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The Marginalization and Devaluation of the Visibly Black Male:

Examining Brown's *Clotel* and Harper's *Iola Leroy*

In both William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, the authors advocate for the black person through the use of the slave narrative. Brown is trying to get a message out, to the British specifically, to end the cruel system of slavery, while Harper is trying to champion for the social advancement of blacks. In both of their novels, the mulatto woman/couple bring about this uplift of the black community, which is problematic for a couple of reasons. The novel is supposed to be about the uplift of black people but it is the white face that has finally made it, and, in order for them to get to their position, the visibly black person has to be sacrificed. Actually, it is the visibly black male who seemingly makes the most sacrifice for the white-appearing black person and the rest of the black race. Though William Wells Brown is a male and Frances Harper is a female, they seem to be in complete agreement that the black male is to be abused for the prosperity of the race. In both novels, the visibly black male is sacrificed by being marginalized in society and by his worth being devalued because of the color of his skin, which ultimately points out that Brown and Harper find the white skin to be more valuable.

The marginalization of the visibly black male is an almost imperceptible way of how he is sacrificed so Brown and Harper can free and uplift the black community. In their novels, Brown and Harper present black people as in opposition to any negative belief that white people

may have about them, so that their readers can take up the black cause. In the case of the visibly black male, the authors try to counter stereotypes about him. In his discussion of *Iola Leroy* in his article “Face Value: Ambivalent Citizenship in *Iola Leroy*,” Michael Borgstrom writes,

As demonstrated by the widespread practice of lynching, black men's public visibility in the postbellum era increasingly became for them a personal liability. To counter cultural stereotypes that characterized black men as sexual menaces (and thus as threats to the purity of white womanhood), the black male body needed to be privatized, rendered both harmless and explicitly sympathetic. (782-783)

Borgstrom sees this marginalization of the black male in a positive light because he believes Harper does this to advance the black male by countering the negative stereotypes surrounding him. However, this quotation actually suggests something that is much more sinister. While Borgstrom may see this as Harper trying to push back on cultural stereotypes, Harper is actually hiding the visibly black male. She pushes them to the furthest reaches of society because their presence would be a problem for the rest of the race. In order for the race to prosper, the visibly black male needs to be held back from society so the ideas and stereotypes associated with them will not permeate what the more valuable white-appearing black person is doing to uplift the race. Characters like Uncle Ben and Uncle Daniel are both relegated to be domestically-inclined. Uncle Daniel declares that he will not run off to the union army with the rest of the young men, but will instead stay with his master's family, saying that he promised his master he would do it and he “mus' be as good as [his] word” (Harper 16). Uncle Ben also decides not to run towards freedom because he refuses to leave his mother behind. Their relegation to the sidelines of society is because they are not important enough to take on the role of saving the race, and, even more disturbing, Harper seems to find it more valuable to have a white-appearing black person at

the forefront of the blacks' cause because they are more pure or superior to the visibly black person. Harper realizes that her white audience would be more willing to empathize and help a person who looks like them, and so the white-appearing black person becomes more valuable, while the visibly black male would be in the way of gaining the reader's empathy, so they are put in the margins. Even if she puts the mulatto at the forefront of the novel for the sole reason of gaining reader's empathy, she is still perpetuating the idea of the white skin being worth more than the black skin.

While the quotation from Borgstrom is about *Iola Leroy*, the idea that he presents also applies to *Clotel*, where the black male is marginalized so he does not disrupt the work being done by the white-appearing black characters. When Clotel, a white-appearing black female, is making her escape from slavery to go up north to rescue her daughter, she is aided by the slave William. William is an intelligent mechanic that is able to save up one-hundred fifty dollars from the work he does. He uses this money to help him and Clotel escape, but after they escape Clotel says, "We are now free, you can go on your way to Canada, and I shall go to Virginia in search of my daughter" (Brown 144). On the surface, this scene makes Clotel more admirable because, instead of gaining her freedom, she returns to predatory waters with the risk of being enslaved again to find her daughter. However, this scene can be interpreted to show that Brown will not let Clotel, the beautiful, white-appearing heroine, be with the visibly black male, no matter how intelligent he is. It is almost as if William is not worthy of Clotel, and because Brown comes off as colorstruck through his overvaluation of Clotel's beauty due to her whiteness, this is further proved. In his book *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bernard Bells claims,

Clotel is not carefully delineated as an individual, but as the archetype of the beautiful heroine whose mixed blood, noble spirit, and poetic nature make her a tragic figure. By

the use of idealized types, irony, and direct appeals to the Christian conscience of the reader, the author solicits sympathy and help for his race. (40)

One thing that Bells notes that should be pointed out is that the archetype of the beautiful heroine that Clotel fulfills is an “idealized” type. Clotel is ideal for the message Brown is trying to send to the audience; however, William is not ideal because he does not have the white skin that makes Clotel beautiful. William’s skin is not worth nearly what Clotel skin is worth. In the iconic scene from the novel where Clotel is being sold at the slave trade, the auctioneer auctions her off piece by piece based on things that would make her a great slave. The narrator writes, “This was a southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred [. . .]” (Brown 51). The narrator continues on, but what becomes apparent quickly is the thing that was worth the most was her body, specifically her white skin. Though this scene is disturbing, we see just how valuable white skin is, and it is this white skin that William does not have, making him worth absolutely nothing. Therefore, William is pushed away from Clotel and to the margins of the book because Brown sees value in the white skin’s ability to sway the reader to the black cause, and, because of the value and worth ascribed to white skin, the black skin is thereby unworthy of both the white skin and of being a part in the rescue of the black race.

