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Casualty, Causality and Chivalry: the Myth of Chivalry and Racial Violence in Southern Literature

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by

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Abstract

This honors thesis project uses history and literature to analyze the role of the myth of chivalry in mystifying racial violence and oppression in the American South. The central claim is that the myth of chivalry— and particularly the exaltation of the white woman— is a myth system used to justify racial violence, oppress white womanhood, and allow white patriarchy to maintain political, social and economic dominance. This project traces the role of literature, especially Sir Walter Scott's historical romance, in developing the foundational myths of a southern society based in violence, racial hierarchy and gender inequality. It then follows the role of white womanhood in this myth— the restrictions on miscegenation, the exaltation of pure white femininity, and the violent actions performed in the name of southern women. With this historical baseline established, this study then explores three works of historical fiction that attempt to subvert this mythology by critiquing and demystifying the myth of chivalry, while also offering counter-narratives to popularized history. These works are Charles Chesnutt's 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition,* which analyzes the 1898 Wilmington N.C. race riot, Gwendolyn Brooks' 1960 poem "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and Lewis Nordan's 1993 novel *Wolf Whistle*, two works about Emmett Till's tragic murder in 1955. This study, then, illuminates the intersection of literature and mythology, revealing how literature is useful for both creating and subverting myth—and revealing how authors undertake this task.

Introduction.

A History of Inequality, A Legacy of Literary Subversion

The distinct culture in the American South from before the Civil War to modernity has long relied on a social hierarchy that is tragically defined by racial inequality. Racial violence is perhaps the most overt symptom of this cultural illness of injustice. During the height of the Old South, whites viewed violence against slaves as a necessary tactic to maintain order. And, after the Civil War, the violent tradition continued through public lynching and race riots as a way to affirm white domination. Like any other culture, the South has reproduced existing conditions by developing a distinct mythology. Myths can be productive. They can instill moral lessons, acculturate individuals to a beneficial way of life and provide positive iconic figures for citizens to aspire to. Yet, they are also always ideological, and therefore are often dangerous. That is, myth often acts to disguise and romanticize the sociological reality of a culture. In fact, the very nature of myth, as Roland Barthes points out in his cultural analysis *On Mythology*, is deceptive. Myths are highly constructed by hegemony, yet they are so prevalent in media, history, literature, and politics, that they naturalize a hegemonic norm (Barthes 1978, 196). Because of this naturalization, myths often obscure our sense of reality. They interpellate individuals into perceiving the world in a certain way. We "innocently" accept myths without challenging their origin or veracity, and so the status quo can normalize problematic ideals by employing myth. The myth of southern chivalry is a unique exemplar of the problematic consequences of an ideologically imposed myth system.

While studying the history and culture of the American South, it becomes clear that the— albeit evolving— concept of southern chivalry is perhaps the most important overarching

myth system that reproduces conditions of inequality in the South. Southern chivalry, a concept rooted in medievalism and adapted for the American South, was originally defined by aristocracy, the plantation lifestyle, and romantic notions of feudal life. The ideologically employed myth of chivalry has depended on various tropes, symbols and stereotypes to survive. While the myth system has mutated as the cultural conditions of the South has changed, the central images of this system have remained constant. These images—mainly the "southern gentleman," "the milk white maiden," and "the black brute"— have been consistently employed by white patriarchy in order to justify racial violence and systemic racial and gender inequality. This study seeks to explore the origins, perpetuation, and consequences of the romanticized myth of southern chivalry by examining literature and history hand in hand. The main focus of this exploration of myth will be the construction of whiteness, and especially the role of the white woman as a signifier that obscures the motives for racial violence. My main claim is that by employing a distinct mythology surrounding the binary between whiteness and blackness, and the superficial veneration of pure white womanhood, Southern patriarchy has veiled the motivation – maintaining a racialized social hierarchy— for racial violence. In this configuration, Southern culture has presented racial violence as a necessary and honorable way to protect white women from the dangerous black male sexuality. In reality, however, this insistence on protecting white womanhood is merely utilized to protect and reproduce the domination of white patriarchy.

Myths depend on representation, and so myth systems are typically transmitted through imagery, symbols, and allegories. For this reason, literature is an important tool in developing and sustaining ideological myth systems. The origin of the myth of southern chivalry, in fact, can be traced to literature, and I will describe this process in later chapters. Yet if myths rely on

imagery, allegory, and symbolism to thrive, can't these same tools be used to attack myth, and even popularize alternate and more egalitarian myth systems? It is this question that in many ways drives my study of Southern literature. By delving into some examples of southern literature that subvert the ideology of chivalry, I hope to reveal a variety of important ideas related to fiction and mythology. For one, by studying the representational history of the myth of chivalry, and particularly the role of the white woman, I hope to reveal its central, and lasting, role in perpetuating, veiling and justifying white supremacy in the South. I also hope that this idea is supported by examining subversive texts. That is, from a new historicist perspective, I seek to illuminate the often hidden presence of the myth of chivalry by studying how authors continually return to the idea. Finally, I hope to elucidate some tactics used by authors to undermine the myth system of chivalry and reveal the actual motivations behind racial violence that is ostensibly based in protecting white womanhood.

The chapters of this project will elucidate the aforementioned concerns. In the first chapter, I will trace the origins of the myth of chivalry from the antebellum south and up to the Civil Rights movement. My focus will begin by examining the role of romantic medieval novels and ballads, especially those written by Sir Walter Scott, in developing the unique southern myth system. From there, I will locate the ideological usage of white womanhood in the antebellum South before exploring how the myth system evolved along with the social changes caused by the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement. My post-bellum and mid-20th century explorations in the first chapter will focus on problematic representations of pure whiteness in the novels of white-supremacist politician and author Thomas Dixon, and the chivalric imagery of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The first chapter of this study, then, will provide

a historical and cultural baseline of the rise and adaptation of the myth of southern chivalry, and later chapters will highlight subversions of this mythology.

The second chapter of this thesis project will focus on African-American author Charles Chesnutt's 1901 historical romance novel *The Marrow of Tradition.* Chesnutt's novel provides a fictional framework to the tragic 1898 Wilmington North Carolina Race Riot, which is now—I will argue in part due to Chesnutt's novel— described as the Wilmington Coup d'etat. In the novel, Chesnutt explores the origins, justifications and consequences of the riot, which by most accounts was a massacre and large-scale intimidation of black citizens. Through the lens of historical fiction, Chesnutt sharply criticizes the notion of southern chivalry, and completely undermines the idea that the riot was based on the idea— accepted at the time and into the mid-20th century— that the violence was enacted to protect white women. While studying Chesnutt's subversion of chivalry and his criticism of the ideological construction of whiteness, I will also use the difference between the historical facts of the riot and Chesnutt's fictional representation of it to reveal techniques, such as allegory, archetyping, and manipulation of character focus that exemplify the ways in which authors can use fiction to attack hegemonic ideological myths. His novel, when examined in conjunction with the historical focus of the first chapter, reveals the disingenuous construction of whiteness in the myth of southern chivalry, the mystifying role of exaltation of the white woman, and the actual motives of racial violence at the turn of the 20th century.

In the study's final chapter, I will focus on two different fictional accounts relating to the tragic murder of Emmett Till in 1955. Till's horrific murder at the hands of two white men in Mississippi, and the subsequent media firestorm, is often credited with sparking the Civil Rights movement to national prominence. It is also another prominent example of the gendered

mythology of chivalry emerging to justify an act of racial violence that was truly inspired by white social and economic insecurity and a desire to maintain and reinforce the southern racial hierarchy. The first work about Till's murder that I will examine is Gwendolyn Brooks' 1960 poem "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon." I will explore Brooks manipulation of fact, deconstruction of the medieval ballad, and overall attack on the role of patriarchally reproduced and ideologically constructed chivalric ideals in Till's murder. The second text that I will explore in the final chapter is Lewis Nordan's 1993 novel *Wolf Whistle.* In this bizarre, comic magical realist novel, Nordan, a white author, also explores the southern construction of whiteness and again relates the murder to the myth of chivalry. Throughout the novel, Nordan utilizes the grotesque, completely changes the facts of the incident, and provides a white vantage point through which to view the murders. Despite being a white author, and writing almost fifty years after Gwendolyn Brooks, Nordan draws many of the same conclusions about the role of chivalry in constructing whiteness, justifying racial violence, and restricting the movement of white females. I hope that by studying two different, but intertwined, perspectives of the same incident will build on the examination of *The Marrow of Tradition* and elucidate the entrenchment of the cult of chivalry, and its role in mystifying and perpetuating the signifiers of white supremacist ideology. I also hope that, as with my examination of Chesnutt, this final chapter will again highlight the varied fictional techniques that can be employed to counter-act hegemonic ideological perpetuation of myth.

As a result of studying the role of chivalry in shaping southern culture, and the role of literature in simultaneously perpetuating and attacking ideology, it became clear that critically studying literature and culture can be an effective approach at attempting to understand racial violence in the United States. I discovered that representation is extremely important, and that

even the most seemingly innocuous myths, such as the exaltation of white womanhood, can be employed in the most problematic ways. This study is certainly not comprehensive, yet I feel that it does provide a good point of entry for anyone interested in examining myth, literature, racial relations and southern culture. I also hope it serves as an entry into my own continued study of these ideas. I tried to provide a broad range of literary, cultural, and historical analysis, but much more work is yet to be done. The following chapters were not easy to tackle, considering the gut-wrenching and often sickening source material for the novelists. But I have tried to approach each chapter with a compassionate and analytical mind. I hope that while you read, you will do the same.

Chapter I.

Reproducing the Romantic: The Origins and Perpetuation of the Myth of Southern Chivalry

In his thorough study of the rise and perpetuation of southern romanticism, Rollin G. Osterweis vividly describes an 1845 jousting tournament held in Richmond, Virginia. Osterweis relays in intimate detail the parade of knights on horses, the blaring trumpets, the medieval weaponry and the appearance of Wilfred of Ivanhoe, inspired by Sir Walter Scott's popular novel *Ivanhoe*. He continues to portray the crowd, composed of "proud planters toying with the heavy watch chains that hung from their fancy waistcoats" and "eager ladies" radiating "charm and beauty" (Osterweis 1949, 4). After the contest, the modern-day recreation of Wilfred of Ivanhoe approaches a young woman in the crowd, crowning her the "Queen of Love and Beauty," much to the envy of the other assembled ladies. A reporter for the local newspaper, the *Richmond Enquirer*, describes the tournament as the "richest scene I ever saw enacted on any theatre" (Osterweis 1949, 5). The popularity of such medieval tournaments, and their descriptions, allows us to analyze the unique intersection of medieval chivalry and antebellum southern culture.

Osterweis' and the *Enquirer's* description are telling indicators of the depth to which the American South transposed the ideals and imagery of knightly chivalry onto their own feudal culture, and also the absurdity and fabrication of such a notion. Here we see modern southern aristocrats, "planters" and "ladies" in Osterweis' terms, actively participating as spectators in these tournaments, following rituals—at one point the crowd welcomes Wilfred of Ivanhoe by yelling "love of ladies; Glory to the brave"— pulled straight from the pages of Scott's romantic novels. But, instead of wielding weaponry and wearing a suit of armor, the gathered planters toy with their "watches" and adjust their "fancy" attire. As such, Osterweis' presentation indicates

the empty symbolism that defined even the earliest infiltrations of medieval ideals into southern culture. The *Enquirer's* description also elucidates the artificial nature of the event. Chivalry here is "enacted" with great "spectacle," which provides an apt analogy for how the myth is similarly (re)enacted in the everyday social relations in the south. The above retelling also reveals the importance of what I will argue is the most pervasive and exalted empty signifier of chivalry: the white woman. The knights are defined by their manners and ability to charm the females in attendance, and the women remain objects of desire, completely passive and merely waiting for a knight to claim them.

The South's transposition of romantic chivalry onto modern culture is a concept that has defined a southern myth system for generations. And, as authors and critics have pointed out for over a century, this myth system has contributed to a variety of persistent and problematic approaches to class, race and gender since before the Civil War. My main focus in this study will be the chivalric ideal of the protection of white-womanhood, its firm grip on the southern imagination, and the obscuring nature of its repeated employment to justify racial violence. In the later chapters of this study, I will illuminate how writers such as Charles Chesnutt, Gwendolyn Brooks and Louis Nordan used fiction to subvert the dominant cultural ideology of Southern chivalry and expose how the myth of chivalry, and its exaltation of white womanhood, was used as a convenient and inflammatory smoke-screen to perpetuate post-bellum racial oppression in the South. Before doing so, however, an exploration of the historical, sociological, and, most importantly, discursive and representational origins of the myth is necessary in order to reveal its popularity and persistence, even as the social conditions that helped cultivate the myth changed greatly. As such, the study in this chapter will begin at the beginning, with the growth of the myth in the antebellum south, and trace its evolution into the 1900's, when the

chivalric ideal reemerged very publically, and very nationally, with the murder of Emmett Till. In doing so, we can understand the depth of the myth's relevance to southern culture, the prolific reproduction of the myth in media, and the rigid social and racial hierarchy that the myth is simultaneously based in and reinforced by. More importantly, studying the growth and evolution of chivalry allows us to define the important role of mythology surrounding the white woman within the broader tradition of southern culture. Such a study reveals that the origins of the myth of chivalry in the antebellum South were a result of, and desire to perpetuate, the institution of slavery. In this environment the white woman plays a small, not central, role in perpetuating racial oppression and racial violence. The antebellum discourse surrounding the exaltation of white womanhood, however, laid the foundations for its post-bellum emergence as the prime justification for racial violence that was actually rooted in the desire to restore the racially defined social order of the "Old South." It is my hope that the evidence in this chapter will allow for a deeper understanding of the aim, and techniques, used by authors to challenge the damaging, dominant myth system of southern chivalry.

