Dunbar occupies a unique place in American literature. He raised a dialect and a theme from the minstrel stage to literature and became and remains a national figure. Charles W. Chesnutt followed him as a novelist, and many white people read in form of fiction a subject which they did not want to read or hearken to. He gained his way unaided and by sheer merit and is a recognized American novelist.

by W. E. B. DuBois

I. His Youth

Helen M. Chesnutt wrote in detail about her father's career, in her book, *Pioneer of the Color Line*. She referred to numerous sources: his papers, manuscripts, letters, newspaper clippings and magazine articles. Few biographies surpass hers. A brief biographical outline based on her account of Chesnutt's life follows.

In July 1857, Ann Maria Sampson and Andrew Jackson Chesnutt, who came from North Carolina, went down the Profate Court (Cleveland) and obtained a marriage license. On June 20, 1858, Charles Waddell Chesnutt was born. Although his mother had several children, she seemed to give all her attention to Charles. Shortly after Charles was born, his family moved to Oberlin, near Oberlin College. His father Andrew became very much interested in the work of the Underground Railroad and had the exciting experience of participating in the famous Oberlin-Willington. After the birth of his second son, Lewis, in 1860, Andrew Chesnutt's life became very difficult and the family returned to Cleveland. There, Andrew and a daughter, who died soon after her birth, were born.

When the Civil War broke out, Andrew Chesnutt enlisted as a teamster and served throughout the war in the Union Army. Meanwhile, Charles attended the Cleveland Public Schools. At the close of the war, Ann Maria was heart broken because of her hard work. In 1866 they went to the South. Charles and Lewis went to Howard School where they were under the influence of the principal of the school who had an irreproachable character and high ideals.

After school Charles helped his father in the store — kept the books, waited on customers, swept the floors — and learned a many things about the world. When he was nine years old he saw a black killed by a white man for the unresonable crime and it was then that he became aware of the power of the law. When Charles was thirteen years old his mother died. Cousin Mary, who was about eighteen years old, took over the role of mother.
When Charles was fourteen he was going to take a book keeping job offered by his father's friend; however, Robert Harris persuaded his father to let him become a teacher at the Howard School. At the age of fourteen Charles wrote his first serial story and published it in a small weekly newspaper owned by a black. Meanwhile, his father failed in the storekeeping business and moved to a farm on the Welmington Road, about two miles away from Fayetteville. So after his day’s work teaching, Charles had to help his father on the farm. As their earnings were meager because of the poor soil, he was forced to peddle needles, pins, thread, buttons and the like in the country districts. Moreover, as more members of the family jointed them, their living conditions became more severe. Charles went to Charlotte, North Calorina to assist Cicero Harris, principal of a school. There, over a period of three years, he learned how to teach and how to relate to boys and girls. Meanwhile he spent his summer teaching in remote country districts to earn extra money to support his large family in Fayetteville. As he was young he often felt lonely and homesick. He spent all his leisure time reading, studying and writing in a journal he started keeping during that time. In July 1874 his hope of getting a teaching position at Malley Creek were dashed when it became apparent that the school was unable to pay him. He went everywhere to find a job. At last, he succeeded in finding one at a little school in Mount Zion, near Fayetteville.

In 1877 he was appointed to a position of considerable importance in the new Normal School in Fayetteville, established that year by the State of North Carolina to train teachers for its black schools. Around that time he spent much of his spare time with the Perrys, one of properous black families in Fayetteville, and on June 6, 1878 he married Susan Perry, a teacher in the Howard School. At the close the school year, he packed his balise and set out to find employment in either Washington or New York, but upon finding no prospects of obtaining employment there, he returned to Fayetteville. Under the influence of Abbion W. Tourgée, Superior Court judge in North Carolina he decided to write. The following entry from Chesnutt’s journal on May 29, 1880, expresses his strong desire to write a book.

I think I must write a book. I am almost afraid to undertake a book so early and with so little experience in composition. But it has been my cherished dream, and I feel an influence that I cannot resist calling me to the task. Besides, I do not know but I am as well prepared as some successful writers. A fair knowledge of the classics, speaking acquaintance with the modern languages, an intimate friendship with literature, etc., seven years’ experience in the school room, two years of married life, and a habit of studying character, have I think, left me not entirely unprepared to write even a book.