The visibly black male not only faces marginalization, but as has been partially shown thus far, he is sacrificed—for the benefit of the black race—through the complete devaluation of his person. In *Iola Leroy*, the devaluation of the visibly black male is most apparent in the character Tom Anderson. Tom is described as a “man of herculean strength and remarkable courage;” however, he is unable to enlist as a soldier “on account of physical defects,” so he is

“forced to remain a servant” (Harper 32). Though the narrator says that Tom has physical defects, the narrator never says what these defects are. In fact, Tom never seems impeded by these limitations whenever he appears in the novel, which makes one question what these physical defects are. The only defect that could be apparent that Tom has is the “defect” of his skin color. If the physical defect is his skin color, then it becomes clear to see why Tom believes he is not worthy of the beautiful, white-skinned Iola Leroy. Tom helps rescue Iola from the master that tried to abuse her, and he tells the story of how he did it to the character Robert Johnson. Robert tells Tom that rescuing Iola was “one of the best things [he] ever did in [his] life, and Tom responds, “I think so, too. Not dat I specs enytin’ ob it. I don’t spose she would think ob an ugly chap like me [. . .]” (Harper 33). Tom believes himself not to be worthy of Iola and this stems from his belief that he is too ugly for her. The narrator never gives a description of the features that make him ugly, but the one thing that the narrator tells us about Tom’s appearance is that he is dark-skinned. His dark skin then becomes the reason he is too ugly to be worthy of Iola. He can rescue her, but he can never be with her. By doing this, Harper then devalues the black male because of his skin color, which perpetuates the idea that the visibly black person can never be on the same level as the white-skinned person.

Tom is not only unequal to the white-skinned person, but his life is worthless compared to a person who has white skin. When Tom and some other union soldiers are faced with enemy soldiers, Tom sacrifices himself so the union soldiers can get away. Tom believed that the *white* soldier’s lives were more important than the life of an ugly, *black* man, and he says, “If they kill me, it is nuthin’” (Harper 41). Tom’s death ultimately becomes a sacrifice that Harper makes so she can advocate for the black race. His death means that the whites can continue fighting which leads to the freedom of the slave, and his death gives Iola the push she needs to help uplift the

black race through her actions. In *Blood Work: Imagining Race in American Literature, 1890-1940* by Shawn Salvant, Salvant claims, “Tom’s self-sacrificial death inspires Iola’s own humanitarian work and establishes the ethical and moral tone of the novel” (74). This means that the life of the visibly black male needs to be sacrificed for the benefit of the rest of the race. Harper’s wish to uplift the entirety of the black race then becomes impossible because one part of the race is still being systematically disenfranchised.

The devaluation of the black male is similarly apparent in *Clotel* through Brown’s portrayal of the visibly black man, Sam. Sam is the head slave in the house of Mr. Peck. Compared to the other slaves, Sam is a very intelligent being described as a “prodigy among the slaves, not only of his own master’s, but those of the town who knew him” (Brown 105). Sam even used to work under a doctor—his previous master—and, for this, he was regarded highly among the slaves. However, these traits could not help Sam overcome his biggest disability: the color of his skin. No matter how much Sam tries, he cannot be on equal footing with the white-skinned person. In the novel, he tries to manipulate his appearance, so that his physical traits could become more “white” in nature. The narrator writes that Sam “seldom or ever let the day pass without spending at least an hour in combing and brushing up his ‘hair’,” and the narrator continues on to say, “when he wished to appear to great advantage, he would grease his face, to make it ‘shiny’” (Brown 106). These lines do two things that demean and devalue Sam. First, it presents Sam as trying to improve his features so that they are closer to the features of a white person, like having straight hair. This portrays white features as being a “great advantage,” meaning that it is more valuable to appear white than to appear black. Second, the black person is further demeaned by the use of the quotation marks placed around “hair” and “shiny.” The use of these quotation marks gives a comedic sense to the features Sam has and is trying to

manipulate. This comedic nature is solidified as the image of Sam sitting “with his wool well combed and buttered, face nicely greased, and his ruffles extending five or six inches from his breast” comes off as humorous (Brown 106). In his discussion of this scene, Bell writes, “in this farcical episode and several others, Brown draws on the eye dialect popularized by frontier humorists and regional writers as well as by minstrel performers as he resorts to caricature and the use of cacography and malapropisms” (42). This scene is then comedic because Sam appears to be a caricature with bad speech, which Bell believes Brown uses as a tool to help “expose the evils of American slavery and to appeal to whites to affirm the common salvation of enslaved blacks” (42). Even if Brown’s intentions are good, he still demeans the visibly black male as he makes him into a caricature to be laughed at. Brown thus devalues the black male by simultaneously making his black features appear to be worth less than white features and by making him into a caricature. Ultimately, Brown, like Harper, sacrifices the visibly black male to further his cause.

In the end, Harper and Brown do not actually achieve their goal of uplifting the entirety of the black race. They may believe that they are using the mulatto as a way to get the entire race saved and rescued, but this is not what is actually happening. At the end of their novels, the reader, specifically the white reader, will see the mulatto and empathize with them because they share the same skin color. However, the white reader can continue to see the visibly black person as inferior to themselves and keep the visibly black person at a distance which is at once far from the white person and directly under them. No matter if Harper and Brown’s intentions were to slyly get their whole race in the door by letting the mulatto be the one who knocked, by having the visibly black male marginalized and devalued in their novels, they perpetuate the idea of the visibly black person being inferior because of their skin color. At the end of their novels, there’s

a happy ending for the white-appearing black person, but the visibly black male still remains at the bottom of the societal hierarchy.

Works Cited

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