The Origins of the Myth

Since the mid- 20th Century, a number of literary, historical, and cultural critics have examined the antebellum origins of the myth of chivalry, and made similar overarching conclusions. Most scholars, including Roland Osterweis, Tison Pugh, Richie Watson Jr. and R.M. Weaver posit that the plantation lifestyle and social stasis of the American South made the region receptive to the romantic ideals of the medieval court, and romantic presentations of the era by authors like Sir Walter Scott. I want to quickly cover these conclusions before more specifically analyzing the role of the mythology surrounding white womanhood in the

development of racial discourse prior to the civil war, and how the symbol of the white woman evolved after abolition.

The feudal social structure of the American south in the 1800's provided fertile ground for the seeds of romantic, chivalric ideals to take root. Slavery and the plantation lifestyle were defined by a hierarchy that configured the plantation owner as an exemplar of moral and social virtue, and also positioned wealthy plantation owners as makers of written— and unwritten— law. As R.M. Weaver points outs, the Southern gentleman was above reproach, his "motives could not be impugned, and …his word could not be questioned" (Weaver 1945, 269). This hierarchy then relegated slaves to feudal serfdom. It comes as no surprise, then, that these plantation owners in the South gravitated towards authors such as Sir Walter Scott's—and countless derivative southern authors— romantic presentations of the feudal life. In their minds, their own society was a parallel of medieval society based in the same values. Due to this highly constructed, yet seemingly natural, connection between medieval and southern societies, Sir Walter Scott's ballads and novels influence southern culture, and southern literature, tremendously.

Scott's influence in the South is evidenced by the remarkable fascination with his work in nearly every area of public discourse. There is the aforementioned popularity of medieval tournaments, highlighted by the presence of Scott's Wilfred of Ivanhoe. The dominance of Scott's terms emerged in discourse as seemingly innocuous as the naming of steamboats after characters from Ivanhoe, to an endless emergence of derivative southern writers (Watson 1993, 71). The infiltration of Scott's language and principles, initially observed by Mark Twain and continued through numerous scholarly analyses of what came to be termed "Scott Cultural Syndrome," cannot be overlooked because it reveals the importance of literature, language and

representation in establishing cultural norms. This idea becomes especially relevant because though southern planters grasped onto to Scott's presentation of feudal ideals because they thought them *descriptive* of their own situation, yet continued cultural dissemination also proved *prescriptive.* That is, many in the South, surrounded by chivalric literature and imagery, enacted the code of chivalry presented by Scott as a way of life, undergirded by social rigidity and dependent on the perpetuation of slavery as an institution. For instance, in a hyperbolic, but nevertheless revealing, passage from *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain wrote, "It was Sir Walter Scott that made every gentleman in the South a major or colonel, or a general or a judge before the war; and it was also he that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste and pride and pleasure in them" (Twain 1893, 376)[1]. Here Twain is referring to the connection between southern "caste systems," defined by slavery, and Scott's chivalric ideal. While Twain approaches the subject with a mix of sincerity and tongue-in-cheek exaggeration, many scholars agree that Scott's influence on the South contributed to the growing cultural divide between the North, defined by urban cosmopolitanism and industry, and the South, which defined itself through Scott's ideals of agrarian traditions, strong social order, and of course, romantic, conservative ideals. As Roland Osterweis points out, many anti-abolitionists cited Scott in their appeals and defenses against northern abolition movements. The connections don't stop there: one of the most prominent anthems of the Confederacy was "Chivalrous U.S.A.," a nod to Scott's introduction of the term within southern discourse

[1] Twain's full quote here further excoriates Scott. He blames Scott for "setting the world back," "checking progress" and glorifying the "brainless shams" of chivalry and feudal government. In Twain's, albeit biased, view, Scott was not only responsible for the Civil War, but "did more lasting harm than any other individual that ever wrote" (Clemens 376). While this is not exactly fair, especially considering the fact that the South was already, in many ways perfectly set-up for Scott's influence to take hold, it reveals Scott's tremendous influence very clearly.

(Osterweis 1945, 46)[2]. And so, these examples reveal the circular relationship of the South to chivalry. The notion took hold most ardently in the South because of the receptive social conditions there, and continued adherence to these chivalrous ideals later replicated and extended the social rigidity of an entire region.

Scott's relevance in the South is also an important concept to analyze because of its clearly romanticized version of medieval life, which reflects the ideological, naturalizing cultural impact of myth. Scott's work glosses over the day-to-day struggles of the medieval existence and presents an inaccurate portrayal of history. As Tison Pugh eloquently notes, "the medieval past is not summoned to do ideological work for subsequent cultures due to its history as archivally reported, but due to a romanticized, aestheticized, and often literary version of its history…more connected to romance than actual living conditions" (Pugh 2013, 6-7). This is telling because it reiterates how mythology obscures reality, often for ideological purposes. The fact that southerners based their culture on this myth, then, points to the idea that the myth of a uniquely southern brand of chivalry, in the years leading up to, and even after, the Civil War, romanticizes a way of life that never actually existed, and overlooks the real social implications of the plantation system. That is, just as Scott's renderings were revisionist and inorganic, their transposition into the myth of southern chivalry was generated just as, if not decidedly more, inorganically. Despite the plantation existence that facilitated the rise of the cut of chivalry, this representation had a very limited basis in the day-to-day reality of southern existence. The myth, for instance, completely overlooks the hardship, violence and inequality of the institution of slavery while also glorifying the "gentlemanly" attributes of plantation owners, who often helped

[2] The use of Scott's language and themes in the discourse of the antebellum South, and surrounding anti-abolition and the Civil War is astounding, Osterweis, in fact, devotes entire chapters of his work to it. For an in depth study, see his *Romanticism in the Old South,* particularly chapters IV and V, in which he lists and summarizes countless popular novels and short stories that overlay medieval chivalry onto the setting of the southern plantation.

themselves, sexually, to their female slaves and who used violence to ensure production and obedience. The ideological function of myth is also highlighted by its magnified ideological employment as abolition pressure from the North gained traction and the Civil War approached. As historian Richie D. Watson notes, as tension from abolitionists increasingly decried slavery as morally untenable, southern citizens, politicians and authors clung to a "fabricated" myth system that, in their, eyes, justified the plantation lifestyle so essential to financial success (Watson 1993, 79). The doubling of mythological ideology is evidenced by novelists who sought to overlay Scott's language and themes on novels about the plantation life. As Watson points out, J.H. Ingraham, a popular author in the years immediately prior to the Civil War, used this method to romanticize the plantation master in the face of northern opposition to slavery. Ingraham's protagonist plantation master, Colonel Peyton, is presented on horseback as a "feudal lord." Completing the analogy, the slaves on the plantation are "joyful" and "obedient," and live in "whitewashed, clean quarters" (Watson1993, 73). We can see, in this example, how the mythical and ideological intertwine, presenting an inaccurate and defensive portrayal of plantation life. Even after the war, and into contemporary times, the purposes of the myth of Chivalry remained primarily ideological. When, for instance, *Gone With the Wind*, or any of a variety of fiction that relies on the idyllic "Old South" notions of the "loyal slave," the "southern gentleman," and the "southern lady," they are doubling both the ideological implications, and the inaccuracy of the rendering, and for this reason, fiction that attempts to subvert this message can act to demystify myth.

The "Pure Maiden" in Ante-bellum Discourse

So, where can we place the ideology surrounding protection of the symbolic, idealized white woman in this antebellum equation? The plantation system certainly used this symbol in

conjunction with the rigid social structure of the time to justify and perpetuate slavery. But, more importantly, in this nascent phase of the myth of chivalry, the discourse emerged for defining male duty, and for the vilification of the stereotypical "black beast," allowing this binary's deployment as the primary, and I will argue, most disingenuous justification for racial violence after the war. Because the pre-bellum discourse surrounding femininity and female protection is essential to its persistence after the war, it is worth spending some time analyzing the traits of the stereotypical "southern maiden" that emerged from medieval romances, and also the reasons for an increased insistence on their protection.

In the plantation South, the ideal southern "lady" was expected to be pure, spiritual, domesticated and servile (Scott 1970, 15). In her description of the foundation of the myth of the southern lady, Anne Firor Scott makes the connection between this restrictive definition of womanhood and the myth of chivalry. This impression came from sixteenth-century books of etiquette that were widely re-circulated in America—particularly the South— and England in the 1800's. But Scott also gives important in depth commentary on the possible reasons for the dominance of this ideal in southern mythology. She, much like Osterweis in his description of Romanticism, connects the myth of the ideal southern lady to the plantation life and accompanying slave economy. She notes that "because they [southerners] owned slaves and thus maintained a traditional landowning aristocracy, southerners tenaciously held on to the patriarchal family structure" because an unbroken patralineage becomes the primary means for perpetuation of prosperity and social status (Scott 1970, 17). This patriarchal family structure enforced the dogma of chivalry by insisting upon female subordination and submission. Any disruption to this patriarchy, such as a strong female would threaten the very foundations of plantation patriarchy (Scott 1970, 18). To extrapolate on Scott's views, sexual dalliances

between white women and African-American slaves represented, for southerners, the pinnacle of a broken bloodline, and threatened the racial hierarchy of the caste system. As Andrew Leiter points out in *In the Shadow of the Black Beast,* white women's sexual dalliances with slaves also threatened the patriarchy because it removed the homosocial element of sexual control from white patriarchs (Leiter 2010, 31-32). Marriage in the antebellum South was often a contract between two patriarchs; white men "gave away" their daughters for advantageous economic and social gain. A dalliance outside of this system, as Leiter notes, operated "outside of the control of white patriarchs." And so the antebellum domination of woman, and also the insistence on the protection of the pure "southern maiden" lay partly in the desire to perpetuate and stabilize the plantation hierarchy. Here we see the earliest foundations of the obscuring power of the myth of chivalry as regards white women. On one hand, women were indoctrinated early into the cult of chivalry through "churches, schools, books and magazines," (Scott 1970, 20) and so their subaltern positioning seemed naturally produced, when in reality it was highly constructed through discourse. And, on the other hand, an insistence on the purity of the southern woman had little to do with protecting women; instead it was a convenient excuse to maintain the status quo of social order. Through this sociological process, the symbol of the pure southern maiden became a signifier utilized by the patriarchy to maintain social order in the antebellum South. The rigid social structure of the plantation became further entrenched through the patriarchal deployment of the myth of chivalry. Women found no freedom of movement, and obviously, neither did the slaves restricted by it. And so what happened to this myth system when the plantation lifestyle, and the stringent social order from which it sprung, collapsed after the Civil War? It magnified in intensity as a justification for racial violence.

Increased Exaltation: The Myth of Chivalry after the Civil War

The myth of chivalry thrived in the American South before the civil war because of the receptive conditions of the plantation lifestyle. The strict social structure of the plantation South found a mirror in the European feudal system and the plantation South increasingly justified its continued existence through this myth. After the Civil War, however, the plantation lifestyle, an empty romantic myth in itself, became increasingly untenable. The absence of free labor and the desire for social mobility by freed slaves threw this rigid social order into chaos. In this chaotic environment, the desire to return to the romanticized antebellum lifestyle increased. As Watson eloquently notes, after the Civil War "The Old South ideal was useful in diverting Dixie's attention from the disgraceful expedients that were being employed under the table to restore the white man to what was deemed his rightful political place. The South thus refused to turn away from its old myths" (Watson 1993, 126). This return to the antebellum myth system manifested itself through the magnification of several signifiers.

One of these signifiers, perhaps the most important post-bellum symbol of chivalry, was the pure white woman. Southern aristocrats that felt their way of life disappearing held the protection of white women as a symbolic, and practical, justification of violence. In the symbolic sense, the hegemonic perpetuation of "sexual panic" touched on the open nerves of an insecure patriarchy. After generations of white plantation owners raping black female slaves, southern whites not only feared reprisal in a less controlled environment, but they also had shaped a discourse around black female hypersexuality that they now transferred to black males. In this configuration, the free black man was stereotyped as the "black beast," a "savage" incapable of controlling their sexual and violent desires without the restrictions of the plantation social order (Evans 2009, 30-31). This "beast" was the opposite of the antebellum ideal of the "loyal darky," and so the desire to dominate and "civilize" freed blacks can be seen as a yearning to return to

one of the essential components of southern chivalry, the loyal, non-threatening feudal serf. And, from a practical sense, miscegenation after abolition represented an increased threat to white patralineage. If white females entered into sexual relations with black men, aristocrats reasoned, than the children that resulted would a have a legal claim to property and inheritance that threatened to undermine the economic status of whites (Hall 1979, 155). In the post-bellum South the myth of chivalry, one underscored and defined by social rigidity, focused intently on the binary stereotypes of "the pure white maiden" and the "burly black beast."

In this tense environment, over 4,700 African-Americans were lynched from 1882 to 1968 (Allen 2000, 12), not to mention the countless deaths of white-supremacist riots such as Wilmington in 1898. This violence, driven by white socio-economic instability, was often justified by the myth of chivalry. The justification, from white citizens and the media, for almost all lynchings, resided in the protection of the white woman, and this discourse was not easily undermined (Allen 2000, 17). This insistence by patriarchal white power structures that the white woman was in danger persisted, even if it was truly utilized for social control. For instance, southern senators, historians and journalists at the turn of the 20th century continually insisted that lynching was the only way to protect white women from "brutish" black rapists. Popular journalist John Temple Graves even pinned the violent 1906 riot in Atlanta on nonexistent charges of rape (Hall 1979, 146). And, as Andrew B. Leiter astutely notes, Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina, a politician who successfully disfranchised South Carolina's black voters, used the protection of white women as the center of his rhetoric (Leiter 2010, 43). Such insistence on the threat to white woman, based in the myth of chivalry, obscured the socio-economic implications of the actions: the threat of violence was a way to keep African-Americans from rising through the social and economic ranks. Sociologist James Inverarity made this association

clear with a 1976 study that revealed that the number of lynchings in the early 1900's always spiked during election years, when tension over black advancement was most tense (Inverarity 1976, 268) .

