When he was young, Colonel Henry French served in the Southern Army. After the Civil War he comes to New York and enters his uncle’s business. He becomes a partner in the firm and, after his uncle’s death, takes his place at its head. He marries a New York woman who dies soon after childbirth.

In spite of persuasion from his partners, Mr. Kirby and Mrs. Jerviss, he retires from the prosperous business and leaves New York with his only son, Philip, for the South. They arrive at his home town, Clarendon, and go the cemetery where they meet Peter French, an old ex-slave who worked for the family. Then they meet Miss Laura Treadwell, an old friend of the colonel. She invites them to her house and tells them about the town and about Mr. Fetters, a poor white who has become powerful person in Clarendon.

Old Peter, who is jobless, is arrested by a constable for loafing around. The next morning after Old Peter’s arrest the colonel, who doesn’t know about the incident, stops by the office of Justice of the Peace just as the justice is handing down decisions on fines and prison terms. Peter French is fined twenty dollars plus four and a half
dollars in prison costs. The colonel agrees to pay Peter's fine and look after him.

Colonel French's presence in Clarendon soon becomes known to the public and he becomes involved in a dispute with Mr. Fetters who buys and sells blacks. Colonel French wants to build a cotton mill so he goes to Charthage to inspect the Excelsion Cotton Mills of which Mr. Fetters owns a majority of the stock. After witnessing the miserable working conditions in the mills, he reports the situation to Judge Bullard.

Around that time the colonel falls in love with Miss Laura; however, Graciella, her niece, begins to fall in love with the colonel, giving the cold shoulder to her fiancé, Ben Dudley. In the meantime, his appeal to Judge Bullard to help him improve conditions at Excelsion Mills having gone unanswered, the colonel hires a new young lawyer, Caxton, to champion his cause.

After considerable effort and a moderate financial outlay, the colonel at length secures a majority of interest in the Eureka Mill site and makes application to the State for the redemption of the title. However, Mr. Fetters challenges him. Major McLean tells the colonel, "You'll have trouble if you hire niggers. You'll find that they won't work when you want 'em to. They're not reliable, they have no sense of responsibility. As soon as they got a dollar they'll lay off to spend it, and leave yo' work at the mos' critical point." The colonel hires Major McLean as a superintendent. The colonel has a plan to establish an academy and library for the blacks but this plan is met with less enthusiasm and some difference of opinion from his colleagues. Dr. Mackenzie, minister of the Presbyterian Church says, "I fear your time and money and effort will be wasted. The Negroes are hopelessly
degraded. They have degenerated rapidly since the war.”

One night Colonel French proposes to Miss Laura. She hesitates at first but at last she accepts his proposal. The colonel’s plans for the improvement of Clarendon also goes forward in spite of some trouble: a white foreman quarrels with him and quits so he promotes George Brown, a black, to the position. The white bricklayers then refuse to work.

On the night of the annual Assembly Ball Ben hesitates to enter the hall because he is not wearing his best clothes. He is jealous that Graciella is dancing with the colonel, and although he has never taken a drink in his life, he gets drunk. At the bar, Young Fetters is talking about Graciella in a disrespectful tone. Ben gets angry and starts fighting with Fetters and two other men. Soon he is knocked down on the floor bleeding.

The next day when the colonel, Laura and Graciella are talking about the previous night’s incident, Catherine Johnson comes to see him. She says that her husband, Bud, is gone. After inquiring about Bud’s previous arrest, the colonel goes to Squire Reddick’s office to inquire about him. The next morning, however, Bud is taken away by Mr. Fetters.

The colonel attempts to meet Mr. Fetters for a month but is unable to. At last he meets Mr. Fetters and negotiates Bud Johnson’s release. The colonel and Caxton then study the criminal laws of the State and criminal records and are appalled to find that on hundreds of farms ignorant blacks, and sometimes poor white, are held in bondage under claims of debt or under contracts of exclusive employment for long terms. Many such men are in bondage to Mr. Fetters. The colonel takes Mr. Fetters to court, however, he is defeated, al-
though this creates a sensation throughout the country. Caxton, who understands the severe situation of blacks, suggests that the colonel help Bud Johnson escape from Mr. Fetters. The plan succeeds.