Fifteen years of life in the South, in one of the most eventful eras of its history, among a people whose life is rich in the elements of romance, under conditions calculated to stir one’s soul to the very depths — I think there is here a fund of experience, a supply of material, which a skillful pen could work up with tremendous effect. Besides, if I do write, I shall write for a purpose, a high, holy purpose, and this will inspire me to greater effort. The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites — for I consider the unjust spirit of caste which is so insidious as to pervade a whole nation, and so
powerful as to subject a whole race and all connected with it to scorn and social ostracism — I consider this a barrier to the moral progress of the American people; and I would be one of the first to head a determined, organized crusade against it. Not a fierce indiscriminate onset, not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect, but a moral revolution which must be brought about in a different manner. The subtle almost indefinable feeling of repulsion toward the Negro, which is common to most Americans — cannot be stormed and taken by assault; the garrison will not capitulate, so their position must be mined, and we will find ourselves in their midst before they think it.\(^2\)

In the fall of 1880 Robert Harris died, and in November, Chesnutt at the age of twenty-two, became principal of the Normal School at the unusually high salary of $75 per month. Chesnutt and his wife could live in fairly comfortable circumstances with their two daughters and could hire a woman to help Susan with the house work. They could even spend the summer months up in the mountains at Carthage. He read voraciously: not only literature from Shakespeare to William Wells Brown but history and a multitude of other subjects in various languages including French, Latin and Greek. His passionate spirit was not satisfied with only study and so he taught both instrumental and vocal music to the young people of the town. He also started a Latin class at one dollar a month and was active in the Methodist Church as organist, choirmaster, and superintendent of the Sunday School. While devoting himself to community service but he kept reading, studying and practicing shorthand.

In May 1883, Chesnutt attained one of his goals — he could write two hundred words a minute. It was the time for him to go to the North to seek a better position and conditions. In spite of his family’s disapproval, he submitted his resignation to the Board of Managers of the State Colored Normal School. In his journal March 7, 1882, he wrote the following:

I get more and more tired of the South. I pine for civilization and companionship. I sometimes hesitate about deciding to go, because I am engaged in a good work, and have been doing, I fondly hope, some little good. But many reasons urge me the other way; and I think I could serve my race better in some more congenial occupation. And I shudder to think of exposing my children to the social and intellectual proscription to which I have been a victim. Is not my duty to them paramount? And can I not find hundreds who will do gladly, and as well, the work which I am doing?\(^3\)

In New York, he obtained a position as a reporter for Dow, Jones, and Company, a Wall Street news agency, but New York made him uncomfortable so he went to Cleveland, the city of his birth. There he secured a good position in the accounting department of the Nickel Plate Railroad Company. After a day’s work he wrote down all the incidents of the day, which were later published in Puck and Tid-Bits. In April 1884, Chesnutt sent for his wife and children and rented a little house on Welcutt Avenue for sixteen dollars a month. Later, the Chesnutts moved into a much better house with a wide, well-kept yard with a white picket fence and Chesnutt was transferred to the legal department of the company where he worked for Judge Samuel E.
Williamson. He remained there for two years, earning his living as a stenographer and studying law (later he obtained the qualifications to be a lawyer). He spent all his spare time writing essays, poems, short stories and sketches.

II. His Writing Career

In April 1885, S.S. McClure organized the first newspaper syndicate in the United States. McClure wanted to find young, ambitious writers to cooperate with him so he sponsored a contest. Chesnutt entered his short story, "Uncle Peter's House", and although he did not win the prize, McClure used his story in his syndicate and paid him $10 for it. During the next three years he contributed numerous stories to the McClure Syndicate: "A Tight Boot," "A Bad Night," "Two Wives," "Secret Ally," etc. He also published several poems in a weekly publication called *The Cleveland Voice*. In 1886 he wrote for *Family Fiction, The Great International Weekly Story Paper*, published in Washington, D.C.: "Tom's Warm Welcome" in November 1886; "The Fall of Adam" in December; "McDugald's Mule" in January 1887; "How Dardy Came Through" in February; "Wine and Water" in April; "A Grass Window" in May; "A Fool's Paradise" in *Family Fiction* and he also wrote for *Tid-Bits* and, later, for *Puck*.

Chesnutt moved into the office of Henderson, Kline and Tolles, one of Cleveland's great law firms and worked at stenography while waiting for legal business. After the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* accepted "The Goophered Grapevine," his story "Po's Sandy," appeared in May 1888 in *The Atlantic Monthly*. As a result, in 1889 he began to associate with George W. Cable (1844 — 1925), a novelist and reformer from New Orleans. As George W. Cable was a member of the Open Letter Club, Chesnutt also developed a close connection to it and through this club, his essay, "What is a White Man?" appeared in *The Independent* on May 40, 1889. His short story "Dave's Neckliss" appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in October; "The Sheriff's Children," in *The Independent* on November 7; and "The Conjure's Revenge" in *The Overland Monthly* in June (These later stories appeared in his short story collection, *The Wife of His Youth*).