Yet, through literature and race-baiting politicians, the idea of the black rapist, and the alleged protection of white women, persisted. This persistence caused Ida Wells to publish the first forays into demystification of the proposed causes of racial violence. She produced S*outhern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* in 1892, and *A Red Record*, in 1895. Wells works stand as a way to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes of the South. These sociological examinations, comprised of newspaper articles and statistical evidence, represent a coherent study about the actual causes of racial violence and propose several bold theses. Not only were black men often falsely accused of rape, but there was a great deal of consensual, though illegal, inter-racial sex occurring. Her study also showed that, despite popular consensus, the majority of lynchings were not in any way associated with crimes against white women. James Allen and Hilton Als, along with contributor Leon Litwick, in their study of lynching photography, later determined that, despite the myth of protectionism in the media, only 19% of all lynchings actually involved the rape of a white woman (Allen 2005, 25). And so it becomes clear that despite the continued insistence that white women were in danger, the real root of racial violence was the chivalric ideal of the plantation lifestyle, and the desire to return to and reinforce a white supremacist social structure. But sociological appeals often stand little chance in the face of constant mythmaking. Myths, generated by newspapers, schools, churches, advertisements, and especially, in the early 1900's novels, naturalized the stereotypes, born in chivalry, of the black rapist and the southern maiden. Chesnutt, Nordan and Brooks recognize this mythical propaganda, and so they sought to undermine it by working in the same mediums

that myth thrives in. They attacked the chivalric ideals of the south, and the cultural insistence on these ideals as a justification for racial violence. But, before delving into how these authors attempted to demystify the myth, some look at representations that built up the myth of chivalry are first necessary.

Building Myth: A Few Examples

In *Yeoman versus Cavalier*, Ritchie Devon Watson traces a history of popular southern fiction that relied on the terminology of chivalric myth to romanticize the plantation South leading up the civil war. These works, Watson argues, were essential in presenting stereotypes such as the "loyal darky" the southern gentleman" and the "pure women," and following Walter Scott, went a long way in inscribing a racialized myth of chivalry into southern culture. Such romantic presentations also persisted after the Civil War ended (Watson 1993, 129). But, more obvious examples of chivalric discourse finding its way into white supremacist ideology exist. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) for instance, relied on the tripartite imagery of the chivalric code to justify their violent actions that sought to re-impose social order on the south[3]. They relied on the tropes of the pure maiden, black beast, and white knight to legitimize their violent acts. The extremely popular and virulently racist Thomas Dixon depicted the KKK in such terms in his novel. Despite the fact that Thomas Dixon's first novel was published in 1902, one year after Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, a brief examination of Dixon's work reveals the persistence of the symbols of the cult of chivalry in the ideology of white supremacy that Chesnutt set out to subvert.

Thomas Dixon was one of the most popular southern authors in the early 1900's. His first work, *The Leopard's Spots* sold a mind-boggling one million copies, and this was the *least*

[3] The organization's name can also be traced back to Sir Walter Scott's presentation of Scottish "clansman," further revealing the connection between the cult of chivalry and white supremacy in the South (Chandler 1994, 246).

popular of his novels (Gunning 1996, 30). His trilogy of anti-segregation, pro-racial violence novels inspired the D.W. Griffith's popular 1915 white supremacist film *The Birth of a Nation*, which drew 5 million American viewers in its 11 month run in theaters. Dixon was also a prominent politician. He was elected to the North Carolina State Legislature at the age of twenty and spent his life in politics as a race-baiting demagogue (Gunning 1996, 29). And so, Dixon became an important figure in white supremacist discourse[4]. The overt racial discourse in his novels needs little interpretation. He fanned the flames of sexual tension by relying on the stereotype of the "burly black beast" and the "pure maiden" to challenge miscegenation. He also glorified the Ku Klux Klan's emergence, and he continually espoused the need for violence to suppress the African-American population's growing freedom. In her in-depth study of southern culture, *Race, Rape and Lynching*, Sandra Gunning thoroughly outlines the racial tension evident in Dixon's novels. She focuses on Dixon's role in fabricating the myth of "white masculinity" that depended on the protection of the white woman as a primary signifier. Yet, despite the clear connection, she doesn't draw a line between Dixon's myth of "white masculinity" and the myth of chivalry that seems to underscore all of his novels.

Every one of Dixon's novels features a white female at risk of sexual deflowering by a violent black man. And this dichotomy certainly connects to the two most magnified signifiers of post-bellum chivalric mythology. For instance, Dixon describes the aftermath of a KKK lynching in vivid detail:

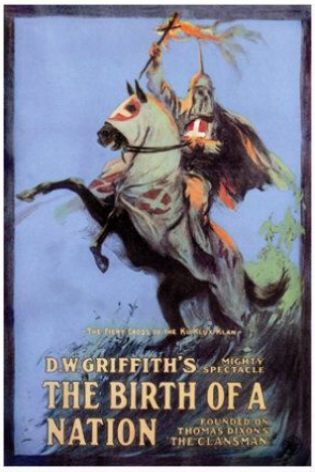
> *When the sun rose next morning the lifeless body of Tim Shelby was dangling from a rope tied to the iron rail of the balcony of the court house.*

[4] Dixon's role, and the themes of his novels, was also mirrored by Southern authors such Thomas Nelson Page, Tom Watson and Paul Hamilton Hayne. For the purpose of brevity, and in-depth study of their works is not included here. For a thorough examination of these authors, see *The White Savage: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South,* by Lawrence J. Friedman.

> *His neck was broken and his body was hanging low--scarcely three feet from the ground. His thick lips had been split with a sharp knife and from his teeth hung this placard: "The answer of the Anglo-Saxon race to Negro lips that dare pollute with words the womanhood of the South. K. K. K. (Dixon 1902, 150).*

Here, a black man is lynched for speaking about a white woman. In doing so, the boy "polluted" the purity of whiteness. Out of context, this passage could be read as a critique of the tragic violence of lynching, and yet, in the paragraph preceding this lynching, Dixon describes he KKK as a group that strove to "make order out of chaos" (Dixon 1902, 149) in the Reconstruction South. The KKK, in Dixon's writing, is lionized, and in one novel even unites to march against the North. But his glorification of the KKK and his presentation of lynching are revelatory. In the above passage, the pollution of the white becomes a signifier to justify the reinstitution of social order based in white supremacy. Yet it is his proposed solution to the problem that most accurately reflects the persistence of the cult of chivalry. He presents the Ku Klux Klan as modern-day knights, riding to save the virtue of the white woman. In the Klan's first appearance in *The Leopard's Spots*, for instance, 200 Klansmen appear on horseback. Their "close-fitting hood disguises looked like the mail helmets of ancient knights" (Dixon 1902, 153). And, in Dixon's *The Clansmen*, an army of men on horseback set out to reverse the "evils" that abolition released upon society. Here we see how the symbols of chivalry converge. The Klan's knights protect the pure maiden from the black beast. This array of symbols also made its way into public discourse through the advertisements for the film *Birth of a Nation*, which was inspired by Dixon's work.

The movie poster for *Birth of a Nation* (figure 1, at right) features a KKK member on the back of a horse with a burning cross held high, like a sword. The image certainly is reminiscent of Osterweiss' description of medieval pageantry. The rider's apparel, though only a sheet, is, as Dixon describes, reminiscent of the armor of ancient knights. And the cross on the rider's chest parallels ancient emblems of Sir Walter Scott's novel. The burning cross held by the rider actually derives directly from Sir Walter Scott's work. As James Chandler notes, the burning cross reflects an ancient Scottish tradition popularized by Scott's fiction and poetry(Chandler 1994, 246). And so the revival of the Klan, fostered by early 20th century works like Dixon's and Griffith's appeals to romantic notions of southern chivalry, revealing the connection between the cult of chivalry and the quest for white supremacy persisted into the twentieth century. Even after Reconstruction, the KKK remained a destructive presence in the South for generations, often emerging most prominently in times of white political distress. During the Civil Rights movement, for instance, the KKK terrorized hotbeds of African-American pushes for integration such as Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama, and brought their mythology of white purity and black animalism with them. The KKK's violent tactics were also often supported by local police forces and political institutions, as Diane McWhorter chronicles in her Civil Rights study *Carry Me Home.* The persistence of the KKK into the mid-twentieth century, and their reliance on chivalric, anti-miscegenation mythology, reveals the consistent ideological justification of violence that, upon closer inspection, was actually based in maintaining social hierarchy.



The KKK's popularity and political power in the South during the 20th century is probably the most radical example of racial discourse in the United States' history. And their overt reliance on the codes and symbols of chivalry is certainly revealing. Yet, other acts of racial violence—and the seeming absence of blatant chivalric discourse— are just as telling. As this chapter has revealed, the origins of the discourse around miscegenation are rooted in chivalry. But, outside of the KKK, from the 1930's to the 1950's, southern chivalry had become so naturalized that the symbols and language of knighthood rarely appear in conjunction with white female protection. The world-famous Scottsboro Boys Trial of 1931 is one example. The case, which saw 9 African-American men falsely accused, and convicted, of raping two white woman in Alabama, became a media firestorm. And knighthood did not appear in any of the commentary. Instead, the predominant discourse was the purity and chastity of white women and the uncontrollable animal sexuality of African-Americans. These ideas are obviously holdovers of antebellum codes of chivalry, yet were so naturalized that the concept of chivalry itself was no longer needed to justify the unfounded southern outrage. Emmett Till's tragic murder, which will receive greater attention in later chapters of this study, followed these same lines. The discourse surrounding Till's murder for, ostensibly, whistling at a white woman, relied on white female purity and black animalism as justifying tropes. But again, the idea of anti-miscegenation was so naturalized that it didn't need to hold up Walter Scott's knightly ideals: they were merely part of society by then. I will argue that, for this reason, authors that comment on racial violence in the mid-20th century had to work harder to reveal the true sociological phenomenon—southern chivalry— behind these acts of violence. Through incidents like the Scottsboro Boys trial and Emmett Till's murder, the myth of southern chivalry lived on, even though the discourse surrounding racial violence had slightly changed.

Dating back to Sir Walter Scott's influence on the plantation south, the symbols of chivalry were the center of racial discourse, yet they were ultimately only smokescreens. As this chapter reveals, the symbols of the cult of chivalry, especially the white woman, were ideologically employed to justify racial violence that was actually deeply rooted in a desire to restore a social order defined by white patriarchy. This chapter also, I hope, reveals the importance of representation—literature, political language, and film— in perpetuating this myth. From the novels of Sir Walter Scott to their derivative southern romances, up until the emergence of the KKK, the imagery of chivalry dominated the southern landscape, seeping its way in the classroom, the church, political debates and the southern imagination. This mythology was so prevalent that it became naturalized. By the 1930's, the discourse of miscegenation became a standalone mythology, one seemingly disconnected from chivalry yet inherently based in chivalric ideals. And so the work of authors like Chesnutt, Nordan and Brooks can be viewed as an attempt to demystify this mythology and undo the process of naturalization by revealing the emptiness of the symbols of chivalry. These authors realized that chivalry, and especially the idea of white female protectionism, was not only a romanticization based in a romanticization, but that it was a disingenuous ideological attempt to ensure continued white supremacy in the South.

Chapter II.

The Corrupt Cult of Chivalry, Counter-Stereotype, and Charles Chesnutt: Demystification of Chivalric Myth in *Marrow of Tradition*

Charles Chesnutt made his mark as a prominent regionalist author with his overtly romantic yet subtly subversive "Conjure Stories." On the heels of his success, he wrote several novels, of which *The Marrow of Tradition,* despite its limited commercial success, remains his most studied text in contemporary academia. In this novel Chesnutt provides a fictional account of the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot. In *Marrow,* Chesnutt attacks Wilmington's white supremacist leader's justification of the riot: the protection of the white woman. In the process, the author turns a critical eye on the dominant myths that define southern society. Chesnutt's text shows how southern culture clung to and reinforced the myth of chivalry to incite and justify violence that is actually rooted in white desire to maintain social order. Myths are powerful because they take a societally constructed symbol or perception and make these images and symbols seem natural. Chesnutt attempts to undo this process of "naturalization" by showing just how constructed the myths of the South were. In this way, the text also reveals how fiction, by challenging myth on its own ground, can demystify myths that reproduce problematic social structures.

J. Lee Greene makes the connection between myth and social order in *Blacks in Eden*. He argues: "The novel [*Marrow of Tradition*] explores the white South's traditional obsessive belief in the inviolability of its social structure and of white people." He also connects this social structure to the "mythic image of the old South" (Greene 1996, 125). Greene uses the lynching scene in the novel as evidence of this hierarchy; I want to extend that concept for several other parts of the novel. Chesnutt, throughout the novel, highlights the declining efficacy of an

aristocratic southern class, exemplified by struggling "southern gentlemen" such as Tom Delamere and Major Carteret. He also presents black and white characters in ways that directly oppose the romanticized myth of chivalry. And, finally, Chesnutt uses varying perspectives to explore the connection between myth and social control, showing that the "real" cause of racial violence had very little to do with protecting women.

Before turning to the text, I will offer some background into the history of the under-publicized riot in order to provide a background for addressing Chesnutt's digression from fact that mimics and challenges myths and stereotypes. I will reveal how Chesnutt uses archetypal, symbolic characters to undermine cultural and historical myths, while also creating a very individualized sympathy with victimized characters which is useful for changing societal perspective. Through this process, I hope to show how, throughout the novel, Chesnutt provides a careful critical examination of a culture defined by inequality and racial violence, which uses the myth of southern chivalry— and particularly the ostensible protection of white women— to maintain order.