One night, Young Fetters and his father’s foreman, who are passing by Dudley plantation on the way to town, are shot. Young Fetters is seriously wounded. The next day Ben Dudley is arrested in a warrant issued by Mr. Fetters. The colonel tries to help Ben but Ben refuses his help. Only Graciella knows the reason why and realizes that she has driven him to such a situation. Finally, however, with the help of the colonel and Caxton, Ben pays his bail and is released. He apologizes for his rudeness and expresses his thanks.

After Ben’s release, former constable Haines, now employed as an overseer at Fetters’ convict farm, is shot in an ambush near Ben’s plantation. Colonel French receives a mysterious note from Henry Taylor, the principal of the colored school. They meet secretly and the principal confesses that Bud Johnson shot Young Fetters and Haines. Bud Johnson is then arrested. True to his promise, the colonel makes every effort to see that Bud is protected against mob violence and given a fair trial.

One morning the colonel finds a promissory note from Mr. Fetters to Mr. Treadwell which is dated twenty years back. Fortunately, the note is still valid and lawyer Caxton takes action to collect the money.

One day while the colonel is writing a letter to his friend and Old Peter is smoking, little Phil goes out and follows a black cat onto the railroad tracks. As the brakeman is absorbed in his own task, he doesn’t see the boy. At the same moment Peter, who has come to look for Phil, catches sight of him kneeling under the railroad car. He shouts, but it is too late to stop the engine. Peter throws himself
forward to seize the child and both are badly injured. Soon after Peter dies, Phil remains unconscious for several hours, and when he briefly regains consciousness he says, “if I should die, and if Uncle Peter should die, you’ll remember your promise and bury him near me, won’t you, dear?” But to bury Old Peter in a white cemetery arouses strong opposition. Even a member of the church says, “To bury this Negro in Oak Cemetery is against our principles.”

The colonel decides to bury Phil and Peter in the same place. On the night of the burial, however, Bud is lynched and Peter’s casket is thrown away. The colonel is shocked. He asks Miss Laura to go to New York with him, and when she insists that it is her duty to stay town, he leaves alone for New York.

II

In November, 1905 Chesnutt received an invitation to attend Mark Twain’s seventieth birthday party. He went to the party, which was held on December 5 at Delmonico’s in New York City. At the party “many complimented Chesnutt on The Colonel’s Dream, which had been published two months previously.” But the novel did not receive favorable reviews. Helen M. Chesnutt described the reviews the book did receive:

This book was not so popular as Chesnutt’s other books. Some reviewers considered it his best story but many of them deplored the fact that he was wasting his literary skill in the arts of the pamphleteer. They granted, however, that “the historian of American life who half a century hence gathers together documents for the study of the Negro problem will find abundant material ready
to his hand... *The Colonel's Dream* was very interesting to the English. They were surprised that the conditions depicted still existed in the South and, having no sense of responsibility for such conditions, gave the book much praise.\(6\)

As Helen Chesnutt stated, “This was an avowed purpose novel written to expose peonage and the convict lease system which were flourishing in the certain Southern states and making the lives of the Negro masses more wretched than in the days of slavery.”\(7\) The avowed purpose is clear in the colonel's dream that the title signifies.

As the colonel slept this second time, he dreamed of a regenerated South, filled with thriving industries, and thronged with a prosperous and happy people, where every man, having enough for his needs, was willing that every other man should have the same; where law and order should prevail unquestioned, and where every man could enter, through the golden gate of hope, the field of opportunity, where lay the prizes of life, which all might have an equal chance to win or lose.\(8\)

In the conclusion of the novel he restates the dream:

