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The "Tragic Octoroon" In Pre-Civil War Fiction

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERS OF PRE-CIVIL WAR ABOLITIONIST fiction was the "tragic octoroon." Presented first in the earliest antislavery novel, *The Slave* (1836), the character appeared in more than a dozen other works.¹ By the time the most important of these works—*Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Octoroon*—were written, the character had acquired certain stereotypic qualities and had come to appear in certain stereotypic situations.

Briefly summarized, the "tragic octoroon" is a beautiful young girl who possesses only the slightest evidences of Negro blood, who speaks with no trace of dialect, who was raised and educated as a white child and as a lady in the household of her father, and who on her paternal side is descended from "some of the best blood in the 'Old Dominion.'" In her sensibility and her vulnerability she resembles, of course, the conventional ingenue "victim" of sentimental romance. Her condition is radically changed when, at her father's unexpected death, it is revealed that he has failed to free her properly. She discovers that she is a slave; her person is attached as property by her father's creditors. Sold into slavery, she is victimized, usually by a lower-class, dialect-speaking slave dealer or overseer—often, especially after the Fugitive Slave Act, a Yankee—who attempts to violate her; she is loved by a high-born young Northerner

¹ Among the most readily available of these works are R. Hildreth, *The Slave* (1836); J. H. Ingraham, *Quadroone* (1840); H. W. Longfellow, *The Quadroon Girl* (1842); Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth, *Retribution* (1840); E.C. Pierson, *Cousin Franck's Household* (1842); H. B. Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852); W. W. Brown, *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853); Mary Langdon, *Ida May* (1855); W. W. Smith, *The Planter's Victim* (1855); J. T. Trowbridge, *Neighbor Jackwood* (1856); H. B. Stowe, *Dred, A Tale of the Dismal Swamp* (1856); Mayne Reid, *The Quadroon* (1856); J. S. Peacocke, *The Creole Orphans* (1856); V. B. Denslow, *Owned and Disowned* (1857); D. Boucicault, *The Octoroon* (1859); H. S. Hosmer, *Adela the Octoroon* (1860); M. V. Victor, *Maum Guinea's Children* (1861).

or European who wishes to marry her. Occasionally she escapes with her lover; more often, she dies a suicide, or dies of shame, or dies protecting her young gentleman.

Although the melodramatic and titillating aspects of this plot are evident, it is specifically the implied or articulated criticism of the institution of slavery that makes the "tragic octoroon" situation so interesting. The octoroon, by her beauty, by her gentility and by her particular vulnerability to sexual outrage, offered to pre-Civil War Northern audiences, accustomed to idealized and sentimentalized heroines, a perfect object for tearful sympathy combined with moral indignation.

To twentieth-century literary historians, the attack on slavery directed by the creators of the "tragic octoroon" appears thin, unrealistic and irrelevant. Modern critics point out that the octoroon situation, while possible, was hardly general and that, while enforced concubinage was a Southern reality, it was hardly the paramount evil of slavery. Further, the tendency of antislavery authors to see the plight of the slave in terms of the octoroon rather than in terms of the full-blooded black has been seen as an indication of racial prejudice.

Bone, for example, writes, "Such novels . . . contain mulatto characters for whom the reader's sympathies are aroused less because they are colored than because they are nearly white." Gloster describes the anti-slavery writers as "sympathetic toward the Negro-white hybrid because of his possession of Caucasian blood, which they often consider a factor that automatically made this character the superior of the darker Negro and therefore a more pitiable individual." Sterling Brown describes the octoroon as "a concession, unconscious perhaps, to race snobbishness even among abolitionists."²

Certainly, the strategy of the octoroon plot was to win sympathy for the antislavery cause by displaying a cultivated, "white" sensibility threatened by, and responding to, a "black" situation. It was the octoroon's "white" characteristics which made her pathetic to the white audience—and, consequently, the writers of "tragic octoroon" stories have generally been accused of making their attack not on the institution of Negro slavery, but only on certain particular and incidental injustices arising from the institution of slavery.