The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898

The Wilmington Race riot is Chesnutt's source material, and because of this, summarizing the events that preceded the violence of 1898 is necessary to establish a baseline for understanding Chesnutt's fictional choices and his thematic concerns. Before the riots, Wilmington in many ways stood as an anomaly of post-bellum life in the South, as it housed a small, but upwardly mobile black middle-class. This does not mean that the legacy of slavery was completely eradicated in 33 short years, however. Black women, for instance made so little in domestic jobs that it was reminiscent of slavery, and many African-Americans were left struggling with low-income, unskilled employment, if any work could be found at all. But,

unlike most southern cities, there were signs of progress. Many African-Americans flourished economically in the town, as evidenced by a growing middle-class that featured a number of black lawyers, entrepreneurs, artisans, professionals, and municipal workers (Prather 1984, 25). This economic advancement, in the eyes of the white populace, came at the expense of white economic stability. White artisans openly complained that they were losing customers, and these complaints trickled all the way down to unskilled jobs, where uneducated whites found themselves unemployed due to the new, cheaper, African-American workforce (Prather 1984, 25).

This growing tension metastasized after the 1897 mayoral election, in which the Fusion ticket, made up of white and black members of the Republican and Populist Party and helmed by white Mayoral candidate Silas P. Wright, gained complete control of the General Assembly. The Fusion ticket, which prominently featured African-American politicians and municipal leaders, relied heavily on African-American voters, and soon found itself in control of Wilmington (Hossfield 2004, 40). For the all-white Democrats, this was the last straw.

Several white supremacist groups, such as the Secret Nine, Group Six, and the White Government Union Club began a campaign which used physical force and intimidation to keep African-Americans from voting in the local election in 1898. The local white supremacist newspaper, the Raleigh *News and Observer* played a major part in this campaign, which incited violence by focusing on the hot-button issue of miscegenation. The newspaper prominently espoused the need to protect of the purity of white women throughout the campaign's duration, and used an editorial written by Alexander Manly to bring racial tension to a head in Wilmington. Alexander Manly, the mixed race editor of the *Daily Record,* Wilmington's African-American newspaper, published his controversial editorial about miscegenation in

August of 1898. In the editorial, Manly responded to Rebecca Felton, a white woman who made a speech encouraging lynching as a way for whites to protect women from blacks, who were presented as "ravening human beasts" (Umfleet 2005, 48). In his editorial response, Manly wrote that most African-American's dalliances with white women were consensual until the public discovered the act, and he also argued that white men had been raping black women since the beginning of slavery. The *News and Observer* reprinted the editorial on the eve of the 1898 election. The *News and Observer's* reprinting was accompanied by a call for action, which became the impetus for the riot of 1898.

White leaders, using the outrage over Manly's editorial as justification, drafted Wilmington's "White Declaration of Independence," which called for the removal of blacks from political offices, the replacing of black employees with whites, and the banishment of Manly from Wilmington. After drafting the declaration, they gave the Committee of Colored Citizens, a group of prominent African-Americans, an ultimatum: they could sign the draft, or they would be forcibly removed from town. While the Committee of Colored Citizens agreed to the terms of the ultimatum, the white supremacist groups insisted that they did not get the response, and took to the armory, and eventually the street. It is believed that up to one hundred blacks were killed during the riot, and nearly all prominent black citizens were rounded up, imprisoned, and forced to leave town. Rioters also burned the printing press of Manly's *Daily Record* to the ground. The riot, so closely linked to the protection of white women, restored white supremacy to the political and economic landscape of Wilmington and drove much of the black population northward. It stands as one of the most tragic instances of racial violence, and political insurrection, in the history of the nation. Chesnutt viewed this tragic instance as a continuation of the backward steps in racial relationships during Reconstruction. He saw a

fractured nation, which despite — or because of— abolition, became more and more divided along racial lines every day. *The Marrow of Tradition,* then, is Chesnutt's attempt to generate sympathy for African-Americans and change the shape of racial relations in the South.

Why fiction?

I am interested in how fiction can challenge dominant cultural myth, and so it is worthwhile to attempt to understand why and how Chesnutt used fiction as a tool for fighting the myth system. So the question becomes, why fiction? Chesnutt researched for the novel like a journalist, historian and even a lawyer. He traveled to Wilmington, taking eye-witness accounts from displaced black citizens and white citizens alike. He also familiarized himself with newspaper accounts and essays about the event. And, based on textual evidence and the wide array of literary analysis focusing on legal issues in the novel, Chesnutt took it upon himself to understand the intricacies of very real lynching laws (or lack of them). Chesnutt's legal background prepared him for this. Why, then, did he choose fiction over non-fiction, or even legal action? An answer which cannot be completely overlooked is that Chesnutt, in 1900, was already a fiction writer of some acclaim. His two published short story collections, *The Conjure Woman* and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line,* were successful, so it makes sense that he would turn to the comfortable realm of fiction to make a social statement. Also, Chesnutt saw the power of fiction to reach the masses, as evidenced by his reverential treatment of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* which was released 50 years before Chesnutt's novel and is often cited as a turning point in the abolition movement. According to his personal notes, he hoped his novel would have the same effect. In this sense, it seems Chesnutt greatly overestimated his audience. His book sold poorly; in fact it was out of print within five years of its 1901 publication.

But, even if Chesnutt thought a fictional story would reach a wider audience than say, an essay, why did he blatantly change some of the details of the Wilmington Race Riot in his retelling? In answering this question, we get closer to an understanding of some techniques Chesnutt uses to broaden the meaning of the 1898 race riot. Chesnutt uses his novel to make the race riot and surrounding events an allegory of deeper-seated problems. He also attacks the existing, damaging symbols of southern chivalry that resulted in white supremacy. Chesnutt, by writing this novel, chooses to tell a story of personal and societal fracture that stands for an entire nation torn by racial divide. Joyce Pettis describes this allegorical process as Chesnutt's use of Wilmington as a "microcosm" for all of race relations in the South (Pettis1990, 38). And, through this use of allegory, Chesnutt traces the origins of the problems to a crumbling southern aristocracy willing to use any means necessary—especially the heavy symbolized mythical system of chivalry— to maintain power. Because Chesnutt is not constrained by facts, he can cleverly attack systematic justice symbolically—on the very ground myth works in— and make a point that, though in this case it doesn't reach the rest of the nation, has the *possibility* to encourage emotional investment and social change.

Chesnutt's choice, despite his realist leanings, to create a combination of historical romance and realism to get his message across is especially telling. Research by Amy Kaplan reveals that despite the popularity of realism in the early 1900's, historical romance actually dominated the best-seller's list from 1895-1902 (Kaplan 2002, 660). So, Chesnutt surely sought to appeal to broad readership to deliver his social message. Also, and especially relevant for the sake of my own argument, Kaplan attributes the popularity of historical romances to America's desire to turn a "potential rupture with tradition into cultural and political continuity" (Kaplan 2002, 666). Chesnutt scholar Matthew Wilson equates Kaplan's reference to "continuity" with

the myth of "slave-holding patriarchy" (Wilson 2004, 121). Kaplan's notion of the myth of "slave-holding patriarchy," I argue, is the myth of southern chivalry. By writing in a genre that is popular, but also symbolically problematic, Chesnutt presciently attempts to directly counteract the spreading of these "Old South" myths. In doing so, Chesnutt undermines popular myths and stereotypes that were used by whites to establish social control, despite the fact that his white readership was not ready to receive his message. Chesnutt makes a variety of interesting fictional narrative choices to create a thorough and artistically appealing assault on the cult of chivalry.

Tom Delamere: Floundering Aristocrat, Carpet-Knight

Chesnutt makes a bold narrative choice when he includes an actual crime against a white woman in his narrative. This did not happen in the actual events surrounding the riot, but Chesnutt includes it to advance his allegorical, counter-stereotype message. Chesnutt shows that though black servant Sandy is blamed for the crime and nearly lynched, Tom Delamere, the troubled son of an aging aristocrat, actually committed the crime. Chesnutt was aware that the controversial editorial printed by Alexander Manly provided fuel for the rioters in Wilmington, and he includes it in his retelling. But Chesnutt takes this idea to the next level and brings the fictional editorial to life through the murder of the white female aristocrat Polly Ochletree. He takes this liberty in order to broaden the focus of his novel to address issues of lynch law, but also, more importantly for this argument, to reveal how insecure white aristocrats used the problematic archetype of the "black rapist" and fear of miscegenation as a scapegoat in the name of white supremacy. Chesnutt makes Tom Delamere a symbol of counter-stereotype to advance this message. Eric Sundquist, in his excellent appraisal of Chesnutt's oft overlooked subversive tactics, highlights the important role of Tom Delamere as a "racial" double whose infamous

cakewalk performance epitomizes the problematic white appraisal of "comical darkies." (Sundquist 1993, 434). Yet he stops one step short of connecting this presentation back to the notion of southern chivalry. Chesnutt, however, takes this step in the novel by making Tom the exact opposite of the symbol of the "southern gentleman" that is held up as an ideal of the larger myth of southern chivalry. In the process, Chesnutt also attacks the stereotype of the 'burly black beast" and the black rapist. On a broader level, Chesnutt also uses Tom's role as an allegory for white supremacist's empty justification of racial violence.

Tom Delamere is introduced early in the novel as "easily the handsomest man in Wellington" (Chesnutt 1901, 13). He is also described as "fashionable." But the text quickly negates these high compliments that are reminiscent of the ideal appearance of aristocratic knights in medieval times. First, the narrator also defines Tom as "swarthy," revealing a darkness of complexion that challenges the pure white stereotype of the southern gentlemen. The text continues by challenging the vaunted masculinity of the southern cavalier. The narrator continues: "But no discriminating observer would have characterized his beauty as manly. It betrayed no impression of strength….[it] subtly negated the idea of manliness" (Chesnutt 1901, 14). While this assault on Tom's masculinity may seem dated and even misogynist by today's standards, it serves an important function in the novel. Masculinity and strength were extremely important aspects of the southern myth, and by building Tom up as the ideal southern man only to completely topple him, the text begins its attack on this romantic symbol. In the same passage, the reader learns that Tom is late to a dinner with his fiancée's family because he has been drinking and cheating at cards, though he lies to cover his tracks. Chesnutt's depiction of Tom's "ungentlemanly" behavior foreshadows his spiraling moral, financial and social downfall later in the novel and challenges the romanticized, mythical perception of whiteness.

To properly understand Tom's symbolic role in the novel, we also have to spend some time looking at how Chesnutt explicitly types Tom as a representative of an entire generation of financially and morally bankrupt aristocrats—again challenging the popular myth of the "southern gentleman-knight." Here, the narrator presents the thoughts of Lee Ellis using close third-person narration. The narrator notes, "Ellis was an excellent judge of character…To Ellis….Tom Delamere was a *type* of the degenerate aristocrat" (Chesnutt 1901, 61, emphasis mine).Chesnutt makes it clear that Tom is a "type," marking him as a symbol of a larger group. In this passage, Chesnutt, through Ellis' perspective, notes that though Tom "claimed descent from a long line of cavaliers," he is scared of untamed horses. This description points to the also complete mitigation of the traditional legends that formed the basis for the myth. Before, and even after, the Civil War, southern men viewed themselves as modern day knights, and what is a cavalier, riding on horseback into battle, if not a knight? Tom, who claims to descend from this group so closely associated with myth, exhibits only the superficial qualities of the legacy. The narrator also comically describes Tom as a "carpet-knight" for his dancing skills, completely revealing the façade of chivalry.

Through Ellis, Chesnutt also directly appeals to the white southern public, reminding the group of the empty ideals of chivalry. In some ways, this presentation of an "ideal" aristocrat seems problematic. By insisting that aristocrats have degenerated, isn't Chesnutt insisting that the ideal of southern chivalry was once a very real idea? But if we reconsider the context, we again find how sneakily subversive Chesnutt's approach is. The description of Tom begins with an important qualification. The narrator notes: "*To Ellis*…"(Chesnutt 1901, 61 emphasis mine).This indicates that the appraisal of Tom and his father is Lee's (a progressive southern white) not the narrator's— or Chesnutt's— perspective. Chesnutt uses perspective to directly

connect to a white audience here. He advances his argument by granting that progressive whites, like Lee Ellis, value this ideal of the Old South and then shows how absurd the idea is in the Reconstruction South. By presenting Ellis's opinion in this way, Chesnutt allows white readers to consider the problematic myth of chivalry. Tom's father is "courageous," "courtly," and "honorable." Tom himself, on the other hand, is described as "the empty husk [of aristocracy] without the grain." The language Chesnutt uses, as well as the fact that Tom is the only young aristocrat presented in the novel, challenges the idea of southern chivalry while making it clear that Tom is a symbol in a larger allegory of southern life. Chesnutt, then, not only presents a counter-stereotype, but he does so in a way that would be read sympathetically by a white audience, highlighting the unique strengths of fiction in encouraging emotional attachment. The result is that the reader—especially in 1901— learns, in the post-bellum South, the symbol and stereotype of the chivalrous southern aristocrat is completely without merit.

Throughout the novel, Tom also serves as a counter-stereotype by robbing and murdering Polly Ochletree to pay off his steep debt. Chesnutt reveals that Tom commits the crime while wearing blackface and dressed as Sandy, the Carteret's loyal black servant. The text also includes the white supremacist newspaper's addition of a baseless charge of sexual misconduct. Chesnutt's attack on damaging stereotypes is doubled here. Tom's dishonorable actions reveal the truth behind the myth of the gentlemen aristocrat, and his murder of a white woman reveals the emptiness of the aristocracies' devotion to white womanhood. But the other side of the empty stereotype is also revealed. The stereotype of "burly black beast" is proved to be a figment of the white populace's imagination. Not only does no such figure exist in the novel, but instead it is imagined by a white aristocrat, played out in blackface. This clever stylistic choice is devastatingly effective in attacking stereotype. Chesnutt also plays with this trope at other points

in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Major Carteret cautions Polly against keeping her valuables in the house, for fear of a "burly black burglar" (Chesnutt 1901, 20). But she is ultimately robbed and killed by Tom. The only true threat to white women in the novel, then, is in fact a white man, not an imagined burly black man. Later in the novel, the narrator characterizes McBane as "burly," again playing with the stereotypical myth of the burly black beast.

