Integration and Education: The Search for Identity Post-Civil War

Lis Sodl

ABSTRACT

Prior to the Civil War, American identity was grounded in community, hard work, and a connection to the land. One woke up, did what one had to do, and kissed one's family before bed. Within literature, life was simple and idealistic—full of romanticization of the land and of its people. Following the Civil War, everything began to change. Between mass industrialization and urbanization, to an increase in immigration and the assimilation of former slaves into society, the world was different, and the definition of what it meant to be an American had to adjust. Through an examination of the literature of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, such as Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Rodman the Keeper" and W.E.B. DuBois's rhetorical *The Souls of Black Folk*, the definition of American identity shifted to represent New England perspectives on traumatized Southern lands as well as proposed solutions to post-emancipation integration. Writers of fiction and non-fiction alike examined the ways in which the trauma of the Civil War and slavery impacted national identity, often in problematic ways that erased disadvantaged or traumatized perspectives in favor of elitist, privileged views.

NORTH VERSUS SOUTH

The Civil War prompted massive industrial shifts within the United States that led to urbanization, evolving labor laws and unions, and railway monopolies; furthermore, the trauma from such a bloody event also led to shifts in perspectives. What is often referred to as the Lost Cause principle reflects growing romanticization of the trauma of the South and its lands, particularly focused on salvation through Northern involvement, and has appeared in literature across the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Within this principle lies the following tropic elements: the glorification of the white New England man (likely through his own perspective) and education as salvation for the South.

A NEW ENGLAND EDUCATION

Constance Fenimore Woolson's "Rodman the Keeper"[1] will serve as the first example. This text focuses on a Union Army veteran who is the caretaker of a Confederate cemetery, and the struggle of existing in a liminal space neither romanticized nor remembered. Woolson writes, "This was not patriotism so-called, or rather miscalled, it was not sentimental fancy, it was not zeal or triumph; it was simply a sense of the fitness of things, a conscientiousness which had in it nothing of religion, unless indeed a man's endeavor to live up to his own ideal of his duty be a religion."[2] John Rodman not only acts as caretaker for the cemetery, but he acts also as a reminder to the world around him that war has consequences. He himself remains in charge of the legacy of the war, which reflects the concept of the New England man—wherein the correct version of Southern history lies within the perspective of a Northerner with little regard for the trauma the land and its people experienced. Rodman quite literally takes care of the history of his conquered Southern home and how it is remembered.

In his time down South, he becomes caretaker to a Confederate veteran just off the property, left impoverished and wounded by the war. They bicker and fight until they come to understand one another as the same: discarded from an event they had both believed in, left to survive in a world that no longer has color. When the Confederate veteran, De Rosset, passes away, Rodman finds himself in a conversation with Miss Ward, De Rosset's relative. They discuss contrasting views on grief and transition, but inevitably come to agreement about the only hope of the South—

1. Constance Fenimore Woolson, "Rodman the Keeper," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym, Wayne Franklin, and Robern Levin (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017), 374-393.

2. Woolson, "Rodman the Keeper," 376.

education.[3] Rodman's belief mirrors Union sympathies at the time in that only through education can the South truly recover from the trauma caused by the Civil War; despite coming from a rather affluent Southern background, Miss Ward agrees with Rodman's sympathies. At this point, it is unclear whether Miss Ward is so much a character as she is the embodiment of the land itself, breezing in and out of the consciousness of a New England man, a character who romanticizes the ideal of a war-torn South and uses its vulnerability to push his own agenda. She in turn represents the Lost Cause principle. She herself is romanticized by Rodman (and Woolson) as a symbol of Southern lands. However, Rodman and Miss Ward exemplify sentiments of not just the South at the time, but also of life in general. With the close of the war, the South was left with questions of rebuilding and whether education could adequately fix what Northern perspectives thought to be unacceptable. Through Rodman, Woolson argues for remembrance of history and heritage of the South, particularly through Northern perspectives, as an integral part of American identity. What is lacking, as we will continue to see through authors throughout this review, is a consideration of Southern perspectives, particularly through the lens of former slaves.