Chesnutt and his wife Susan joined the Cleveland Social Circle, which had been formed in 1868 with the exclusive membership of the respectable colored middle class. As members of the club they participated its picnics, parties, and so on. During the summer of 1891 Chesnutt completed "Rena Walden and other stories," which was the original model for *The House Behind the Cedars*. During these years Chesnutt's business flourished and he decided that his children should receive a good education.

In 1897 he went to Boston to discuss his literary aspirations and plans with Walter Hines Page, editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* and with the members of Houghton Mifflin and Company. That was the beginning of a relationship between Chesnutt and Page. During the early months of 1898 he started to write a novel which he had discussed with Page the previous year. His collection of "Conjure" stories was awaiting publication with Houghton Mifflin and Company.

On March 30, 1898, Chesnutt completed his first novel *A Business Career*, however, Walter H. Page did not accept the novel for publication. This shocked him deeply. He continued writing stories, however, and sent the "conjure" stories to Walter H. Page. In July his "The Wife of His
Youth" appeared in The Atlantic Monthly and received good reviews. Houghton Mifflin and Company at last decided to publish the book of "conjure" stories in September. In March 1899, The Conjure Woman was published. It headed the list of the six best sellers in Cleveland for the month of April. With the publication of the book Chesnutt stepped into the first rank of American short story writers.

Chesnutt became busier and busier with his literary work finally on September 30, 1899 gave up his prosperous business as attorney-at-law, court reporter and stenographer. After closing his law office, he set up his literary office in his home at 64 Breton Street. In December The Wife of His Youth, a collection of short stories, and Life of Frederick Douglass in the Beacon Biographies from Houghton, Mifflin and Company were published. After the publication of the collection of short stories Chesnutt's reputation was established thanks to positive reviews. He stepped into a new stage of his career.

Early in 1900 Chesnutt received a letter from Walter H. Page after a fairly long silence. (He had resigned from Houghton, Mifflin and Company the previous year and formed his own publishing company with Mr. Doubleday.) In the letter Page offered to publish Rena, Chesnutt's first novel. The House Behind the Cedars, the name by which Rena appeared in print, was published at the end of October 1900 and widely reviewed throughout the country.

After the publication of The House Behind the Cedars he began to write a new novel based on the Wilmington riot. According to Helen M. Chesnutt, "Chesnutt started the year 1901 in a somewhat pessimistic frame of mind, for the condition of the Negro in the South was becoming intolerable." In the late 1890's the southern states adopted a number of more sophisticated stratagems for disenfranchising blacks, including the use of outright intimidation by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and legislation such as "grandfather clauses," "poll taxes" and "illiteracy tests" for voter applicants. Chesnutt had been very much affected by the savage race riot that had broken out in Wilmington, North Carolina during the November elections of 1898. He thought that he might stir up trouble by writing about what was going on in the South. In February, 1901, he made a lecture tour of the South. He went to Fayetteville; Wilmington; where he collected a great deal of materials for his new novel; Tuskegee, as the guest of Dr. and Mrs. Booker T. Washington; Birmingham; Atlanta University; Charlotte; Concord; and other cities. From observations he made on tour he wrote about race relations in the South, "A Visit to Tuskegee", in the Cleveland Leader and "The White and Black" in The Boston Transcript. After returning to Cleveland, he had a dispute by correspondence over the content of The American Negro with the Macmillan Company. Consequently, the Macmillan Company stopped selling the book and endeavored to withdraw it from circulation.

Chesnutt spent spring and summer in 1901 writing The Marrow of Tradition. It was finished by the end of July and sent to the Houghton, Mifflin and Company which published it in October. In spite of his fatigue on finishing the novel he accepted the chairmanship of the Committee on Colored Troops for the 35th National Encampment of the Grand Army of the Republic scheduled to meet in Cleveland in the early part of September. He worked very hard to make it a success. Upon publication The Marrow of Tradition was responded to positively by the public and some critics widely acclaimed it as the most important book on the black question since Uncle Tom's Cabin. However, other critics like William Dean Howells accused Chesnutt bitterness
towards whites. To be sure, the book did much to increase Chesnutt's fame, although it did not meet the expectations of Chesnutt and his publisher as a financial venture.