Chesnutt uses Tom to undermine Chivalric symbols and create counter-stereotypes, but he also lets Tom's actions act as an allegory to battle myth. Chesnutt's description of Tom's murder of Polly while wearing blackface, as I described, serves as a counter-stereotype, but also as an allegory. The text shows how an entire culture imagined the myth of the black rapist to justify racial violence. Chesnutt also extends this allegory to reveal Tom's motivation for the crime. In the process, he magnifies the problematic social role of the myth of southern chivalry.

Chesnutt shows how Tom— the "type" of aristocrat— *imagined* a "burly black man" to get away with his robbery and murder. But he also connects Tom's crime directly to his faltering economic and social status, revealing the actual motivation behind the crime. Chesnutt reveals Tom's tenuous financial situation throughout the novel, but the problem comes to a head when Tom loses an excessive amount of money in a card game. To restore his position, he attempts to cheat at cards and beat the rich but lowborn Captain McBane. Instead, Tom loses one thousand dollars, a sum he cannot pay. After losing to McBane, Tom becomes aware of the direness of his financial situation. But he is just as upset with his social displacement. McBane offers to overlook Tom's debt, if Tom will sponsor his membership in the city's highest social Club. Tom is not only resentful of the low-born captains social aspiration, but he is also acutely aware of his own social downfall at the hands of a "low-born" white. While discussing how Tom can pay off

his debt, McBane refers to Tom familiarly. The narrator describes the scene as follows: '"We'll let these notes stand for the time being, Tom' said McBane, with significant emphasis, when they separated" (Chesnutt 1901, 98). Immediately, Tom becomes enraged. He "winces" at the social familiarity because "he has reached the degree of moral deterioration where…the externals of social intercourse possessed an exaggerated importance" (Chesnutt 1901, 98). Tom has no moral or financial leverage over McBane, so his social status, or lack of it, assumes extreme importance. Tom responds by immediately devising a plan to regain his financial and social foothold. This plan involves his black-face disguise and a black servant as scapegoat. The text, then, draws a clear line directly from Tom's financial and social decline to his use of a black man, and the black community, as scapegoat. This incident becomes a powerful, personal allegory for an entire generation's use of the myth of southern chivalry, and the associated stereotypes, to secure social and economic hierarchy.

Chesnutt also utilizes the murder of Polly Ochletree to add another layer to the allegory, one that further attacks the symbolic exaltation of white womanhood—an integral part of the myth of chivalry. Chesnutt does this by connecting a supposed "gentleman" to the murder of a white woman. Here, he undermines both the justification of racial violence and the stereotypes of the white gentleman and the burly black beast. Chesnutt presents Carteret's response to the murder to highlight the emptiness behind the myth of chivalry. Carteret, believing the criminal to be black, states "if such crimes are not punished with swift and terrible directness, the whole white womanhood of the south is in danger." Using this context, Chesnutt, by revealing the murderer to be a white aristocrat, brings into question exactly who is a threat to white women. In doing so, he battles the belief that racial violence is done in service of white womanhood, but

also takes it a step farther to reveal that in fact, the aristocracy suppresses, or in this instance kills, white women.

This layered allegory reveals the power of Chesnutt's fictional account. By spending a great deal of the novel encouraging the reader to sympathize with "loyal Sandy" and dislike degenerate Tom on a personal level, his allegorical message, which if stated outright would most likely be unpalatable to a white audience, has more of an emotional impact on the reader. While Chesnutt does present the broader scope of the riot as an argument against North Carolina white supremacist's justifications of the violence, this personal, allegorical presentation highlights the use of fiction in battling myth on its grounds of allegory and symbolism. Chesnutt's use of this allegory and his subversive presentation of counter-stereotypes show how he uses one character to effectively battle a wide range of representations that are essential parts of the overarching myth structure. Chesnutt continues this idea through his presentation of "The Big Three," made up of powerful white individuals who rely on the myth of chivalry to enact social reordering.

The Captain, the General and the Major: Empty Nobility, Resistance to Fluidity

In the actual race riot of 1898, a multitude of white supremacist groups, such as Secret Nine, Group Six, and the White Government Union Club participated in the violent removal of blacks and black sympathizers from the town. In the novel, however, Chesnutt narrows the group of agitators to three men, the self-described "Big Three" of Captain George McBane, Major Carteret, and General Belmont. Chesnutt's reduction in the number of agitators is multifaceted. It gives readers access to, while focusing reader's vision on, the true motives of machinations behind the violence (which counteracts popular opinion), and it allows for the creation of three broad archetypes that symbolize the resistance of southern aristocracy to social movement. As Barthes noted in *Mythologies*, archetypes are mythical, so revealing the contextual reality behind

the myth is effective in battling social restriction. Again, Chesnutt uses allegory, stereotype, and archetypes to challenge the myth of chivalry.

Chesnutt's use of military titles to describe the three group members is a good starting place to analyze the hierarchal presentation of the Old South and its relationship of the myth of chivalry. Consider Chapter I of this study, and Mark Twain's description of Sir Walter Scott's influence in the south. Twain wrote "It was Sir Walter Scott that made every gentleman in the South a major or colonel, or a general or a judge before the war; and it was also he that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste and pride and pleasure in them" (Twain 1893, 376). Here Twain is referring to the connection between southern "caste systems" and the romantic ideals of Sir Walter Scott, defined by modern scholars as the previously mentioned "Scott Cultural Syndrome." Chesnutt's archetypes are his way of battling and undermining these caste structures, which were under attack in the wake of emancipation. Chesnutt describes "The Big Three" using military rankings. They are *General* Belmont, *Major* Carteret, *Captain* McBane (emphasis mine). Chesnutt makes it clear that neither Belmont nor Carteret actually fought against the north in the Civil War, an important factor in revealing the ridiculousness of their hierarchical titles. In his depictions of the men, Chesnutt also breaks down the presentation of each member's place in society, and their connection to the romantic ideals of chivalry that resulted in class structure resistant to movement. By giving them these titles, and then revealing the emptiness of both the title and the chivalric ideals which they publicly profess but privately ignore, Chesnutt effectively undermines the myth of southern chivalry from multiple angles. He undermines the stereotype of the "gentleman aristocrat," reveals the "Big Three's" social, political and economic instability, and shows that their

motivations for instigating the riot are based in restoring order, not protecting white women. Chesnutt's presentation of the characters, then, battles myth on a variety of levels.

General Belmont

Chesnutt gives the reader little access to General Belmont, but his limited description reveals Chesnutt's awareness of the connection between myth, history and racial violence. Chesnutt presents Belmont as a career politician, former slaveholder, and aristocrat by blood. His introduction of the character is similar to his presentation of Tom Delamere, in that Belmont is presented as feminine because of his small hands, feet, and stature. Chesnutt makes it clear that Belmont has no military experience, so his military status, connected to chivalric ideals, is hollow. Chesnutt, through this presentation, begins to erode the notion of a hierarchical system of a plantation lifestyle rooted in notions of knighthood. In addition, the narrator's description of Belmont notes that the General believes in the "divine right of white gentleman, as his ancestors had believed in the divine right of kings" (Chesnutt 1901, 24).As noted in the previous chapter, Cultural Historian Rollin Osterweis describes the rise of chivalric hierarchy, and the popularity of Sir Walter Scott, as a natural development of southern settler's roots in English society. He argues that the agricultural economy of the South, combined with the free labor of slavery, led to an easy reinstatement of a feudal society based in English tradition (Osterweis 1949, 84-87). Chesnutt's presentation of Belmont connects Belmont's origins directly to the rise of chivalry in the South presented by Osterweis and other historians. Chesnutt then reveals Belmont's real motives for inciting racial violence. Belmont approaches Carteret the day after the fusion ticket nearly sweeps the local election. Chesnutt uses this timing to reveal that, despite his long career in politics, Belmont's fear of impending change signified by the rise of the Fusion party triggers his involvement in the violent "campaign against black domination." Chesnutt also reveals that

Belmont stands on shaky economic ground. In addition to being a politician, Belmont is also a lawyer, and in his first bit of dialogue he notes that “negro lawyers get most of the business in the criminal courts” (Chesnutt 1901, 22). Chesnutt shows here that even the oldest of southern aristocrats fears economic and political change at the hands of a rising black-middle class. And Chesnutt also reveals that for the General, the campaign – and the demagogical use of the fear of the black rapist – rests in his insecurity, not in the protection of white women. Chesnutt depicts General Belmont as an archetype to represent the history of southern chivalry. And by connecting Belmont to the roots of chivalry, and then revealing his true motivations for inciting the riot, Chesnutt refutes the culturally dominant belief in gentlemanly devotion to the purity of white women.

Major Carteret

Chesnutt focuses on Major Carteret, the owner of the fictional *Morning Chronicle* and another archetypal representative of the continuation of aristocracy and southern ideals, as one of the main characters in the novel. Chesnutt shows that Carteret, revealingly, also has a tenuous position in the socio-economic hierarchy. Carteret comes from a formerly powerful family, giving him the birth-right of aristocracy in the south. But the war, and the breakdown of the plantation life as an economic advantage, has damaged his economic status. He purchased the newspaper with his wife’s money, and feels threatened by the emergence of prominent black physicians such as Dr. Miller. He sees his aristocratic power, which is the only remaining source of his prominent status, diminished by the changing state of the local government, and he engages in his media campaign in order to “restore the balance.” His discomfort with his place in society is established throughout the novel, and his desire to reaffirm white superiority is clearest in relationship to the birth of his son.

Carteret's new fatherhood and the fusion ticket sweeping the polls in the city occur on the same day in the novel. In another example of Chesnutt's use of fictional argument, he, quite ingeniously, combines these two events in order to make it clear that Carteret's motives for utilizing his newspaper as a political propaganda machine are based in order, not female protection. Not only is Carter a diminished aristocrat whose own efficacy is undermined by his wife's financial dominance, but after the birth of his child, he realizes that his male heir, and his own name, will benefit from continued white dominance. In the first meeting of the "Big Three," the close third-person is used to describe his motives for beginning a white propaganda campaign quite concretely. The birth of his son "rekindles old desires." Before the birth, he regretted that his name should be lost, but after, "all the old pride of race, class and family welled up anew" (Chesnutt 1901, 20). The close third-person is also used in another particularly telling internal monologue that describes his true desires. Carteret, quickly after assessing the political rise of the fusion party, describes an investment in a local cotton mill that he believes will "enable his son, upon reaching manhood, to take a place in the world commensurate with the dignity of his ancestors, one of whom, a few generations removed, had owned an estate of ninety thousand acres of land and six thousand slaves" (Chesnutt 1901, 22). The connection between a desire to restore wealth lost to emancipation and the beginning of Carteret's campaign against African-Americans becomes even more evident here. These motivations conflict with his tactics in the press. Carteret focuses the campaign against African-Americans on crimes against white women, not on social order. This desire for restored "name" and "title" reflect aristocrat's connection to the damaging idea of southern chivalry. It is this connection to the myth that Carteret values, not the empty symbol of the white woman.

Captain McBane

Captain McBane, the lowest ranking military member, is the wealthiest of the "Big Three," yet he has the lowest social status. As a character, only his military rank reflects his connection to antebellum aristocratic chivalry. Even though his role in the novel does not reflect a desire to reaffirm the hierarchy of antebellum life, an analysis of his background in the novel reveals not only the problematic, rigid social structure of the southern aristocracy, but also the emptiness of the protection of white women as a justification for racial violence. McBane's motives for participating in the campaign, the reader learns, rest in his desire to infiltrate the aristocracy and cement his social status.

A former slave-driver, McBane became wealthy using chain gangs to complete construction projects. While he is economically more secure than his fellow group members, he still holds a lower status in society. He is well aware of his place, but seeks to affirm his position among southern aristocrats. As the narrator notes, "he was ambitious for greater wealth, for office, for social recognition" (Chesnutt 1901, 53). McBane's motives are on display throughout the novel, but his use of violence to obtain them is most relevant to this discussion.

Captain McBane, in a pre-Reconstruction south, only separated himself socially from slaves through violence. He was a slave-driver, a rung above the slaves he controlled but never accepted by his aristocratic employers. After the civil war, McBane utilizes this same technique to become wealthy, using prison labor to get major contracts with the state and make exorbitant profits. Chesnutt again stresses the violence which McBane used in this economic coup. The narrator states that McBane, in running his prison labor teams, used cruelty and death as a motivator. Before the events of the novel, then, McBane used violence against blacks to climb the rungs of southern society. And he carries this tradition into the novel's plot. He sees his role as enforcer for the "Big Three" as a way to ingratiate himself with the highest levels of white

society, while also eliminating competition from the rising black middle class, represented by characters like Dr. Miller. His dependence on chain gang labor for profit also hints at a secondary motivation for ensuring a downtrodden black population. As Gene Gorman points out, McBane is dependent on black labor for economic success, and so his motives for reordering society are also economic (Gorman 2012, 1). For McBane, then, the violent usurping of power from the Fusion Party can only increase and stabilize his social and economic prestige.