Henry Adams published *Democracy* in 1880 as a critique of the American political system and its relation to corruption and morality. Education and the concept of knowing are integral to the text. It is the main motivation behind Madeleine Lee (Adam's protagonist) and her travels from New York City to Washington D.C. However, Adams places higher educational value on Carrington, a Confederate veteran turned Virginian lawyer who plays the role of tutor to Lee. Adams, a Bostonian, allows himself to glance through the point of view of a Southerner in a section directly referencing his role in the Civil War:

> "The Lees were old family friends of mine," said he. "I used to stay here when I was a boy, even as late as the spring of 1861. The last time I sat here, it was with them. We were wild about disunion and talked of nothing else. I have been trying to recall what was said then. We never thought there would be war, and as for coercion, it was nonsense. Coercion, indeed! The idea was ridiculous. I thought so, too, though I was a Union man and did not want the State to go out. But though I felt sure that Virginia must suffer, I never thought we could be beaten. Yet now I am sitting here a pardoned rebel, and the poor Lees are driven away and their place is a grave-yard."[4]

3. Ibid., 393.

4. Henry Adams, "Democracy," in *Democracy, Esther, Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, The Education of Henry Adams* (2020), 54.

How interesting it is that we have a Confederate veteran who would have been a Union man in any other universe, seated on reclaimed Southern land, talking to a daughter of Union loyalists. His only certainty is that the land itself would be more a victim than the actual fatalities, whilst still maintaining sympathy for the Lees (distinct from the New York Lees of Adams's fiction; referencing the immediate families of General Robert E. Lee). This sympathy, however, comes off in an elitist tone. Through Carrington, Adams simplifies Southern land into that of a graveyard, a place wherein only Northern industry can rebuild. Only through his own education to become a lawyer does Carrington make it out of post-Civil War poverty and support his family.[5] The Southerner with Northern sympathies (a pseudo-New England man) finds his salvation through Northern knowledge and business, but even that cannot repair the damage done to the land itself. He has used his education to pull himself out of his previous standing and become a coveted companion in D.C. politics, thus reflecting the ascent of Northern carpetbaggers in their dominance of Southern industry post-Civil War.

In the latter portion of his life, Adams penned his autobiography in the third person as an analysis of the importance (and unattainability) of education in one's life. Here, he reveals that, during his time at Harvard, he befriended Roony Lee, a Virginian relative of the Confederate Lees and describes his character:

> The habit of command was not enough, and the Virginian had little else. He was simple beyond analysis; so simple that even the simple New England student could not realize him. No one knew enough to know how ignorant he was; how childlike; how helpless before the relative complexity of a school. As an animal, the Southerner seemed to have every advantage, but even as an animal he steadily lost ground. […] Strictly, the Southerner had no mind; he had temperament. He was not a scholar; he had no intellectual training; he could not analyze an idea, and he could not even conceive of admitting two; but in life one could get along very well without ideas, if one had only the social instinct.[6]

Here, Adams places himself among the educated elite, a class within which Southerners like Lee have little chance of ever being accepted. He debases Southerners to animals and, though Woolson does so with a tad more grace, begins to claim that, though Southerners can live without education, they would be the

5. Adams, "Democracy," 11.

6. Henry Adams, "The Education of Henry Adams," in *Democracy, Esther, Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, The Education of Henry Adams* (2020), 381.

better for having attained it. This directly reflects Carrington's educational evolution in *Democracy*; respect for the character grows through this confession on Confederate soil just as respect for Roony Lee grows through his (failed) attempts at gaining an education.