Chesnutt was very concerned about the education of his children; however, as they grew up they went their separate ways — Ethel was at Tuskegee; Edwin was at Dumme; Helen went to Baltimore to teach at a black high school — freeing to him to concentrate on his work and social life. He brought a large house on Lamont St. and joined various clubs, enjoying his life with his wife.


In 1905 he began working on a new book, The Colonel's Dream. In September The Colonel's Dream, his last novel, which had the avowed purpose of exposing peonage and the convict lease system in southern states, was published by Doubleday, Page and Company. It was also issued in England, where it attracted attention to the situation in the South. On the other hand, it was not as popular as his other novels and received poor reviews in the United States. In the early part of November 1905, Chesnutt received an invitation to attend Mark Twain's seventieth birthday party, which was given by Colonel George Harvey, president of Harper and Brothers Publishing Company. There were lot of distinguished American writers at this party held on December, 5 at Delmonico's in New York City and it marked an important point in his literary career.

In the fall of 1908 Chesnutt delivered two addresses — one for the annual meeting of the Niagara Movement of Oberlin and the other for the opening meeting of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association in Washington. D.C. He stressed in these addresses, the fact that the negro had no duties unless he had rights. Early in the spring of 1910, Chesnutt received a letter from William English Walling asking to make an address at the annual meeting of the National Negro Committee, which later became N. A. A. C. P.

Early in June 1910 Chesnutt, who had never had an illness, had a stroke in his office and was sent to Huron Road Hospital. Fortunately, it was not so serious and he recovered completely by the middle of July. In December Chesnutt became a member of the Rowfant Club, nationally known as an organization of men who loved and collected books. Many of Chesnutt's friends who were acknowledged leaders in Cleveland were among the members.

Newton D. Baker was candidate for Mayor of Cleveland for the 1912 — 1914 term and he had a very lively and successful campaign, accompanied by Chesnutt who reported his speech. Chesnutt was unanimously elected to the board of directors of the Chamber of Commerce where he served as member for many years. In July 1912 he took a vacation and went to Europe with his daughter Helen. By 1913 the South had come north with a vengeance. In many of the northern states anti-intermarriage bills were introduced in the state assemblies, stirring up protests by blacks. In June Chesnutt delivered an address entitled "Race Ideals and Examples" before the literary societies at Wilberforce University. This was published in the A. M. E. Church Review of October 1913. While he was at Welberforce, the university conferred upon him the honorary
degree of L. L. D.
Chesnutt's efforts to improve race relations never abated. For years he and other publicly
minded people had felt the need of a social settlement in his town. In the early part of 1914
the Men's Club of the Second Presbyterian Church decided to establish a settlement along the
lines of Chesnutt's suggestions.
In August 1916 Joel Spingarn issued invitations to the nation's leading colored men and women
to meet in conference at Troutbeck, New York. They discussed education and industry, the
Negro in politics, civil and legal discrimination, social discrimination, practical paths and a working
program for the future. Spingarn asked Chesnutt to preside over the session devoted discussions of
social discrimination. He seemed to enjoy the conference and was able to discuss the matter
with many intelligent people.
As the United States advanced toward World War I, the black problem became very acute.
There was harsh and unjust treatment of black soldiers in Southern training camps, and with the
leader of the N. A. A. C. P., Joel Spingarn and James Weldon Johnson, he fought against that.
The great migration of blacks from the South into the industrial cities of the North had begun.
The years rushed on. Chesnutt was absorbed in his old law profession so that he had practically
given up any idea of further literary effort. His house on Lamont Avenue became a Mecca for all
sorts of pilgrims. In 1920 he had another serious illness, appendicitis followed by peritonitis. In
1925, the Chesnutts decided to build a summer cottage. There, in the spring of 1927, sickness
dogged Chesnutt's steps and overtook him yet again.
On June 8, 1918, Chesnutt received a telegram from James Weldon Johnson announcing
that the Spingarn Medal Award Committee had decided to confer a medal on him for his pioneer
services as a literary artist and his distinguished career as a public-spirited citizen. The news gave
great surprise and joy to him and his family.
The last years of Chesnutt's life were happy years though he was frail and tired, and his last
novel *The Quarry*, lacking the magic touch which had won his fame a generation before, and was
refused by his publisher. He failed to rewrite the novel and gave it up. Instead, he made an
extensive survey of the economic, civil and social status of Cleveland's black people and the
article appeared in *The Cleveland* in November 1930. After that he wrote several essays and which
were published in 1937 under the title *Breaking into Print*. In November 15, 1932, at 5:30 after
coming home from his office and going to bed because he was a little tired, he smiled at his family,
holding out his hand to his wife, and breathed his last breath.

