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Chesnutt and Realism: A Study of the Novels (review)

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Reviews



Chesnutt and Realism: A Study of the Novels. By Ryan Simmons. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2006. 198 pp. Cloth, \$39.95.

In his new study, Ryan Simmons makes an admirable—and largely successful—attempt to return Charles W. Chesnutt to his rightful position as a literary realist, after a recent critical backlash apparently generated by scholarship such as Eric Sundquist’s stunning “Charles Chesnutt’s Cake-walk” chapter in *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993). This particular section further unmasked Chesnutt’s signifying response to mainstream America’s centuries-old white supremacy hoax. Conditioned by earlier research to regard the author more as a racial accommodationist than an erudite moralist harboring deep-seated disgust at white folks who try to elevate themselves at the expense of people naturally programmed to color their skins, some contemporary critics—e.g., Joseph R. McElrath’s “Why Charles W. Chesnutt Is Not a Realist” (*ALR* Winter 2000)—saw romantic views of Chesnutt discredited and aggressively sought to discount the writer’s subtle brand of realism, which enlarges upon (rather than merely duplicates) the literary realism they knew. But as Simmons perceptively notes, whether or not scholars call this author a realist, the debate has been largely conducted in such a way that “the effect is almost inevitably to make Chesnutt a minor figure, mimicking—with greater or lesser degrees of success—the techniques of his more important peers . . . [when, in fact, Chesnutt] ought to be considered a major contributor to the realist movement.” To the degree that it highlights Chesnutt’s determination and ability to cause “readers to shift perspective so that they acknowledge, understand, and respond to the world’s realities rather than averting their eyes,” Simmons’s volume becomes noteworthy, even while occasionally falling prey to the very same racial fictions its author condemns.

In general, Simmons persuasively argues that, despite seeming oddities of plot, theme, and character, Chesnutt’s fiction moves beyond traditional realism. For instance, in discussing the posthumously published *Mandy Oxendine* (1997), he, unlike Matthew Wilson in *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (2004), does not jump to conclusions about Chesnutt’s supposed inability to achieve his artistic goals, but understandingly wonders out loud “whether or not Chesnutt’s *failure* [my emphasis] . . . was, in some

sense, purposeful—whether his uncontrolled, haphazard appeals to readers’ hearts and heads are . . . just possibly, a more sophisticated attempt to work through the uncontrolled, ugly nature of the world he was depicting.” Simmons also shows that in an unpublished typescript entitled “The Rainbow Chasers,” Chesnutt’s use of “external events not only to reveal elements of its protagonist’s personality but to dramatize its evolution” does indeed take the writer’s “pursuit of realistic narrative one important step forward.” Unfortunately, Simmons’ failure to interrogate sufficiently other Chesnutt “oddities”—even though he knows that this author’s trademark “narrators tend to have a canny, slippery quality, simultaneously adopting and skewering the particular perspectives they may seem to hold”—leads him to slight the novelist’s signifying black perspective (what Simmons calls Chesnutt’s “subdued presence of blackness”) on the white lives he depicts in fiction like the also posthumously published *Evelyn’s Husband* (2005). Consequently, he misses the novelist’s cue that he is not changing his theme but switching settings in order to continue his “realist critique of romance”—a specific exploration of human nature—in “an imagined native state.” The deserted island of *Evelyn’s Husband* permits Chesnutt to further dissect westernized concepts of love and culture by comparing them with a more primitive counterpart and thus signify on the former’s presumed civilization.

In the final analysis, *Chesnutt and Realism* does not always capture the breadth of Chesnutt’s realism, which unequivocally refuses to concede to white American racism, even as it appears to do so. In his novels, Chesnutt repeatedly asks why uncolored people paradoxically target, abuse, and lust after skin-coloring human beings, answering in essays like the three that comprise his “Future American” series (1900) that Americans cannot escape evolutionary history—contrary to the racist suppositions of the Founding Fathers, who expected to nurture Benjamin Franklin’s phenotypic “lovely white” in a virgin land. The fact that the human race began with a black African female—that is, without a white woman or a male of any color—apparently generated among whites as well as black males a deep resentment of nature and its human prototype. Thus, it is not surprising that Simmons’ analysis continues to employ a variety of socially constructed but biologically untenable concepts such as “race” (meaning black folks only, as if whites have somehow become “raceless” or “unraced”), “mixed race,” and “biracial”—all of which are based on the unfounded assumption that human beings had multiple geneses. Chesnutt himself, however, emphasizes racial wholeness, longevity, and, most significantly, peace achieved amidst heterogeneous peoples who amalgamate naturally; he refuses to accord privilege to those who perpetually seek superiority and exclusivity

through genetic mythmaking. Still, the virtues of *Chesnutt and Realism* far outweigh its flaws and Simmons' volume is perhaps the best research lately that directs readers toward new ways of envisioning Chesnutt's conception of realism.

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Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair. By Anthony Arthur. New York: Random House, 2006. 380 pp. Cloth, \$27.95.

Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century. By Kevin Mattson. Hoboken, N. J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2006. 283 pp. Cloth, \$25.95.

Anyone who has ventured much beyond *The Jungle*, the Lanny Budd novels, and perhaps *The Brass Check*, *Love's Pilgrimage*, or *Boston* can vouch that extensive reading of Upton Sinclair is laborious. Mastering his *œuvre*—some ninety books, not counting the journalism—would require superhuman perseverance. But Sinclair remains perennially popular in spite of the fact that (or perhaps because) his historical significance trumps his literary craftsmanship. We can thus be grateful that the centennial of the publication of *The Jungle* brings us two new biographies. While both grapple with what motivated Sinclair to keep on trying to change the world, Anthony Arthur's literary biography *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair* provides more of a sense of the man and the artist, while historian Kevin Mattson concentrates on Sinclair's historical significance in *Upton Sinclair and the Other American Century*.

Each title captures how the biographer attempts to redefine Upton Sinclair, whose last biographer was Leon Harris in 1975. Arthur maintains that a distinctive mix of radicalism and perennial innocence captures the best as well as the worst of his subject: "Sinclair's comparative innocence concerning human psychology accounts for his limitations both as a literary artist and as a . . . husband. Although he would spend most of his career exposing what he thought was wrong with American society, he was constantly being unpleasantly surprised, like *Candide*, by the human potential for treachery. Yet Sinclair's naïveté afforded him a degree of protection, . . . allowing him to hope, against all evidence to the contrary." That passage foregrounds Arthur's strengths: interest in connecting the public author with the private man, mastery of a broad sweep of literature that proves as useful in contextualizing Sinclair's personality as his writings, and ability to deal with contradictions.