These elitist attitudes of the New England Man regarding education in the South became a thoroughly explored trope in literature following the 1860s. In a satirical allegory to the post-Civil War South, Mark Twain sends his Hartford-born main character to the Middle Ages to patronizingly suggest education as salvation in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. When faced with the people of King Arthur's court, he resorts to an elitist point of view: "There were people, too; brawny men, with long, coarse, uncombed hair that hung down over their faces and made them look like animals."[7] The commoners of the fictional sixth century are less than human to the narrator, who continues to describe naked children oblivious to being exposed and the crippling need for all of these creatures to be educated.[8] Though the message boils down to the a similar view on education as Woolson, Twain's language borders on pseudo-racist. This elitist language reflects perceived Northern sympathies of the time, focused on how to take advantage of the trauma of a Civil War scorched South to their own benefit. In his observations of the new world he finds himself in, he searches for what will benefit him and lead to not just his survival, but also a life of affluence. He suggests that equality can be gained only through education, but only the education that he deems useful, which gets in the way of any genuine attempt to educate the people. Twain's narrator, an educated New England man, suggests the belief of inferiority of the Southern class through his characterization, much like Adams in his autobiography. He even goes so far as to refer to the commoners as "white Indians," which is to say, "their philosophical bearing is not an outcome of mental training, intellectual fortitude, reasoning."[9] Twain's character has little respect for these people by whom he finds himself surrounded. They are small, uneducated, and valued only for the ways in which they can be useful to his pursuit of power and control over his situation.

Through an examination of the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elitist New England sympathies (fictionalized for your viewing) triumph over Southern survivors unless, in Carrington's case, they are willing to assimilate. This concept of assimilation continues throughout the early twentieth

7. Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (New York, NY: Signet Classics of the New American Library, 2004), 14.

8. Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 21, 29.

9. Ibid., 20.

century, especially among prominent black philosophers and activists of the time. As we continue into the discussion of authors of color, keep in mind the ideals of the New England man and education as salvation, as they oftentimes have racial connotations reflective of contemporary struggles of integration post-Civil War.

CARPET-BAGGERS AND THE FREEDMEN

Up until this point, we have explored primarily white authors and their perspectives on a post-Civil War American identity. As we consider emancipation and the perspectives of people of color, it would be inappropriate not to explore pieces written by prominent black authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this section, I aim to explore the ways in which these writers have analyzed the integration of the black population into larger society following emancipation, particularly within the South. Whilst contrasting, Chesnutt, DuBois, and Washington provide an in-depth glance at the troubles faced by African Americans of the time as well as solutions proposed to create a more integrated multi-racial society.

In his compilation of social critique, *The Souls of Black Folk*, written for white audiences, DuBois illustrates post-war society for African Americans. He references the Freedman's Bureau through its rise and fall, as well as explains the socio-economic assistance in place for former slaves; his main argument in this first chapter is the achievement of equality and success through education. This is a cornerstone that he comes back to later in his essay "The Talented Tenth," where he argues that the top ten percent of educated, successful black society should aim to continue to "guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the [w]orst, in their own and other races."[10] Despite making a direct call to action among black society, the audience of "The Talented Tenth," akin to *The Souls of Black Folk*, is still white society. Across his texts, DuBois holds true to the argument that equality can only be achieved through education and employment thereafter.[11] However, the language in this text comes off as elitist, suggesting that DuBois does not acknowledge his own identity as a Northeastern African American. He has seen the benefit of education firsthand, sure, but this does not fully erase the privilege of being a New England Man himself nor his intended white audiences of both texts. This comes off as rather patronizing, making claims to white society that the elite top ten percent of black society—a demographic he considers himself to be a part of—is responsible for pulling the rest of the

10. Dan S. Green. "W.E.B. Du Bois' Talented Tenth: A Strategy for Racial Advancement," *The Journal of Negro Education* 46, no. 3 (1977): 359. https://doi.org/10.2307/2966779.

11. Green, "W.E.B. DuBois' Talented Tenth: A Strategy for Racial Advancement," 360.

community up by their bootstraps. To posit these solutions to integration to largely white audiences suggests a distance to the community he both identifies with and wishes to serve.