Southern apologists have interpreted the "tragic octoroon" figure as corroborating their own theories of white superiority, insisting that only slaves of mixed blood were ever unhappy and that the unhappiness of these was due solely to their white blood. Even such an indefatigable

² Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven, 1958), pp. 22-23; Hugh M. Gloster, *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1948), pp. 12, 17; Sterling Brown, *The Negro in American Fiction* (Washington, D. C., 1937), p. 45.

romanticizer of slavery as Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth was able to present the pathos of the "tragic octoroon" in Henny of *Retribution*. The tactic of the Southern apologists has been to concede the possibility of the octoroon situation, but to dismiss the octoroon figure, whether female and tragic or male and heroic, as being unrepresentative of "the happy-go-lucky, ignorant, coon-hunting, fun-loving field hand who, more than any other class of slave, typified the great mass of black men throughout the South."³

The tendency of modern pro-Negro commentators has been to judge the writers of "tragic octoroon" stories on the grounds of the validity or comprehensiveness of the picture they painted of the Negro in slavery; on these grounds, naturally, the octoroon plot has been found wanting. This judgment, though a just one as far as it goes, has had one unfortunate result: the effectiveness of the conventional octoroon as part of the antislavery arsenal has been belittled. In reaction to the Southern reading of the "tragic octoroon" as a corroboration of Southern race theories, Northern critics have dismissed her and have accused her creators of being racist snobs. It is interesting that when Sterling Brown, a Negro critic, attacks the tragic octoroon as evidence of racial snobbery, he writes: "As one critic says: 'This was an indirect admission that a white man in chains was more pitiful to behold than the African similarly placed. Their most impassioned plea was in behalf of a person little resembling their swarthy proteges. . . .'"⁴ The "one critic" he is quoting is J. H. Nelson, an extreme Southern apologist, and the quotation comes from the same book as does the "fun-loving, coon-hunting" passage quoted above.

The charge—that the abolitionist author's motive amounts to no more than a concession to racism—fails to take into account the overriding and avowed purpose of the abolitionist author, the propagandistic intention. What is particularly interesting about the "tragic octoroon" plot is that it revealed the point at which the imagination and sympathy of the pre-Civil War Northern public could be won for the antislavery cause; this is precisely what has been obscured by the oversimplified and unfair view that the octoroon's appeal was based purely upon racial hypocrisy in author and audience.

Specifically, it should be recognized that the appeal of the "tragic octoroon" situation was not based primarily upon a racially snobbish feeling that a white person in chains was more pathetic than a black one. Rather, the plight of the octoroon evoked a number of widely differing, though related, responses from Northern audiences.

³ J. H. Nelson, *The Negro Character in American Fiction* (Lawrence, Kans., 1926), pp. 83-84.

⁴ Brown, p. 45.

First, the "tragic octoroon" situation flattered the Northern audience in its sense of self-righteousness, confirming its belief in the moral inferiority of the South. The octoroon, to the North, represented not merely the product of the incidental sin of the individual sinner, but rather what might be called the result of cumulative institutional sin, since the octoroon was the product of four generations of illicit, enforced miscegenation made possible by the slavery system. The very existence of the octoroon convicted the slaveholder of prostituting his slaves and of selling his own children for profit. Thus, the choice of the octoroon rather than of the full-blooded black to dramatize the suffering of the slave not only emphasized the pathos of the slave's condition but, more importantly, emphasized the repeated pattern of guilt of the Southern slaveholder. The whiter the slave, the more undeniably was the slaveholder guilty of violating the terms of the stewardship which apologists postulated in justifying slavery. The octoroon became the visible sign of an incremental sin, the roots of which could be seen by Northern audiences as particularly and pervasively Southern. If the "tragic octoroon" plot passed lightly over the suffering of the black field hand, it nevertheless made up for this deficiency by the intensity of its condemnation of his white master. Seen in this light, it might be said that the pre-Civil War popularity of the "tragic octoroon" foreshadowed the North's post-Civil War eagerness to punish the former slaveholder and its relative reluctance to help the former slave.

The accusations against the Southern slaveholder implicit in the plot of the "tragic octoroon" were of major significance in the propaganda war carried on between abolitionist and proslavery writers. Proslavery writers, finding the Yankee assumption of moral superiority unbearable, replied to abolitionist pictures of the horrors of life in the field hands' quarters with pictures of the horrors of life in Northern mill towns. While such "you're another!" arguments are hardly acceptable as defenses of slavery on the rational level, they might have been a more valuable counter-propaganda device if it were not for the availability to the abolitionists of the purely Southern "tragic octoroon" situation.