A deeper analysis of McBane's role also shows the southern aristocracy's use of propaganda—in this case centered on the perpetuation of the chivalric myth— as a means to control blacks without actually participating in violence. At a meeting about Polly Ochletree's death, Carteret recognizes the inevitability of lynch law, and actively hopes for it. However, he does not want to participate. Carteret distances himself from the violence, noting: "I, for one, "would prefer that any violence, however justifiable, should take place without my active intervention" (Chesnutt 1901, 111). McBane responds by declaring: "It won't take place without mine" (Chesnutt 1901, 111). And this is the crux of the difference between the two men and an illuminating aspect of southern social hierarchy. The myth of southern chivalry is so pervasive in the South that merely mentioning it can generate a lynch mob. But, the people most reliant on the myth as a tool for order remain distant from the violence, and instead manipulate the general public by using the symbols of the myth to generate action. McBane's "probationary white" class assumes responsibility for action. Again, this detail calls to attention the emptiness of the myth of southern chivalry. It is merely a tool used by the aristocrats, not a code to live by.

Each of the members of the big three are socially, financially, and politically dependent on a suppressed black population. But, each understands the pulse of the southern public. They all are aware of the myth of southern chivalry, and that the easiest way to mitigate black

advancement is by playing up this very trope. The three men's "campaign" against African-Americans focuses almost entirely the symbols and stereotypes of this concept, and Chesnutt's presentation of the campaign reveals the duplicitous use of myths for violent propaganda. This duplicity is evident at one of the earliest meetings of the "Big Three," in which they discuss the editorial of Barber—Chesnutt's fictional stand in for Alex Manly— and how it can be used to foment public anger against blacks. At the meeting, the group agrees that it is better to withhold reprinting the editorial until election time, "firing the southern heart," to "scare the negro into fits" and put a permanent end to "negro domination." This exchange captures the group's true motive, political and social white supremacy, while also revealing their plan to use the white woman to achieve these ends. Nearly every one of the group's meetings focuses on this very ideal, and the meetings become a useful tool for advancing Chesnutt's message. In one callous exchange, General Belmont expresses his remorse that Polly Ochletree's death did not occur closer to the day of the election. The general notes, "I should have preferred to have this take place, if it was to happen, on the eve of the election" (Chesnutt 1901, 111). This comment, in which the death of a woman becomes merely a tool for propaganda, shows the political machinations behind the group's perpetuation of southern chivalry. By connecting the members of the "Big Three" to the media and politics, Chesnutt also shows the importance of these structures in perpetuating myth. This connection cements his attack on the myth of chivalry.

The Tradition of *Marrow*

While writing about allegorical patterns in *Marrow,* James Giles and Thomas Lally note that "recognition of allegorical patterns" in the novel put critical complaints about Chesnutt's use of "typed characters" in "a different light" (Giles 1984, 261). Though Giles and Lally are discussing characters that represent black resistance to racism, the light they are referring to is

relevant because they are arguing that Chesnutt's use of stereotype is thematic rather than lacking artistic merit. In the same way, I hope analyzing Chesnutt's use of allegory with an eye towards the myth of southern chivalry has served the same purpose.

Chesnutt's creation of archetypes reveals his deft artistic eye, but also his deft social eye. He uses historical romance—the very genre essential to propagating the revised Reconstruction myth of chivalry— to draw on and refute archetypes and stereotypes and reveal their connection to damaging myths. Through these techniques, Chesnutt challenges the damaging and socially confining myths of the South. This subversive, complex thematic and artistic interest results in a text that is rich for critical analysis. While I haven't covered full breadth of allegory and myth in the novel, viewing Chesnutt's counter-narrative is productive in a variety of ways. First, analyzing the actual myths which he combats provides a window into the distinct cultural mythology of the American South. Second, it reveals fiction's usefulness as a tool for battling inequality. Finally, the text looks beyond the stated justification for racial violence and provides a counter-history that has been useful for historical reappraisal of the event. I find no coincidence in the fact that any modern historical account about the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot includes at least a brief mention of Chesnutt's work. And though his work was critically panned upon its release, the recent revival of *Marrow* scholarship speaks to the power of his message when read with a critical eye. Today, historians have given the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot a more fitting name: The Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898. In 2006, the government of North Carolina officially recognized the horror of the coup and developed an early plan for making reparations to African-American businesspeople and laborers. Chesnutt's role in this contemporary assessment cannot be quantified, but he was the first person with a national platform to offer a counter-history to the white supremacist version of events. By shaping his

story with allegory and counter-stereotypes that directly connect to the images of the myth of chivalry, Chesnutt becomes a major figure in a long line of authors that criticize these ideals. Chesnutt's legacy, then, deserves the modern reexamination currently afoot in academia. He stands as a deft social observer, and studying Chesnutt through the lens of history and myth reveals his importance as a social commentator and subversive novelist.

Chapter III.

Myth, Murder and Mississippi: Gwendolyn Brooks and Lewis Nordan De-mystify the Discourse of Emmett Till's Death

Charles Chesnutt used historical romance based on the Wilmington race riot to subvert the mythical ideal of Southern chivalry, uncovering the ideological usage of chivalric symbols as a way to maintain racial hierarchy. The ideology that Chesnutt attached, as noted in earlier chapters, seemed to reemerge most violently in times of political change. And so on the cusp of the Civil Rights Era in 1955, when Emmett Till was tragically murdered in Mississippi, it makes sense that chivalric ideology was again employed by Southern white males to attempt to reaffirm white supremacy as a Southern way of life. Yet despite its persistence, the discourse surrounding the protection of the white woman in 1955 had slightly changed.

Outside of the KKK, the direct connection to the medieval imagery that defined "Sir Walter Scott Cultural Syndrome" became more or less hidden. Instead, the protection of the white woman and the voraciously sexual black beast developed into stand-alone signifiers. They had become so naturalized that a nod to knightly duty or feudal life no longer even entered the equation. For instance, the idea of protection of the white woman was expressed by J.W. Milam, Roy Bryant's accomplice in the murder of Emmett Till, in his famous confessional interview with *Look* magazine in 1956. He states "…when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him" (Huie 1956, 47). There is no mention of knightly duty, J.W. Bryant is not a general, nor is he an aristocrat. Instead, romantic chivalry was naturalized into an impenetrable and dislocated discourse surrounding fear of miscegenation. The roots of this discourse were still anchored in the age-old notion of Southern Chivalry. They were just diminished. For the white patriarchy, Barthes notion of the ideological use of mythology had

thoroughly succeeded. No one seemed to question where this fear of miscegenation came from, and so critical analysis—or demystification— was impossible. The protection of the white woman was just something that was done in the South; it justified racial violence that actually served the much more sinister purpose of stabilizing white social and economic standing. And so the female body, so central to justifying lynching, maintained its ideological importance. As noted in the first chapter of this study, the white patriarchy closely guarded and attempted to regulate female sexuality— and reproductive rights by proxy— as a way to ensure patralineage and maintain an increasingly unrealistic racial caste system. This tension over female sexuality, and the threatening, imagined, and ideologically reproduced "animalistic black male" continued to reign in Southern culture and again undergirded justifications of violence against black men that was still truly rooted in securing socio-economic control. Because the discourse surrounding miscegenation had changed, I will argue, authors sought new approaches to subvert and demystify the ideology surrounding racial violence. Mainly this emerged as a departure from "real" history that Chesnutt, despite his insertion of various fictional plotlines, never undertakes in his historical romance.

Gwendolyn Brooks, writing in 1960, on the heels of Till's death, uses a highly fictionalized ballad – "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon"[5] –to connect Till's murder back to the empty signifier of Chivalry, demystifying the discourse around racial violence by revealing its empty roots and highlighting that it was actually based in white supremacist desire for social and economic stability. And Lewis Nordan, whose *Wolf Whistle* was published in 1993, yet written through the fictionalized lens of his own childhood in the 1950's, goes even farther: he completely manipulates the

[5] Because of the length and somewhat confusing punctuation of this important title, I will refer to the poem as "A Bronzeville Mother" throughout this paper.

"facts" surrounding Till's murder and even uses magical realism to draw these same connections. Studying these approaches is then helpful on a variety of levels. It reveals how authors like Brooks and Nordan, despite writing 60 and 90 years, respectively, after Chesnutt, made the same connections as Chesnutt between racial violence and Southern chivalry. This highlights the persistence of the ideology surrounding Southern mythology, and the results of this ideology. For aristocrats, the protection of the white woman was merely a veiled attempt to restore the antebellum racial hierarchy of the South. And for those usually committing the violence—the white underclass— racial violence remained a tool to secure their own tenuous class position against the rising power of black advancement. The amplified tactics used by each writer, here the complete departure from the facts of the case, reveals the necessity, and importance of fiction, in understanding racial violence in the South as part of an all too naturalized system of signifiers. Both authors subvert the discourse surrounding racial violence in the 1950's by revealing the hidden ideology of southern chivalry. Though this process, the authors problematize the discourse surrounding white womanhood and black sexuality, revealing it to be damaging for both racial and gender equality. Before engaging with each writer's texts, it is helpful to briefly relay the history of the Emmett Till murder in order to understand how the discourse of miscegenation dominated the justification of a murder that was truly based in maintaining the status quo, and in order to understand how each author departs from the facts to reveal sociological and discursive realities surrounding racial violence.

The Murder and Trial of Emmett Till

The hard "facts" of the Emmett Till case have been debated by journalists, scholars, and the court system since Till's death. Even today, with the FBI's renewed investigation into the murder, and the overwhelming amount of Till research and scholarship, some questions haven't

been fully answered, and some may never be. This debate, and the communal memory of blacks and whites throughout the nation, the shifting of facts in the press and the continual re-imagination of the event in fiction make a thorough timeline somewhat impossible (Metress 2002, 6-9). Some things, however, as Till scholars Harriet Pollack[6] and Christopher Mettress narrate in *Emmett Till in Literary Memory and Imagination*, we are fairly certain about[7]. Emmett Till was a 14-year-old boy raised in Chicago, Illinois. He traveled to Mississippi on August 21, 1955, to stay with his great-uncle Moses Wright and spend time with his southern cousins. Three days later Till entered Bryant Grocery in Money, Mississippi, and had an exchange with the white store owner, Carolyn Bryant, that left her flustered. Upon leaving the store, Till allegedly "wolf whistled" at Bryant, breaking the unwritten codes of interracial etiquette between black men and white women. Three days after this encounter, Till was kidnapped in the middle of the night by Carolyn's husband Roy and his half-brother J.W. Milam, though new research and testimony also points to other co-conspirators. The half-brothers were arrested for kidnapping, but insisted that they had let Till go free.

Till's body was discovered in the Tallahatchie river three days later, and Bryant and Milam were arrested for murder (Pollack 2008, 2-3). Emmett Till's mother, Mamie, upon learning that that state of Mississippi planned on burying Emmett's body, intervened and Emmett's casket was sent to her in Chicago. Despite instructions to keep the casket sealed, Mamie opened her son's casket and, apparently horrified by her son's unrecognizable visage, showed the horror to the world by having an open casket funeral in Chicago and releasing photos of her son to *Jet* magazine, an African-American periodical. Mamie's actions set off a media

[6] For the sake of full disclosure, Harriet Pollack is one of my advisors for this thesis project.
[7] The following timeline includes only events that are readily agreed upon and confirmed by multiple sources. Much conjecture about the incidents, such as Carolyn's role in identifying Till and the exact nature of Till's interaction have been left out.

firestorm, and many scholars argue the publication of the *Jet* photos and the ensuing media coverage of the case were the first national, solidified media movement of the Civil Rights era (Halberstam 1993, 441). After a short trial, highlighted by political and media maneuvering by black and white citizens of the North and South, the defendants Bryant and Milam were found not guilty, further inciting national protest, even as the Mississippi media attempted to defend the verdict. This tragic timeline reveals a variety of disturbing facts about Till's death. For one, his murder can be traced back to his transgression of etiquette towards a white woman. The murder also reflected the lynchings of previous decades, as Till's body was mutilated—though not castrated. And Bryant and Milam certainly committed the crime, yet walked free. Shortly after the trial, in January of 1956, Milam and Bryant admitted that they murdered Till and provided a ghastly account of their actions to William Bradford Huie at *Look* magazine, generating a controversial reaction and further cementing the tragedy of Till's death in the American imagination (Metress 2002, 201).The freed-defendants' recollection of the events in Huie's piece is filled with inconsistencies and is, probably as much as later author's accounts, highly fictionalized. The article represented the first American example of "checkbook" journalism, and so the defendants, who received $4000 for their story, probably told the public what they thought it wanted to hear. This fictional narrative is revealing because the killers explicitly outlined the oft un-discussed thought process behind racial violence to what they believed was a willing audience.

Closer examination of Huie's article in *Look* reveals some of the undertones of this act of racial violence: mainly that, as much as this murder was about the white woman Carolyn Bryant, it was also about reinforcing white supremacy, politically and socially, in Mississippi. As Milam claims in the article, the men didn't initially set out to kill, Till, they just wanted to make sure

"he knew his place." (Huie 1956, 47*).* Milam's full, disturbing quote, despite its horrific message, is helpful in making this connection between Till's death and maintaining the status quo. He states:

> *I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people go out on notice. As long as I live and I can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. And they ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger even gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin;….I'm going to make an example of [Till]— just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand"(Huie 1956, 47).*

In this disturbing confession, Milam makes connections that no one else in the press cared to elucidate. While the media firestorm focused on the sexual implications of Till's action, Milam was connecting miscegenation to voting, segregated school systems, and social positioning. And so the discourse on miscegenation is revealed full-force. Racial violence here is a message that African-Americans should "stay in their place" and uncovers the social, economic and political insecurity driving the murderers. The white woman takes a backseat, and becomes a smokescreen for social ordering. Brooks and Nordan illuminate these very ideas in their work.