White men go their way, and black men theirs, and these ways grow wider apart, and no one knows the outcome. But there are those who hope, and those who pray, that this condition will pass, that some day our whole land will be truly free, and the strong will cheerfully help to bear the burdens of the weak, and Justice, the seed, and Peace, the flower, of liberty, will prevail throughout
Colonel French is a symbol of white conscience; however, in the end, he is defeated by Mr. Fetters who is a symbol of the South. Radical Bud Johnson is defeated by lynching. Even docile Old Peter dies. Finally, Miss Treadwell declines the colonel's offer of marriage. In this novel there is no person who has hope. The members of the church refuse to bury Old Peter and he is buried in an open grave. The novel treats an unique theme; however, it is marred by thematic confusion. The characters are generally idealized or stereotyped, and Sylvia Lyons Render pointed out that "The Colonel's Dream (1905) was anticlimactic. Though clearly conciliatory in tone and lacking the confrontations between blacks and whites which had especially aroused the public ire against the other novels, this book found few readers." However, The Colonel's dream is more realistic than Chesnutt's previous novels and those of other contemporary novelists. Vernon Loggins offered favorable criticism: "The Colonel's Dream, the most poignantly tragic and yet perhaps the most realistic of the three books..."

III

There are three main points that we should mention in discussing Chesnutt's novels. In all three of his novels, Chesnutt wrote about self-destructive dreamer who is either black or having a relationship with a black. One of his main themes is the racial problem in the southern states. Rena in *The House Behind the Cedars*, who dreamed of a new life, was driven to death in self-destructive struggle after she crossed over the color line. Dr. Miller in *The Marrow of Tradition* chose the southern life in order to help black people even though he
could have succeeded in the North. In the end, he lost his only son during the racial riot. Colonel French in *The Colonel's Dream* fights against the evils of peonage and convict labor but he also has a destructive struggle against the impenetrable barrier of racial prejudice and looses his son, his servant and his fiancée.

Ironically, the destructive struggle stems from Chesnutt’s romantic optimism which is embodied in his characters.

But Rena was no philosopher, either sad or cheerful. She could not even have replied to this argument, that races must lift themselves, and the most that can be done by others is to give them opportunity and fair play. Hers was a simpler reasoning—the logic by which the world is kept going onward and upward when philosophers are at odds and reformers are not forthcoming. She knew that for every child she taught to read and write she opened, if ever so little, the door of opportunity, and she was happy in the consciousness of performing a duty which seemed all the more imperative because newly discovered.¹²)

Dr. Miller is also an idealist:

He liked to believe that the race antagonism which hampered his progress and that of his people was a mere temporary thing, the outcome of former conditions, and bound to disappear in time, and that when a colored man should demonstrate to the community in which he lived that he possessed character and power, that community would find a way in which to enlist his services for the public good.¹³)
Colonel French thinks, "... there are those who hope, and those who pray, that this condition will pass, that some day our whole land be truly free..." All of these characters play tragic roles, however, essentially, they are all optimists and as such, unrealistic about how to affect social change. Rena is a tragic heroine not because she confront evil or injustice. The only thing she can do is to determine to do her best to help black people. Even Dr. Miller can not fight boldly against racial injustice. Although Colonel French once challenged injustice, in the end, he retreats.

Behind Chesnutt’s optimism, there seems to be religion. Chesnutt’s main characters are influenced by God when they have to make a decision. Rena says, “It is the will of God.”14) Chesnutt wrote in *The Marrow of Tradition* that “We turn to God, who sometimes swallows the insult, and answers the appeal.”15) Although his faith is somewhat fatalistic, however, generally speaking, if one devotes oneself to the absolute or God, one will tend avoid confronting the present situation. As a result, he must be optimistic.

The second characteristic Chesnutt’s novels have in common is their black characters. Rena and Dr. Miller are mulatto and in *The House Behind the Cedars* Frank and Wain are blacks in a supporting role. Sandy, Josh, Aunt Jane and Jerry in *The Marrow of Tradtion* are black as well as Old Peter and Bud Johnson in *The Colonel's Dream*. These black characters are divided into four types. The first group is the mulattoes who have fair coloring and the posibility of passing for white. The second group is the so-called Uncle Tom type. The third group is those blacks who become the white man’s tools. The fourth group contains those who are radical and have the power to revolt.
These types are also representative of the post Civil War problems between and within ethnic groups. Chesnutt's novels also offer accurate, vivid portrayal of historical facts and contemporary life. These add spice to his novels.

