

## Race Labels and Status Changes in Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Sheriff's Children"

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In Dr. Robert Sturr's African-American Literature (ENG 33011), students were asked to develop a reading of one of the assigned texts. Kurt Sampsel's "Race Labels and Status Changes" takes a critical look at the relationship between race and power. He shows that as Chesnutt's characters near the 'color line' in "The Sheriff's Children," both race and social status lose their connection to reality and become more obviously social constructions.

Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* is a collection of short pieces of fiction that collectively addresses the experiences of African-Americans in the post-Emancipation South. Chesnutt's stories discuss the status of African-Americans within the context of fictional rhetoric; however, his medium for communicating his message does not compromise or soften it in any way, for although his stories are rich with humor, satire, irony, and many other devices, the stories deal very directly with the social position and status of black Americans in the cultural and historical setting of the antebellum South. One particularly powerful story from *Stories of the Color Line* is "The Sheriff's Children," in which a young "mulatto" is accused of having murdered a local man of prominence, and after narrowly escaping a lynch mob, the accused man is shot by a girl who is revealed to be his own, all-white, half-sister. As in many of the stories in *Stories of the Color Line*, the terminology of racial (and indeed, racist) designation plays an important role in the depiction of the African-American character, and specifically, reveals the ways in which the

white characters perceive him. Interestingly, in "The Sheriff's Children," the race labels that are applied to the unnamed accused man change as his status changes, and as the white characters' perceptions of him change.

"The Sheriff's Children" begins by introducing the murder of Captain Walker, a prominent military man who had served in the Civil War. The murder has been the first in some time in the small, isolated Southern community, and the residents of the town anxiously begin to search for a suspect. The narrator then mentions a "strange mulatto" (134) who was seen near the scene of the crime, whom some people are beginning to suspect as the murderer. Here, the racial label "mulatto" essentially means that the man has one black parent and one white parent; he is thus half white and half black, what we could call "biracial" today. As a "mulatto," he is, in reality, neither black nor white; he essentially straddles what Chesnutt himself refers to in the title of his book as "the color line," or the line of division between the world of blacks and the world of whites.

As suspicion of the man increases, however, his status as a "mulatto" quickly changes. He instead becomes referred to not as a "mulatto" but as a "nigger," a word that is considerably more derogatory than "mulatto," and that carries with it different implications of both race and status. The accused man is referred to first as a "nigger" by a "third speaker," who, as an angry mob congregates to speculate on the identity of Captain Walker's murderer, interjects, "I s'pose the nigger 'lowed the Cap'n had some green-backs [...]" (135). Throughout this mob meeting, the accused man is referred to using racial labels many times, and each time, the members of the lynch mob refer to the suspect exclusively as a "nigger." Even the narrator stops using the word "mulatto," which indicates half-blackness, in favor of "Negro," which, like "nigger," indicates complete blackness. Essentially, it seems that as people increasingly suspect him of being Captain Walker's murderer, his status changes from a half-black "mulatto" to an entirely black "Negro" or "nigger."

This change in the white characters' perception of him from half black to all black could occur because the mob wants to set up a dichotomy between the "murderer" and his "victim." A "round-shouldered farmer" expresses this dichotomy perfectly when he says to his fellow whites, "Ef you fellers air gwine ter set down an' let a wuthless nigger kill the bes' white man in Branson, an' not say nuthin' ner do nuthin', I'll move outen the caounty" (136). Setting up the dichotomy of the "wuthless nigger" and the "bes' white man" clearly serves to antagonize the crowd, and to soil and incriminate the accused man. The labels used are distorted, subjective, and clearly racist, but they are obviously more dramatic and rhetorically powerful than the truth. To proclaim that a "mulatto" killed a white man is not nearly as affecting as to say a "wuthless nigger" killed the "bes' white man." Thus, largely responsible for the accused man's status change and racial label change is the lynch mob's own determination to incriminate him by making him seem more black, more "other," and more guilty than he would be if they considered him to be a "mulatto."