As DuBois continues in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he walks audiences through the history of the Freedman's Bureau. Through the explanation of the Bureau's attempts at setting black society up for success, he presents the arguments against free public education for his people:

> The opposition to Negro education in the South was at first bitter, and showed itself in ashes, insult, and blood; for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent. Nevertheless, men strive to know.[12]

He empathizes with Southern whites on the account of education being a danger (though a necessary danger indeed), but he continues to argue for its implementation. Through the achievement of education, black society stands to finally reclaim the equality extended to them in emancipation. Without it, how could America ever hope to fulfil its promise of equality for all?

To DuBois, the efforts of the Freedman's Bureau, which arose from Puritan and Christian desires of helping others, meant nothing because efforts toward education were not prioritized. The money given to freed slaves was lost when the banks went under,[13] the land parceled out was retaken by white businesses (as deeds were not recognized in the South),[14] and suffrage was discriminatory; with all these losses, DuBois argues for an increase in education so that his people could claim the basic rights promised to them at the close of the war. Without it, there can be no advancement. Education thus remains integral in his solution to what he terms the Negro Problem: the question of what to do with the black population (especially in the South) post-emancipation.

In the second essay compiled in *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois outlines and critiques Booker T. Washington's views on the path to success for black society. In his discussion of the "Atlanta Compromise," DuBois claims that Washington aimed for "ultimate assimilation through self-assertion, and on no other terms."[15] Washington felt as though black salvation lay in the hands of economics and monetary gain, forfeiting

12. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2020), 15.
13. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 17.
14. Ibid., 11-12, 17.
15. Ibid., 21.

(to DuBois's chagrin) basic suffrage, civil rights, and higher education.[16] Washington thus argues, in his proposition for economic success, black society ought to strive toward learning or continuing in an already known trade such as farming or culinary arts. He preferred these trades over more academic pursuits such as economics or academia. Whereas DuBois posits that, without a basic education, former slaves who have known nothing else but lives of manual labor and grief will not be able to integrate fully into a predominantly white society, especially as it continues to industrialize.[17] The surrender of basic education, political power, and civil rights would be detrimental and continue to box black society into an otherness similar to which they had just been freed.

Similarly, we have the question of how to "Americanize" former slaves, portrayed in Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Wife of His Youth."[18] The main character of this story is a black man who embodies traits largely associated with elite white culture. Mr. Ryder is a member of an exclusive society called the Blue Veins, has a passion for poetry, and large romantic notions about how to propose to a girl much younger (and lighter) than himself. Though the Blue Veins was a "little society of colored persons organized in a certain Northern city shortly after the war,"[19] its exclusivity and gatherings represent idealized upper class white society gatherings, a direct implementation by Chesnutt no doubt. Mr. Ryder is a black man in a white man's world, emulating elite white culture and thus internalizing racism through the promotion of colorism. Now, this brings up debate on the definition of black culture much too large for this space—but Chesnutt's characterization portrays the proposed assimilation of his piece "The Future American," in which he argues the only true integration of black people into society post-Civil War is through desegregation and intermarriage.[20] To be American is to confine to American standards, set not by the indigenous or former slaves, but by white society. This is exemplified by Mr. Ryder, who has tried his whole life to erase his own past as a black man and assimilate into white society.

While it is largely problematic to assert that black society cannot achieve

16. Ibid., 22.

17. Ibid., 15.

18. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym, Wayne Franklin, and Robert S. Lavine (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017), 740-8.

19. Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," 740.

20. Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Future American," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym, Wayne Franklin, and Robert S. Lavine (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2017), 1176.

its promised equality without fully assimilating into predominantly white society and embodying its traits, throwing away all references to their own cultural identity, Chesnutt argues for full assimilation by any means. In a thorough analysis of Chesnutt's "The Future American," Elder writes:

> Chesnutt's vision of a time when, through intermarriage, racial differences will fade and ultimately disappear, creating his 'new American,' strikes at much more than the commonly accepted segregationist policies of his day. Of profounder significance, he is heralding the erasure of the marker of color, the semiotic of skin, historically distinguishing between the civilized and uncivilized, the godly and unregenerate.[21]

Chesnutt's solution to the problem of post-Civil War integration is to remove boundaries society has placed around race. He illustrates this blending with his introduction of Mr. Ryder's wife from his years as a slave, who he claims as his own at the end of the piece.[22] To be American is to forfeit individual racial and cultural identity for the sake of equality.