The third aspect of Chesnutt's novels I'd like to mention is technique. His most popular novel, The House Behind the Cedars had a romantic tendency; however, his later novels became more realistic. Chesnutt depict Rena in The House Behind the Cedars as follows:

Warwick's first glance had revealed the fact that the young woman was strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered. As he walked along behind her at a measured distance, he could not help noting the details that made up this pleasing impression, for his mind was singularly alive to beauty, in whatever embodiment. The girl's figure, he perceived, was admirably proportioned; she was evidently at the period when the angels of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence. Her abundant hair, of a dark and glossy brown, was neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column that rose straight from a pair of gently sloping shoulders, clearly outlined beneath the light muslin frock that covered them. He could see that she was tastefully, though not richly, dressed, and that she walked with an elastic step that revealed a light heart and the vigor of perfect health. Her face, of course, he could not analyze, since he had caught only the one brief but convincing glimpse of it.16)

In his second novel, which has structural shortcomings, and his third novel, there is less exaggeration and more realism. His characteriza-
tions still have trace of exaggeration, however:

Looking at these two men with the American eye, the differences would perhaps be the more striking, or at least the more immediately apparent, for the first was white and the second black, or, more correctly speaking, brown; it was even a light brown, but both his swarthy complexion and his curly hair revealed what has been described in the laws of some of our states as a “visible admixture” of African blood . . . the other not more than thirty . . . both seemed from their faces and their manners to be men of culture and accustomed to the society of cultivated people. They were both handsome men . . . while the mulatto’s erect form, broad shoulders, clear eyes, fine teeth, and pleasingly moulded features showed nowhere any sign of that degeneration which the pessimist so sadly maintains is the inevitable heritage of mixed races. ¹⁷)

Mr. French, the senior partner, who sat opposite Kirby, was an older man—a safe guess would have placed him somewhere in the debatable ground between forty and fifty; of a good height, as could be seen even from the seated figure, the upper part of which was held erect with the unconscious ease which one associates with military training. His closely cropped brown hair had the slightest touch of gray. The spacious forehead, deep-set grey eyes, and firm chin, scarcely concealed by a light beard, marked the thoughtful man of affairs. His face indeed might have seemed austere, but for a sensitive mouth, which suggested a reserve of humour and a capacity for deep feeling. ¹⁸)

Roger Whitlow points out that:
Much of this same rich prose is found in Chesnutt's lesser work, his three novels, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905)—works which, for all of their nineteenth-century conventions, two-dimensional characters, coincidence in abundance, melodramatically mistreated heroines, and so on, nonetheless make for worthwhile reading. For some reason, still not fully understood, Chesnutt stopped writing in 1905.\(^{19}\)

Of course, Chesnutt as a novelist, had a lot of shortcomings; however, Sterling Brown had a good point when he said that "Most important, however, is his going beneath the surface to social cause."\(^{20}\) To be sure, as Robert A. Bone stated, it may be that "On the strength of his short stories alone, he raised standards of Negro fiction to a new and higher plane."\(^{21}\) However, Chesnutt tried to clarify the relationship between blacks and whites during the post reconstruction period from 1877 to 1901. In this sense he was a pioneer of the color line. As a transitional novelist, he swayed between protest and accommodation, between romantic melodrama and realism, and between pessimism and optimism. The remark Walter Hines Page made about Chesnutt's first novel aptly expresses Chesnutt's situation as a novelist:

> The feeling here was, and to some extent at least I share it, that you had so long and so successfully accustomed yourself to the construction of short stories that you have not yet, so to speak, got away from the short story measurement and the short story habit.\(^{22}\)
Notes

14) CWC, *The House Behind the Cedars*, op. cit., p. 163.
17) CWC, *The Marrow of Tradition*, op. cit., p. 49.
18) CWC, *The Colonel’s Dream*, op. cit., p. 3.