Although the mob, the sheriff, and the narrator refer to the accused man using racial labels that indicate him to be all black (usually using the term “nigger”), in a scene in the jail, the narrator again reminds the reader of the suspect's true biracial status by saying that his face was “yellow,” clearly indicating that he is not completely Negro. Other terms used by the narrator in describing the scene also have significance in depicting the accused man's blurred, vague racial status, revealing a host of racial subtleties of which only the reader and the accused man himself are aware. The narrator describes the scene: “The prisoner was crouched in a corner, his yellow face, blanched with terror, looking ghastly in the semi-darkness of the room” (141). As mentioned before, the term “yellow” is racially indistinct; describing the man as “blanched” and “ghastly” looking indicates some whiteness; saying that he looked “ghastly” in “semi-darkness” seems to indicate a sort of whiteness trapped within darkness, or blackness. This description shows the reader that the accused man is on “the color line,” even as the white characters perceive him as an all-black “Negro” or “nigger” as a means of rationalizing their persecution of him.

The accused man's status soon changes again, however, and to follow, his racial label changes too. After taking the sheriff's gun and holding it on him, the prisoner again becomes referred to as “mulatto,” likely because he is now perceived as having power. This power is evident from the narrator's description of him: “The mulatto kept his eye upon the sheriff” and “The mulatto's eye glittered ominously” (144). Clearly, he has transformed from the powerless “nigger” who had been “crouched in a corner” and “blanched with terror.” Calling him a “mulatto” conveys a perception of him as being stronger, which he is, now that he holds the sheriff under his power. He essentially stops being completely black and begins to be half-white again; his power is, in fact, a manifestation of his whiteness.

In addition, in this crucial scene in the jailhouse, using the term “mulatto” helps the reader to discover the truth about the prisoner's relationship with the sheriff. After we discover that the sheriff is the man's father, the suspect remarks, “You gave me a white man's spirit, and you made me a slave, and crushed it out” (146). Clearly, this demonstrates the conflict in racial identity for the suspect, again revealing his status as a man walking “the color line.” Also, the reader again begins to see that this “white man's spirit” that had been crushed as the “nigger” was subverted is now coming to power as the prisoner has taken the gun and wields control over the sheriff.

The suspect later says, “I learned to feel that no degree of learning or wisdom will change the color of my skin and that I shall always wear what is in my own country a badge of degradation” (146). Here, the prisoner fully expresses the misery he experiences as an inhabitant of the “color line.” Specifically, however, the focus of his frustration is not his own racial identity (or lack thereof), but rather the prejudiced, subjective, and arbitrary perceptions of him by the white majority. It is his half-black “badge of degradation” that he credits for making the white men perceive him as a wicked person, thus compelling them to suspect him of murder and to distort his racial identity, labeling him as a “nigger” when he actually is not one. As the suspect tries to say, in spite of his education, eloquence, and indeed, his racial status as only *half* black, the fact that he is black at all allows the white characters to perceive him as entirely soiled, which is why he is referred to as a “nigger.” The irony at the end of the story, of course, is that the all-white daughter of the sheriff (and the half-sister of the prisoner) is not to be punished in any way for her (virtual) murder of the suspect, and yet the suspect is dead even though the reader highly doubts that he actually murdered Captain Walker. Thus, essentially, the all-white murderer goes free and the innocent half-black man is dead.

In “The Sheriff's Children,” Chestnut uses different race labels to designate different positions of social status. As the white characters' perceptions of the African-American character change, the race labels also change to signify a change in status. The murder suspect in the story is actually a “mulatto,” or half-black, half-white man. Although the narrator introduces him as a “mulatto,” as the white characters' suspicion of him grows, he becomes referred to as a “nigger” or “Negro” rather than as a “mulatto,” indicating that he begins to be perceived as all black rather than half black. In the jailhouse, however, the prisoner's status changes once again, and as he gains power and control of the sheriff, his latent “whiteness” emerges, allowing the white characters to again perceive him as a “mulatto.” Essentially, the race labels applied to the prisoner change as his status changes, and his status changes as the white characters' perceptions of him change, indicating that both the race labels and the positions of status are, in fact, constructed by the white characters in the story and largely disconnected from reality.

#### Work Cited

Chesnutt, Charles W. “The Sheriff's Children.” *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*. Ed. William L. Andrews. New York: Penguin, 1992. 133-149.