Certainly, one of the strong motives to which the abolitionists appealed in their attempt to win converts was the motive of self-righteousness. In the octoroon, the antislavery propagandists had an appeal to this Northern sense of superior morality that could not so easily be met by an admonition to "put thine own house in order." While little children up in the Northern cotton mills might slave themselves into pathetically early graves, the Northern mill owner never sold his own daughters into a life of shame, as was clearly the custom down in the Southern cotton fields. The charge of sexual looseness was a serious one in that period; not only

in fiction, but in their pamphlets and exhortations, the abolitionists brought that charge again and again—and every light-skinned slave was tangible evidence for the prosecution. Wendell Phillips, for example, called the South "One great brothel, where half a million women are flogged to prostitution," and George Bourne spoke of the South as a "vast harem where men-stealers may prowl, corrupt, and destroy."

Another particular appeal, apart from the moral, made by the "tragic octoroon" results from the way in which the octoroon situation imaginatively involves the audience in the tragedy of the heroine. Central to the stereotyped plot is the element of reversal whereby the heroine is suddenly reduced, by a legalism, against all evidence of the senses, from aristocratic, pampered white heiress to Negro slave—from riches to worse than rags. This, of course, is the stuff of nightmare, but a nightmare with particular significance for the nineteenth-century American whose own family history might very likely be so obscured by immigration and migration, by settlement and resettlement, that any detailed knowledge of the blood lines of great-grandparents could well be unavailable.

The presentation of the perils faced by the octoroon can be seen, then, on the very simplest and most naive level, as a sort of scare tactic: how do you know they won't be coming after *you* next?

Even in those stories which cannot be said to make this simple appeal, stories in which the octoroon is already aware of her mixed blood, the element of reversal served to involve the audience in the tragedy of the heroine. On the imaginative level, at least, each witness to the octoroon's tragedy was threatened by a similar fate, by the sudden reversal of fortune that was so much a part of the American experience, and the ironic underside of the American dream. The particular discovery which precipitates the fall of the helpless young female, with her fine and tasteful clothes, her cultured speech, her garden full of flowers, was still the same sort of discovery which threatened to destroy the middle-class young white lady of the audience: her father is suddenly bankrupt; her father has died, leaving mountainous debts. In an age when women of the middle class were nearly as dependent upon the head of the household as the poor octoroon was upon her master-father, the antislavery propagandist could draw upon the audience's own dread of the life they would face if the bank failed, the tariff were defeated, the speculation fizzled.

Expressed this way, it becomes clear that the octoroon permits the audience to identify with her, not merely on the superficial level of her color, but more profoundly in terms of the radical reversal of fortune she has suffered—both modes of identification denied, in any case, to the more representative, but less imaginatively available figure of the black slave.

Another relatively constant element in the octoroon situation is the relationship of the octoroon to the major villain of the plot, her lustful pursuer. Though occasionally identified as a gentleman, most often he is an overseer, a slave trader or a parvenu plantation owner. Typically, he is coarse, ill-bred and crudely-spoken. Most interesting, he is often a Yankee. This character first appeared as Jonathan Snapdragon in Hildreth's *The Slave* (1836), the novel in which the "tragic octoroon" made her first appearance. A particularly popular version of the character was McCloskey in Dion Boucicault's very successful play, *The Octoroon*, but he achieved his apotheosis, of course, as Simon Legree in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

This character has been critically perceived as a sop to Southern audiences, intended to mitigate the severity of the indictment made of the Southern slave owner by the octoroon situation. The Yankee becomes the sadistic and lecherous agent of evil, while the aristocrat is often presented as entirely innocent of the gross acts perpetrated in his name by the brutal New Englander. Certainly, there is truth in this interpretation of the Yankee overseer, since many of the antislavery writers were, as late as the 1850s, still hoping for a reconciliation between North and South, and to make the overseer explicitly a Yankee is to acknowledge that the guilt of exploiting slaves was not exclusively Southern.

However, while the use of the Yankee overseer may have been intended, in part, to soothe the Southern reader, it cannot be dismissed merely as a detail which had no propaganda effect on the Northern audience. On the very simplest level, to identify the meanest, most immoral, most black-hearted sinner in the whole book as a Yankee is to say that the moral superiority of Northerners is shared only by antislavery Northerners: a Yankee who condones and collaborates with Southern slavery is even worse than a slave owner; he is a regular Simon Legree.

On another level, the conventional overseer, Yankee or not, functions to present the evils of slavery as resulting from the excesses of an individual, unlike the octoroon herself, who functions to represent the sins of slavery as particularly institutional. To understand this apparent contradiction in motives between the function of the overseer and that of the octoroon, we must first recognize that popular audiences in the 1840s and 1850s enjoyed and were accustomed to aristocratic and sentimentalized heroes and heroines, and the conventional Southern Gentleman and his Lady of popular fiction were probably the closest native approximations we had to that ideal. Further, many of the writers of antislavery fiction were themselves sentimentally wedded to the romantic image of the old South by emotions not very different from those which prompted their sympathy for the Negro slave.