De-Romanticizing: Gwendolyn Brooks Attack on Chivalry

In "A Bronzeville Mother …" poet Gwendolyn Brooks fabricates an interiority for Carolyn Bryant[8]— wife of alleged Till murderer Roy Bryant— in order to undermine

[8] While the character clearly seems to be Brooks' inspiration for the "Mississippi Mother," it is probably not exactly fair to conflate the two because she is never referred to as Bryant in the text. For this reason Carolyn

the notion of southern chivalry. This act represents Brook's complete distortion of fact in order to examine deeper cultural and sociological causation, which is essential to understanding how authors can manipulate facts in order to express the sociological truth behind the myth of southern chivalry. Brooks undertakes the process of demystification from this angle, and reveals that female protection was not about white womanhood, honor, or a grand romantic narrative. Instead, it was about a patriarchy desperately clinging to its assumed social hierarchy. Brooks also reveals that instead of protecting white women, the idea of chivalry instead represented an ideological jail cell for women, and for black men as well. Because of the role of factual distortion in this demystification process, an analysis of the ways in which the poem fictionalizes history is necessary before understanding the effects of the fictional account.

Brooks' piece assumes a completely fictional approach, as despite the avalanche of media coverage surrounding Till's murder, and despite her central role in inciting the murder, Carolyn Bryant remained essentially voiceless in the public eye. Her only commentary on the case survives in a transcript from the trial, in which she explains her encounter with Till— much of which, it is worth noting, is contradicted by other witnesses in the case (Metress 2002, 93). Despite her testimony, Bryant never, in actuality, voiced feelings of resentment or horror at her husband's act and she never elaborates on her psychological state. Brook's crafting an emotional interiority for Bryant becomes a useful tool for indicting the southern patriarchy. Some specific details from the poem serve the same purpose. For instance, in the poem, "Mississippi Mother's" disgust at her husband is incited by an intimate act, which is described as the "first time

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Bryant's fictional counterpart will be referred to as "Mississippi Mother," Roy Bryant as "Mississippi Father" throughout.

in all those days in nights" that the couple kissed (Brooks 1960, 134-35). Media representations prove otherwise, as the Bryants are famously recording engaging in a deep kiss moments after his acquittal by a Jackson, Mississippi jury. These changes elucidate the ideological and emotional impact that Brooks is looking for, and the techniques she uses to attack chivalry. By both assuming Bryant's voice and using metaphor, Brooks analyzes the deeper causes behind Till's murder, exemplifying an attempt to use the very tools of myth-development to undo its naturalization.

In the poem, Brooks uses the motif of a "fairy tale" ballad to undermine the concept of southern chivalry, and directly connect Till's murder to the now-hidden, yet perpetually re-inscribed, antebellum romance. The first stanza opens with a fictionalized internal monologue for the "Mississippi Mother":

From the first it had been like a

Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.

A wildness cut up and tied in little bunches,

Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite

Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school (Brooks 1960, 1-5)

The formal elements of this section point to the role of the ballad—most famously introduced to the South by Sir Walter Scott's romantic ballads— in perpetuating racial violence. For one, the poem itself is a ballad; it is composed of short stanzas and, at least initially, tells a fairy tale adventure of love and romance. And the use of enjambment ensures that the second line, though mid-sentence, highlights the importance of the "Ballad" by capitalizing the word and beginning the line with it, thus adding importance to the term. The perpetuation of ballads in Southern culture also becomes apparent in this

stanza, as "Mississippi Mother" connects her appreciation, and the inevitability of Till's murder, to her school days, when she is indoctrinated with representations of Southern Chivalry. The "Mississippi Mother" also "never quite understood" the ballads she learned in school. Instead, the symbols are naturalized so she accepts them at face value without considering where they came from or what they mean, which connects to Barthes notion of the ideological work of myth. In this stanza alone, then, Brooks implicates the mystifying chivalric underpinnings of "Sir Walter Scott Cultural Syndrome" for Till's death. As Vivian May notes, the effect of Brook's attack on ballads is a "challenge to literary histories and traditions (May 2008, 102). Much like Chesnutt, Brooks here appropriates a literary tradition of the South that underpins the perpetuation of racial inequality, and dismantles it. And, again formally, by the time the last few stanzas of the poem emerge, it looks nothing like a ballad. The short, uniform stanza length that marks a ballad, and Brooks' first several stanzas, shifts into a free flowing, enjambment-filled and irregularly metered work of modern poetry. By formally undercutting the ballad, Brooks seeks to undermine its validity. Besides this formal manipulation, as the poem continues, Brooks also begins with a narrative replication of a traditional ballad, which she later completely dismantles.

In the poem's second stanza Brooks outlines the metaphor of the Ballad, elucidating how Southern white supremacists overlaid Scott's medieval romantic fairytales onto their own unique, oppressive culture, and how medieval ballads provided a romantic image of racial violence in the name of the white woman. "Mississippi Mother" imagines:

"*Herself: the milk-white maid, the 'maid mild'*

Of the ballad. Pursued

By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.

The Happiness-Ever-After" (Brooks 1960, 5-8).

In this context, the milk-white maid (Bryant) is pursued by the Dark Villain (Till), only to be saved by the Fine Prince (her husband). Thus, "Mississippi Mother" overlays her own narrative with romantic chivalric ideals. The terminology used is not innocent. Here, it highlights the previously discussed symbolic binary of chivalric ideology. The "milk white maid" and the "Dark Villain" are, respectively, the pure Southern lady and the "black beast." As the poem continues, Brooks reveals that the transposal of Scott's ideals doesn't fit the current culture, and the symbols are revealed to be empty, disrupting the binary and calling the value of chivalry into question.

After sitting down to breakfast with her husband, "Mississippi Mother" comes to a realization regarding the absurdity of her indoctrination into the idea of racial violence as chivalry. She realizes that when the facts of the Till case are considered, the "fun" of the fairy tale is "nullified" by the fact that Till was a "child" with "eyes too young to be dirty/And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder/ Of its infant softness (Brooks 1960, 28-32). She goes on to note that her husband, instead of a knight in shining armor, was a "baby full of tantrums" (Brooks 1960, 41). Here, she realizes how false the fairy tale of southern chivalry is. The dark villain is merely a child, no threat at all, and her husband is merely an insecure "baby," who is also described as "ridiculous." With these lines, the symbols of chivalry and the main signifiers of miscegenation are exploded. The archetypes of chivalry are instead merely a justification for violence that is actually

rooted, as the depiction of "Mississippi Father" as a baby suggests, in the social insecurity of white males.

White social insecurity is presented in even clearer terms when "Mississippi Father's" voice appears in the poem. This fictionalized voice notes that the murder was worth the stress of the trial because he was able to show the "intruders" the core ideals of Mississippi (Brooks 66-70). In the poem, he claims what he never publicly stated after the fact; the murder of Emmett Till was an attempt to reaffirm the status quo of social hierarchy in the south by showing "intruders" (in this case the "brown-black" Bronzeville mother, a Northerner and fictionalized version of Mamie Till) that they could not change it. In "Mississippi Father's" eyes, after his murderous act, "nothing could stop Mississippi" (Brooks 1960, 78).And so Brooks' allegory comes into focus. The ballad, a traditional representation of chivalry is appropriated and eventually collapses upon itself. The symbols of chivalry are shown to be a veil through which white patriarchy reaffirms its social status through violence. Yet Brooks' condemnation of chivalry does not stop there. She also undermines the legitimacy of the myth of protecting white women by revealing how this illegitimate myth system actually immures, damages, and threatens white females.

The fictional "Mississippi Mother's" fear and oppression at the hands of patriarchal reproduction of the myth of chivalry is referenced throughout "A Bronzeville Mother…" For instance, Brooks' "Mississippi Mother" questions her own worth when contemplating the implications of her husband's murderous actions. She "fancied he looks at her as though/measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth It?" (Brooks 1960, 56). Here, the mother reflects her objectification at the hands of her

husband. She considers his gaze "measuring her," giving up her subjectivity and only viewing herself through his eyes. And so, to battle this, she must go to the "mirror with comb and lipstick." It becomes necessary to "be more beautiful than ever." Even in the midst of consideration the absurdity of chivalry, she must live up to the ideal of the "maiden mild" and prove she is worth the murder of Till. This idea of Carolyn Bryant as a "comely" Southern girl also received a great deal of attention in the press at the time, in fact few articles printed in Mississippi about the case failed to mention her looks (Houck 2008, 26). Brooks' description of an objectified "Mississippi Mother" reveals the problematic cultural reproduction of her role as "the maiden mild." The mother, it is revealed, is trapped by this objectification, yet she is also trapped by the threat of patriarchal violence her husband embodies.

In the poem's final stanzas her fear of her husband becomes more obvious. In the narrative, her husband slaps her misbehaving child. And when his "Hand" comes down, the trapped mother can think "only of blood" (Brooks 1960, 125). She sees this violence against a child—importantly *her* child— as a reenactment of his murder of the defenseless child Till, and her "fear ties her like iron" (Brooks 1960, 125). In this image, a newly discovered fear of her murderous husband becomes iron-clad—it is a prison. She can't escape it, and she can't "protect her children" from it. The institutionalized patriarchal violence normalized in the name of chivalry has become so apparent she can think of nothing but blood. Her realization of patriarchal violence against the innocent only grows in the poem's final stanza. As her husband approaches to kiss her, she feels the "courtroom beer and hate…Pushed like a wall against her," her responsibility as an object of desire, her husband's violence done in her name and its role in Till's death is

crushing her, and it "will not go away" (Brooks 1960, 130). In the final images of this fictional stand-in for Carolyn Bryant, then, the poem's protagonist is trapped by her husband, and by his horrific act done in the name of chivalry. As such, the white woman is configured as a victim of chivalry, elucidating that while she is supposedly exalted, she is instead immured by the oppressive patriarchal myth of chivalry. This entire configuration— the disruption of the binary signifiers of chivalry, the absurdity of chivalric ideals, the naturalization of myth, the connections to Sir Walter Scott, and the immurement of white females— mirrors Chesnutt's subversion of chivalry. But while Chesnutt doesn't seem to offer any sort of solution for disrupting white patriarchal dominance beyond demystification, Brooks does. As Laura Dawkins notes, Brooks hints at maternal empathy as a possible salvation. She argues that Brooks links the fictional Carolyn Bryant's awareness of the hollowness of chivalry to a maternal connection with Mamie Till, suggesting that harnessed maternal empathy can upend patriarchal power (Hawkins 2008, 116). Despite this slight difference in representation, the similarities between *Marrow* and "A Bronzeville Mother" highlights the fact that chivalry persists in the South even as the social conditions that birthed them seem to erode, and that many authors attempted to subvert the ideological naturalization of myth through literature. Nordan continues this tradition through his magical realist work, *Wolf Whistle*.

Wolf Whistle: **Mythical Manipulation**

The majority of this study has focused on presentations of whiteness by African-American authors. As such, it seems fitting to close with a white Southern writer's understanding of the problematic perpetuation of chivalry as a smokescreen for miscegenation and racial violence. Lewis Nordan wrote *Wolf Whistle* in 1993, almost a century after Chesnutt published

Marrow and almost a half century after Till's death and Brooks' "A Bronzeville Mother...." Yet his appraisal of racial violence in the South closely echoes Brooks' and Chesnutt's, even if he goes about subverting it through different techniques. And so while Nordan has received some criticism for representing the tragic death of Emmett Till from a white perspective, chancing trivialization of the death of Till by adding a comedic element to his work, and for – in some ways— humanizing Till's murderers (Romine 2008, 135), it is important to look closely at his work and consider the implications of Nordan's perspective . While he admits that "blood-guilt" partially inspired him to write the story, he also notes that coming to terms with the horror of racial violence helped give him clarity about the complex Southern dynamic, and the pain it has historically inflicted on African-Americans (Growing Up 1993, 273). This idea of clarity is important; in many ways, his perspective as a white writer gives him a unique and personal understanding of the hypocrisy and emptiness of white identity constructed by southern chivalry and the exaltation of white womanhood. Nordan, reflecting on his childhood, actively participates in the demystification of myths of racial violence, which in some ways speaks to the impact of his predecessor's similar attempts while also elucidating the persistence of the myth. While, like Chesnutt and Brooks, Nordan's work exposes the emptiness of chivalry and verbalizes the real motivations behind racial violence, he departs from Chesnutt's historical romance and ventures into the supernatural and the absurd. But, despite the formal differences, Nordan's work consistently highlights the social and economic instability lurking behind the mythical justification of racial violence. In the following discussion of the novel, I will first reveal how Nordan connects the myth of Southern chivalry during the civil war to Till's death. I will then discuss how Nordan carefully manipulated some facts of Till's death, such as the social status of Lady Montberclair, his fictional stand-in for Carolyn Brant to get at sociological

structures behind the murder. These ideas should ring a bell: Chesnutt and Brooks illustrated the same concerns.

In the early chapters of *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan presents a bizarre, supernatural cadre of "swamp eagles"— a misleading description of buzzards. His description of these buzzards represents a stirring criticism of Southern mythology which is connected to chivalry, romanticism and myth. The bizarre passage deserves its full shrift: "The locals called them swamp eagles," Nordan writes, "sometimes just eagles, though they were clearly buzzards. The birds were descendants and remnants of an ancient flock, attracted here long ago by the corpse stench of a Civil War battle…a significant Mississippi defeat…These birds were part of the glorious history of the South" (Nordan 1993, 68). Southern literary Scholar James Giles astutely notes that this passage must be read as a critical allegory of the mythic the old South. He rightly focuses on the birds' role as "part of the glorious history of the South," noting how Nordan's irony satirizes the "white Southern fondness for living in a past that never existed"(Giles 2006, 62). The buzzards, birthed in the carcasses of the South's "glorious" war against northern intrusion represent the romanticization of a past based in white supremacy, and shattered by the North's interruption of the plantation lifestyle (Giles 2006, 62). And though Giles doesn't state it, these ideas certainly relate back to chivalry. The perpetuation of the mythically idyllic, romanticized Southern plantation lifestyle, and the supposed glory of the Civil War are all chivalric myth based in the racial hierarchy and glorification of combat prescribed by the Scott Cultural Syndrome. They also completely obscure the realities of slavery, inequality, and suffering involved in each situation. Also, Giles, despite his intriguing and eloquent appraisal of the passage, stops short of explicitly noting how this passage reflects Nordan's awareness of how myth becomes naturalized. The birds' misidentification by the general public is telling on this

front, especially when the birds' connection to Civil War mythology is considered. Here, a society chooses to ignore the ugly side of its history and dress it up with absurd semantic gymnastics. The buzzards appeared in Mississippi to feast on the casualties of a war fought by the South to reinforce their racial hierarchy, yet they are instead known by the locals as "eagles," an image synonymous with freedom, and one on the state flag of Mississippi. So we see how mythology surrounding the South's ugly past is formed. The buzzard, a signifier of death and tragedy, is emptied out and filled up with misleading imagery of freedom and glory. This idea is then naturalized through cultural reproduction. The eagles are lionized in "newspapers all over Mississippi." And so a lie becomes naturalized, and a tragedy becomes glorified, with some ideological appropriation and reproduction. In this one passage alone, Nordan uses magical realism (the birds later tell stories in the novel, and we discover they are named after race-baiting Southern senators) and allegory to question the myth of Southern chivalry and reveal how the myth has become so naturalized. In this sense, the passage can be read as an early attempt to demystify the signifiers of southern violence and reveal how symbols are used ideologically to naturalize mythology.