In his short story "The Goophered Grapevine," Chesnutt explores not only Northern and Southern interactions, but he also introduces race relations both during and post-slavery. Through the storytelling of Uncle Julius, a former slave in South Carolina, to the narrator John and his wife, a Northern white couple, Chesnutt introduces audiences to the realities of a life after slavery. Uncle Julius resides on the property of his former plantation owner, reaping the benefits of a neglected vineyard, when John arrives with the cash and determination to turn Southern soil into Northern industry.[23] Julius proceeds to tell John and his wife of a curse he believes was placed on the vineyard to keep slaves from stealing grapes from Mr. McAdoo,[24] which he frames as a warning to John to not purchase the land. John, of course, does not heed the former slave's warning, nor does he believe in his story. He states, "I bought the vineyard, nevertheless, and it has been for a long time in a thriving condition, and is often referred to by the local press as a striking illustration of the opportunities open to Northern capital in the development of Southern industries."[25] Readers learn within

21. Arlene A. Elder, "'The Future American Race': Charles W. Chesnutt Utopian Illusion," MELUS 15, no. 3 (1988): 121-29, https://doi.org/10.2307/467507.

22. Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," 748.

23. Charles Waddel Chesnutt and University of Virginia, *The Goophered Grapevine*, (Charlottesville, VA: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 1996), 254, https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2010588&site=eds-live&scope=site.

24. Chesnutt and University of Virginia, *The Goophered Grapevine*, 255.

25. Ibid., 260.

the last few lines that, through John's point of view, Uncle Julius's story had served no purpose other than potentially to allow Julius to keep the land and the grapes for himself.[26]

John represents the carpet-baggers, or Northern pioneers who saw conquered Southern land as their own piece of Manifest Destiny. He purposely moves his life to South Carolina to take up a formerly Southern industry, which happens to displace Uncle Julius as the land's caretaker (though he assures readers he kept Uncle Julius employed after the land purchase). Not only does this reinforce the ideas presented in DuBois's analysis of the successes and failures of the Freedman's Bureau, but "The Goophered Grapevine" also places John as a New England man, discussed earlier in this study. Julius does not receive profit from the sale, nor does he seem to be considered as the former owner—which happened more often than not to former slaves who were given parceled land by the government, inevitably forcing them into sharecropping or other means of indentured servitude. The assurance of keeping Uncle Julius employed falls short when readers are informed that he has become John's driver, a position wherein he lacks the autonomy he once had while caretaker of the neglected vineyards. While not in a clearly defined position of servitude, he lives at the beck and call of John and his wife rather than his own ambitions, unfortunately throwing him back into a subservient position rather than a land-owning citizen in control of his own destiny.

Through the struggle of reconstructing American identity in the South after the Civil War, prominent black philosophers and activists of the time proposed contrasting solutions to integration. While each proposal had its pros, they were not without cons. DuBois's insistence on education mirrored the New England man sympathies, wherein Northerners were to provide the pathway to successful integration. Even with the best of intentions, he refuses to acknowledge his own privileges as a successful, Northern black American and reiterates elitist language. Washington boxes in black Americans, insisting that they rise to success through economic means within their control (and skillset), without consideration of the impact of Jim Crow and the failures of the Freedman's Bureau. Though compensation was now provided for the services of black Americans, in it there was little to no profit, thus trapping them in an endless cycle of debt through sharecropping. Finally, Chesnutt suggests for assimilation at all costs and inevitably lends voice to the concept of colorism, wherein the lighter your skin, the more valued you are. His successful characters are those who either are white or embody the traits of white society, whilst

26. Ibid.

boxing black characters into roles of tricksters (Uncle Julius) or representations of the past ("The Wife of His Youth").