The point of the introduction of the villainous overseer was to show that even the happy slave of the kindly master, or worse, the idealized octoroon daughter of an honorable (if sinful) father, can overnight be betrayed into the clutches of a McCloskey. The popular image of the Southern Gentleman as a sentimentalized, aristocratic figure was used by the proslavery side in its defense against abolitionist charges; the documented charges of ill-usage of slaves brought by abolitionists were dismissed as wholly unrepresentative excesses of a few uncouth individuals. The effect of the overseer figure in the octoroon plot, then, is to point out that so long as slaves are property which can be sold or attached for debt, even the stereotypic noble, kindly master of pro-Southern literature would be powerless to protect his slaves—even his slave daughters—from suddenly falling into the hands of the worst slave-driver. The image of the overseer serves to permit the American public to retain its beau ideal, while at the same time it demonstrates that this beau ideal is irrelevant to the moral question of the institution of slavery.

Another aspect of the overseer-octoroon relationship not critically commented upon is that in addition to representing a racial conflict, it represents in certain works a conflict of class and regional attitudes. The conflict, of course, is not merely between the overseer and the octoroon, but between parvenu and aristocrat, between commoner and landed gentleman, between efficiency expert and dreamer. The octoroon is merely the prize for which they struggle. That she was prized, it is suggested, was because of her seven-eighths white aristocratic blood which had made her unattainable until she became a slave at the death of her father. It was the single drop of black blood that made the tragic octoroon available; it was the seven drops of blue blood that made her desirable. Thus, in the fiction of the tragic octoroon, the Yankee figure gloats over the possession of his intended victim as a victory over her father. By possessing the aristocrat's daughter, the Yankee achieves a triumph to which her beauty and his lust seem almost irrelevant.

Seen as an expression of regional conflict, the Legree-McCloskey figure is much more complicated and contradictory than is suggested by the conventional reading of him as a concession to the South. On one hand, it must have seemed to Northern audiences that the Yankee overseer embodied many of the characteristics that such audiences valued. He was keen, assertive, a go-getter. He was in the South to put on a sound basis an economic establishment the Southerner himself was unable to make pay. E. J. Stearns, himself a transplanted Yankee and violent defender of slavery, says in *Notes on Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

Mrs. Stowe has no good opinion of this class of persons [Yankee Overseers], for she tells us . . . that they are "proverbially, the hardest masters of slaves." This is, no doubt, true; but it does not follow that they are, therefore, "renegade sons" . . . of New England. On the contrary, it is because they are *genuine* Yankees, that they are so hard masters: they have been accustomed to see men do a day's work,—they have done it themselves—and they cannot understand how the negro can do only a half or a third of one.⁵

In comparison with the Southern plantation lord, the Yankee stood for democratic, that is to say native, institutions, while the Southerner represented an aristocratic and European ideal. Further, the Yankee, in his efficiency, stood for the nineteenth century and progress, while the Southerner represented some feudal, Sir Walter Scott past.

On the other hand, the Yankee overseer must have uncomfortably suggested the hard-handed, pushy, shrewd-dealing Yankee entrepreneur who by the mid-century was breaking down many of the old barriers of the genteel past and establishing in the North an illiberal, vulgar and powerful commercial class. Regarded in this light, the Yankee in the South appears as a sinister precursor of Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court*.

This double vision of the Yankee reveals itself most fully in Boucicault's *Octoroon*, where we have the evil Yankee, McCloskey, opposed by the heroic Yankee, Salem Scudder, who loves Zoe and wishes to marry her and who, in the best literary tradition, tinkers with new-fangled gadgets, one of which, the camera, providentially proves McCloskey guilty of murder. It may be said that the issue that divides the villainous Yankee from the heroic and benevolent one is the fate each proposes for the tragic octoroon.

To sum up, then, the popularity of the tragic octoroon character in pre-Civil War antislavery fiction cannot be explained by suggesting she was simply the nearest thing to a Negro that Northern authors and audiences could wax sentimental about. The attack on the slavery system mounted by the creators of the tragic octoroon was specifically directed toward certain sins implicit in that institution, was particularly appropriate to the audience which it was intended to move and was firmly based on the regional attitudes and moral values of that audience.

⁵ E.J. Stearns, *Notes on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), pp. 141-42.