevertheless, in “The Conjuror’s Revenge” Julius does present a situation in which a black turns against another one – the conjure man who seeks revenge on Primus because he stole his shoat. The conjure man is he himself a black man but because he is a free man and because he is empowered with the ability to work up magic elixirs and control the supernatural, he does not have any second thoughts in what concerns punishing the poor thief slave. Julius recounts: “Ez it happen', de shote b'long ter a cunjuh man w'at libbed down in de free-nigger sett'ement. Co'se de cunjuh man did n' hab ter wuk his roots but a little w'ile 'fo' he foun' out who tuk his shote, en den de trouble begun”. (Chesnutt, 47).

The same situation can be found in Julius’ fifth story “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” in which the conjure man took revenge after Dan, a black slave, killed his only son. Of course the reason for the conflict between the two is different and more serious in this story, adopting the “eye for an eye” rule of revenge. If in “The

Conjurer's Revenge" the conjure man had turned Primus into a mule just because he stole a pig that belonged to the shaman, this time the story takes a dramatic turn and it is the son of the conjurer that is killed, therefore the revenge may be somewhat acceptable. Nonetheless Julius presents this conjure man to be very old and very skilled at what he did, he was even more astute than Aunt Peggy, who admits her inferiority compared to him: "Dat cunjuh man is mo' d'n twice't ez ole ez I is, en he kin make monst'us powe'ful gopher." (Chesnutt, 73). After his plan succeeded the conjure man knew that Dan (now turned into a wolf) would kill him, yet he is true to himself and satisfied that he had managed to fulfill his revenge. 'T's eben wid you, Brer Dan, en you er eben wid me; you killt my son en I killt yo' 'oman" (Chesnutt, 80).

The third situation in which Julius mentions the conflict between two black slaves is present in "Hot Foot Hannibal", the last story of the series. Hannibal is the target of Aunt Peggy's conjures because Chloe cannot stand him and because she does not want him for a husband even if the master promised her to him. She is in love with Jeff and she wants him to be her master's favorite so that she could marry him instead, thus she goes and seeks help from Aunt Peggy. The conjure woman offers a solution – a voodoo doll representing Hannibal, but with feet made out of hot pepper – which will make him clumsy and unhandy, leading to his expulsion from his master's house.

It is a love conflict that cannot be solved but by means of conjuration, Chloe is aware of the fact that only a supernatural aid could determine the change of fate. She is a woman and she knows that conjure is a good opportunity, and that Aunt Peggy is a skilful shameness, therefore she sends Jeff to the old woman for help.

En she tol' Jeff fer ter go down en see ole Aun' Peggy, de cunjuh 'oman down by de Wim'l'ton Road, en ax her ter gib 'im sump'n ter he'p git Hannibal out'n de big house, so de w'ite folks u'd sen' fer Jeff ag'in. En bein' ez Jeff did n' hab nuffin ter gib Aun' Peggy, Chloe gun 'im a silber dollah en a silk han'kercher fer ter pay her wid, fer Aun' Peggy neber lack ter wuk fer nobody fer nuffin. (Chesnutt, 87).

Chloe is the mistress maid and she is an empowered woman after all – she wants things to go her way and she seems very positive about it. She is the one who pays Aunt Peggy, she is the one that coordinates the entire "mission", although all of her deeds turn against her. Hannibal is thrown out of the house because of the mistakes he makes after being goophered, but he realizes that he was the victim of a conjure dictated by Chloe, and takes revenge on her by disguising himself into a woman and bluffing her into believing that Jeff was seeing another woman. Raging with jealousy she goes to her master and tells him everything about the gopher, putting the blame on Jeff, who is casted off the plantation and Chloe commits suicide. The nigger against nigger conflict seems to be more intense than those conflicts from which derived a conjure against the white master. After all, the life of a negro has to be more impassioned and pungent than that of the whites not only because all the stories are told by a former black slave, but also because Julius needs to influence his listeners and persuade them on his desired path.

## Conclusions

Conjuring seemed to be indeed the only method that the African Americans would resort to when facing a difficult situation. No matter the cause: love or oppression from their master, they sought refuge in the rootwork of the conjurers. As Fett clearly implies it:

Most illness caused by conjuration originated in conflicts over love, sex, economic resources, and interpersonal power. Although troubles with love or money might be construed as concerns of any age, it would be a mistake to view African American hoodoo as a timeless folk practice. (Fett, 87).

Julius is cunning enough to present all of his stories in a dim light, around which gravitates a mysterious atmosphere of the supernatural. His conjurers are witty, skilled, and have no qualms. If the price and payment are correct they would do anything for the ones who seek their help. As Fett explains many daily conflicts were solved by resorting to conjure.

Therefore, Julius' hidden interests are more easily attainable if the conjuration mentioned seems veridical, bewitching Annie and John, the two northerners. Annie is easy to impress and Julius insists on this trait of hers in order to persuade her husband to do as the nigger pleases. John cannot deny any of Annie's caprices due to her poor health and probably because of his intense feelings for his wife. Yet, he knows that women are easily touched by anything that has a tragic or dramatic ending and which involve some supernatural factors. He belongs to the men of his era, who considered women superficial, puerile and affected emotionally by almost anything. Annie is seen through John's eyes as being "of a sympathetic turn of mind", "takes a deep interest in the stories of plantation life which she hears from the lips of the older colored people", always having things her way because "I did not wish the servants to think there was any conflict of authority in the household, I let the boy stay", and "the victim of a settled melancholy, attended with vague forebodings of impending misfortune". However, according to Fox Genovese northern women's view on class relations promoted the illusion that all men are truly equal, thus Annie's attitude towards John is justified – she does not submit to his wishes, and she does not have a servile behavior, because this is the way in which the northern the society has thought her to act.

Some of the conjuring in Julius' stories is more fearful than the beatings of the master, and sometimes they suspected one another for using an exterior "support", that of conjuration, against a certain member of the plantation community.

Though enslaved men and women did not interpret all illness as the work of a conjurer, the possibility of conjuration was present when supporters attempted to determine the cause of a person's sudden pain or declining health. In considering a path toward healing, the afflicted person often scrutinized the character of past relationships and recent encounters with neighbors. (Fett, 92)



For example Dan, in “The Grey Wolf Ha’nt”, goes to Aunt Peggy just in case the conjure man would try or has already tried to work his roots against him, and asks her to make him a life charm that would protect him from any exterior harm. Therefore the slaves know that conjuring is something that cannot be controlled and fear the effects that these gophers might have on them. Hannibal in “Hot Foot Hannibal” analyzes his situation and realizes that his misfortune comes from conjuration worked against him by Chloe.

Julius’ stories abound in supernatural situations and root work, which are used and abused for his interests, and which have a powerful impact on both the reader and the listeners, John and Annie. His talent as a storyteller is also sustained by elements that reach beyond ordinary and which he recounts with a very serious attitude.

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