SYNTHESIS

Reconstruction brought about the question of how to redefine American identity post-Civil War, especially in the South where former slaves adjusted to emancipation. In an examination of literature of the time, three overlapping tropes develop: the New England Man, education as salvation, and integration through assimilation. In "Rodman the Keeper," Constance Fenimore Woolson paints a portrait of the post-Civil War South, wherein a Union veteran is left in charge of a Confederate cemetery. Rodman, a New England Man, reflects contemporary sympathies of Northerners maintaining agency and control over the legacy of Southern land and history. This concept returns in Henry Adams's *Democracy*. Carrington's identity as an educated Southern-born Union man mirrors carpetbaggers, who arrived on traumatized Southern lands with the inception of northern industry.

Adams himself represents a New England Man, as evidenced by the characterization of Southern Harvard classmates in his autobiography, as does Twain's narrator in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Unlike Adams, however, Twain's narrator does not acknowledge his privilege or elitism. Both texts utilize elitist language, but Twain's narrator takes this to another level by employing racist tactics such as reducing the people of Camelot (symbols for Southerners post-Civil War as well as freed slaves) to animals and valuing only their utility to his own needs. What is interesting with Twain, however, is the appearance of education as salvation within this text. While this concept is seen through Woolson and others, Twain satirizes the notion; the narrator claims this need but has no intention to help educate nor provide any suggestions regarding how to do it. Instead, he leverages his own education in order to dominate the society.

Domination of Southern territory by northern industry also appears in Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine." Uncle Julius cares for the neglected vineyard before John purchases the land and usurps his responsibilities. Side-by-side with Woolson and Adams, however, Chesnutt's exemplification goes a step further by illustrating Southern racial relations post-emancipation. Uncle Julius's demotion to chauffeur for John and his wife exemplify the general loss of autonomy and indentured servitude for African Americans during Reconstruction. This is a concept that DuBois also acknowledges in *The Souls of Black Folk*, written for white audiences about the struggle of post-emancipation integration. He highlights the failures of the Freedman's Bureau to help former slaves integrate into American society through the

history of northern dominance of Southern capital—to the eventual detriment of both regions.

However, DuBois posits that the failure of the Freedman's Bureau and carpetbaggers' attempts at providing salvation and support for the black community can be tied back to the failure to provide accessible education. He argues against Booker T. Washington's belief in the superiority of trade school education, claiming that more academic pursuits have higher likelihoods of benefiting the entire black community. Though both arguments have merits of their own, DuBois takes this a step further by proposing that the top ten percent of successful black men should give back to their community both financially and through education. This presents a hierarchy within his own idea, suggesting the emergence of an elite class but doing so to white audiences.

Oddly enough, a similar structure appears through the Blue Veins in Chesnutt's fiction of "The Wife of His Youth." This text reflects Chesnutt's own belief in full assimilation, which brings with it the idea of colorism. Though DuBois does not overtly support assimilation in his texts, the suggestion of an elite class of educated, successful black society mirrors the Blue Veins, led by Mr. Ryder who embodies traits the text connotates with white society instead. Chesnutt and DuBois side-by-side create an interesting juxtaposition wherein concepts of classism solve the question of integration with little regard for the hierarchical society it will create.

American identity is concerned with newfound realizations of classism and the recreation of hierarchies as seen through the New England Man, tense race relations within post-emancipation integration, and the importance of education in the reconstruction of war-scorched Southern lands. As we continue toward the present, these three themes evolve alongside literary movements and historical contexts. New wars bring about new definitions, going so far as to further emphasize the division of developing American ideals, the emergence of women's suffrage, and civil rights. Following these traumatic events, literature continues to assert definitions of identity to reconcile opposing forces—whether they be physical nations as with both World Wars or socioeconomic factors as with post-emancipation integration. Only a thorough examination of the Modern, Post-modern, and beyond can fully recognize the impact these battles and desires for identity and reconciliation have on society itself.

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