At various points in the novel, Nordan continues this imaginative departure from the facts of the case in order to allegorize Till's death and undermine the tradition of Southern Chivalry. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his shifting of the social status and relationships between the murderers and Carolyn Bryant. In reality, Carolyn and Roy Bryant were, as Huie states in his *Look* article, "… poor: no car, no TV…they live in the back of the store which Roy's brothers helped set up…and they earn little" (Huie 1956, 46). Also, in the real life incident, Carolyn's husband Roy, along with his half-brother J.W. Milan, commit Till's murder, ostensibly in defense of Carolyn Bryant. But Nordan disrupts this reality through his

presentation of the incident. In *Wolf Whistle*, Carolyn Bryant, the white-women allegedly whistled at by Till, is replaced and renamed. The subject of Till's social transgression becomes a liberated, progressive and modernized Southern woman, Lady Montberclair. While in reality, Carolyn Bryant was intimidated by Till's actions, in the novel, the Lady drives him home to avoid any problems with the locals. She and her husband Lord Montberclair are also the richest family in town. In the novel, Till's murderer then becomes "white-trash" Solon Gregg, a stranger to the Montberclair family but a member of Mississippi's probationary white class. Gregg is recruited by Lord Montberclair to mete out justice on his wife. This complex shifting in the protagonists of the case, while a bit messy to explain, is not haphazard. Instead it serves a variety of deeper thematic purposes that explicitly present Till's murder in allegorical terms of Southern chivalry.

Nordan's replacing of the Bryants with the Montberclairs operates on a variety of allegorical levels that connect Till's murder to Southern chivalry. On one hand, naming the couple a "Lord" and a "Lady" explicitly connects the group to the antebellum ideas of slave-owning aristocracy, imported from medieval romances featuring similar characters. Nordan also traces this aspect of Southern mythology back to its European roots. Montberclair is a French name, and the couple lives in a "Spanish" style mansion. The catalysts of the racial violence, then, are quite literally imported by Nordan from Europe, which reflects the transposition of European chivalric ideals into the south. We later learn that just like those chivalric ideals, the titles are empty. The Lady is far from a pure, chaste Southern maiden mild, and the Lord is a jealous, violent alcoholic. Nordan skillfully calls the reader's attention to this absurd mythology by changing their social status and names. These changes also add several other layers of depth to Nordan's configuration of Southern culture.

Nordan's choice to juxtapose Lady Montberclair's elite economic and social standing with eventual murderer Solon Gregg's white-trash roots also directs the reader to consider the real motives behind Till's slaying. In this configuration Lady Montberclair represents the height of southern aristocracy (albeit a diminished one), and Solon Gregg represents the lowest rung of the white socioeconomic hierarchy. Gregg's motives for tracking down Till, then, as the text reveals, have very little to do with protecting white womanhood. For instance, in the novel, Gregg watches Lady Montberclair enter the grocery store where Bobo (Till's real life nickname and the only moniker Nordan's Till character receives) encounters Lady Montberclair and envisions himself rising above his social status and entering the aristocratic hierarchy. In this fantasy, Gregg asks the Lady for a ride and "pictures himself sitting up in that wide front seat with her…calling her Sally Anne, right to her face, and liking it, too" (Nordan 1993, 38). Before he has the opportunity to ask for a ride however, Bobo enters the store and whistles at the Lady. Though Lady Montberclair is not offended by the interaction, Solon begins to berate the youth, which results in Montberclair driving the boy home and allowing him to ride in the front seat of her car. It is this encounter that triggers Solon's desire to murder Bobo. This fictional interaction reveals Gregg's insecure social and economic status. Bobo, by approaching Carolyn Bryant and ultimately leaving in the front seat of her car, prevents Solon's desired social movement. In fact, his position in society is usurped by Bobo, who ultimately rides, as Gregg notes "Settin up in that ar front seat like a Cock-of the-Roost" (Nordan 1993, 36). Solon's interrupted fantasy makes it clear that while he, like generations of Southern men, insisted that he harmed Bobo to protect the Lady, his murderous act is actually meant to protect and advance his spot in the social hierarchy and keep African-Americans "in their place." Nordan uses the exchange, then, to undermine the idea of Southern chivalry.

While Solon ultimately murders Bobo, he doesn't immediately leave the grocery store and find the boy. First, he visits Lord Montberclair to inform him of the "disrespect" of his wife by Bobo. And Lord Montberclair, the only male aristocrat in the novel, ends up paying Solon to murder Bobo. This reiterates the idea, also expressed by Chesnutt in *Marrow,* that aristocrats used ideology surrounding white womanhood to galvanize lower-class men into acts of racial violence. Lord Montberclair tells Gregg, "'Decent white folk have always needed men like you…we need people like you to keep our niggers in line…it gives you lower classes, you white trash boys some *Raison d'être"* (Nordan 1993, 118). For Montberclair, the sole purpose of lower-class whites is to enact violence on the aristocrat's behalf and maintain the racial social hierarchy of the South. Montberclair literally uses his lower- class white acquaintance to, in his words, "keep our niggers in line," revealing the true motives for racial violence. As scholar Molly Mckibbin points out, "Many historians show that lynchings significantly rose in number during slow economic times…Lower-class white men, like Bryant…could compensate for their lack of economic power by exerting racial power over black men" (Mckibbin 2011, 11) Through this process, Solon becomes a parallel to Chesnutt's McBane, a character who uses violence in the name of white womanhood to solidify his social status, and cement "racial power" to no avail. In each instance, however, the status quo is maintained, revealing the entrenchment of social order dependent on chivalry.

Nordan's reimagining of Carolyn Bryant as an aristocratic white woman also works to reveal how the mythology of chivalry surrounding white womanhood not only relies on the protection of white womanhood to justify racial violence, but also depends on white women to follow the prescription of sexual purity in order to perpetuate white patriarchal control. Nordan reveals how female resistance to chastity, purity and protection can disrupt the entire system. He

does this not only by imaging Carolyn Bryant as an aristocrat, but as a sexually free, "immodest" and progressive women: in essence the exact opposite of the "ideal Southern woman." In the novel, Lady Montberclair is suspected of having an affair, dresses "immodestly" and breaks social etiquette by openly purchasing tampons. The result, as Harriet Pollack points out, is that the white men in the novel have no idea how to treat her (Grotesque 2008, 180). The Lady refuses protection, even going as far as letting Bobo get into her car, and so she is unconfined by the restrictive boundaries prescribed by chivalry. This threat to patriarchy, unfortunately, leads directly to Bobo's murder, so the intertwining of the discourses becomes clear. Solon and Lord Montberclair are enraged that a white woman would dare to interact with a black man, but they are also, as Pollack notes, tremendously insecure in the face of a free woman. Thus, the murder of Bobo is again depicted as an attempt to maintain control of a system through the intertwined mythical binaries of white female purity and intimidating black sexuality. Despite the character's, and a society's, justifications, then, Bobo's death has very little to do with protecting white womanhood, and more to do with attempt to maintain a system dependent on the oppression of African-Americans and women alike.

Brook's and Nordan's appraisals of the Emmett Till's murder are two stirring examples of authorial attempts to demystify and subvert racial violence that relies on the mythological system of Chivalry for justification. In the process, these authors employ tactics, such as the re-imagination of historical events and the use of allegory, that reveal the power of fiction to expose the truth behind seemingly naturalized sociological phenomena. This demystification is an important representational move for explaining how mythology works, and for attempting to enact social change through fiction. If mythology, which also depends on imagery, allegory and imagination to persist, is used to justify racial violence, than creating new mythologies, as

Brooks and Nordan have done, seems to be an effective way to override romantic perceptions of oppression. Yet, depressingly, we see that Nordan and Brooks battle the same mythology that Chesnutt challenged at the turn of the 20th century. This illuminates just how deeply entrenched, despite constant attempts to eradicate the idea, Southern chivalry actually is. These works however, represent a path to changing the way we think about race in America.

Conclusion.

Far from Complete: Where We Can Go From Here

This study of southern culture from the antebellum South to the Jim Crow South helps locate the myth of chivalry as a primary myth system utilized to perpetuate racial oppression. It also reveals the disingenuous role of the mythical protection of the white female in racial violence. And the study of historical fiction inspired by acts of racial violence supports these conclusions, while also revealing tactics employed by authors to attack myth. More broadly, my thesis also reveals the role of fiction in both making and subverting mythology. Through the course of investigating this issue, I discovered that my theoretical approach changed slightly. While I initially considered employing Marxist and psycho-analytical literary criticism to Chesnutt's, Brook's, and Nordan's texts, the scholarship that I found along the way guided me towards cultural studies, new historicism, gender studies, and precise regional history and theory that applies to the South. While I feel I have made my points cogently, this study is only a starting point, and along the way I found as many new and interesting questions as I found answers.

This thesis follows up on a scholarly tradition, from Rolin Osterweiss to Roland Barthes and beyond, that asks questions about mythology, the American South, racial inequality, chivalry

and literature. My study also seems particularly relevant considering the increasing prevalence of recent literature that focuses on Chesnutt, Brooks, Nordan Till and the myth of chivalry in Southern fiction. I am thinking especially of Harriet Pollack's 2008 *Emmett Till in the Literary Imagination*, Matthew Wilson's 2004 *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt*, and Tison Pugh's 2013 *Queer Chivalry* (released mid-way through the completion of this project). These works, among others, have guided me in my exploration of Southern literature, and will continue to guide me as I explore these questions through my academic journey.

So, where can I, and other scholarship go from here? From a cultural standpoint, some interesting questions arise. For instance, while Sir Walter Scott was more popular in the American South than the North, his novels were still widely disseminated in the antebellum North. So how did the myth of chivalry affect the North? I explored why the South was particularly receptive to Scott's romantic medieval notions, but it may be interesting to explore why the North resisted this ideology, or perhaps more appropriately, where and how the myth of chivalry metastasized in the North. Some very interesting criticism, such as Andrew Leiter's *In the Shadow of the Black Beast*, explore the racial binary in the North, and some general approaches from this thesis may help build on theories about northern racial hierarchy. In general, because of the distinct cultural differences between the North and South, an exploration of myth and racial oppression that considers these differences from a strictly geographical standpoint may also prove revelatory. Hopefully, this study has provided me with a starting point to explore these questions, and will provide insights for others who are interesting in pursuing these questions.

From a literary standpoint, there is also still much to be explored. While the authors that I chose here are a cross-section of writers who explored the idea of southern chivalry, many other

authors could continue to be studied with this idea in mind. In the aforementioned *Queer Chivalry*, for instance, Pugh looks at authors, ranging from Faulkner to John Kennedy Toole, that subvert southern chivalric presentations of masculinity. With this in mind, further study could analyze Ralph Ellison's, Richard Wright's, Percival Everett's (amongst many others') subversion of the mythology surrounding racial violence and the role of the white woman. Also, this study could prove helpful in continued exploration of the intersection between all myth and literature. Historical fiction is not the only type of literary text that seeks to subvert myth, and so I hope the exploration of myth and literature in this study can provide the framework for continued probing of the interaction between ideology and fiction.

From a theoretical standpoint, further inquisition into the myth of chivalry and these particular works could benefit from a broader theoretical approach— one that time and space requirements prevented me from interrogating here. For instance, my claim is that the white woman's ideological role was deployed by the southern white patriarchy to perpetuate the social and economic status quo of the South, yet there are some areas where this analysis could be delved into more deeply. Applying theories from gender studies, psycho-sexual approaches, and even strictly Marxist readings of history and literature could be applied to these texts in order to further explore the ideas presented. Also, outside of the study of the American South, I think my exploration of mythology has drawn some useful conclusions about fictional techniques for both perpetuating and destabilizing mythology, and I hope that these conclusions can provide the groundwork for an exploration of this phenomenon in all literature, past and present. I hope to continue to explore these theoretical approaches as I continue my academic career, and I hope that anyone who comes across this thesis is similarly inspired by my modest attempt to

understand race, violence, myth, culture and literature, and can use some of my conclusions in his or her research.

In summation, this study draws several conclusions about Southern literature, chivalry, myth, gender and race. Mainly, I cannot help but conclude that racial violence in the South, so often justified by the protection of white womanhood, is actually often inspired by political, economic and social insecurity. In this way, the cult of chivalry's distinct ideology served the white patriarchy as a useful veil for continued social ordering. And, I must conclude that as persistent as this myth system was, and still remains, many authors have chipped away at the foundations of this myth, destabilizing it so that future generations of citizens and authors can completely topple it. The key, it seems, is to understand how these processes work— in essence demystifying mythology— so that we can approach difficult questions about race and gender with an open mind and equally open eyes.

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