III. *The House Behind the Cedars* (I)
Chesnutt's first novel, *The House Behind the Cedars*, is a story about Rena and John, two
children of a black woman Mis' Wolly Walden, and a wealthy and cultured white. After their
father's death the Waldens live in the house behind the cedars. John, who in his early life escaped
from black society with the help of his father's friend, Judge Straight, is already established as a
white person in another state and has become a lawyer.
One evening John Walden visits the house behind the cedars and encourages Rena, who worries
about her future as a black, to "pass." Although Rena is sorry to leave her mother, she decides to
go with her brother. Frank, a black man who is secretly in love with her, says, "an' none er yo'
fren ' won't necer see you no mo '. " (5) She denies what he says, although her heart already is no longer with her black family and friends. She makes debut as a white at the annual tournament of the Clarence Social Club as Miss Warwick and draws everyone's attention because of her beauty. Before making her debut Rena went through school and acquired good taste and intelligence. She is able to behave very gracefully at the ball. George Tryon of North Carolina falls in love with her at first glance and finds her a most excellent lady, worthy of respect and esteem. After the several meetings he confesses his love and proposes to her. She promises to give him an answer within a week; however, she falls paralyzed when she considers her past and her heritage. She worries about whether or not she should confess her identity. Her brother Warwick, who has come to work for Tryon, encourages her saying, "It's a matter of the future, not of the past . . . George Tryon loves you for yourself alone; it is not your ancestors that he seeks to marry." (6) , however, she is plagued by doubts and fears.

Their marriage is fixed for the thirtieth of the month, but on the twentieth Warwick sets out with Tryon on a business trip. During the night Rena dreams for a second time that her mother is ill and soon afterward she receives a letter from her mother saying "I take my pen in hand to let you know that I am not very well. I have had a kind of misery in my side for two weeks, . . .

Dr. Green says that I'll get over it in a few days." (7) Impatient to see her mother she takes a train for Patesville, leaving messages for her brother and Tryon.

When Tryon comes back to Clarence he is disappointed to find that Rena is gone. He has to go to Patesville for business and Warwick is optimistic about the possibility of their meeting each other. In Clearence, Tryon goes to meet Judge Straight who happens to find a letter from Rowena Warwick among Tryon's business papers. He recognizes the writing as the Walden woman's daughter's and recalls that he is the man who helped Rena's brother pass the color line. Fearing for Rena's fate, Judge Straight writes a note to Mis' Walden saying, "MADAM — if you value your daughter's happiness, keep her at home for the next day or two. . . ."

Mis'. Walden Wolly receives the note, but she can not read and loses it. On Rena's third day in Patesville, in spite of the Judge's and Frank's efforts, Rena meets Tryon in front of the drugstore, who had an information about a black beauty and tried to see the woman. There her identity is revealed.

By the incident Rena has a great shock and becomes ill. Her brother, who already knows the details of the incident, come to encourage her. When John reads a message from Tryon to Rena, she realized from the cold tone of the letter that he does not love her. Then she determines firmly that "I shall never marry anyman, and I'll not leave mother again. God is against it. I'll stay with my own people." (9) One day Mary B. Pettifoot, her cousin, visits the house behind the cedars and tells Rena's mother about a job for Rena teaching school.

Rena then goes to live in Sampson County with the black principal's mother, who, coincidentally, happens to live near Liza Tryon, the mother of her ex-fiancé. Jeff Wain, the black principal of the school, who treated his ex-wife cruelly and is divorced, tries to win her affection, when he fails, he persecutes her. One day after school Wain tries to attack Rena in the woods but is not successful. Feeling some alarm, Rena moves into Elder Johnson's house.

Tryon, who visits his mother's house, gets information about Rena from Plato, one of his ex-slaves who is a now a pupil of Rena. Tryon writes a letter to Rena and orders Plato to hand it to her and get an answer. The letter says," . . . I am constrained to believe that you do not find
my proximity embarrassing, and I cannot resist the wish to meet you at least once more, and talk over the circumstances of our former friendship. . . . Will you not grant me one interview? . . . I have found it almost as hard to communicate with you by letter.”

She sends a reply by mail “. . . our romance is ended, and better so . . . Leave me in peace, I beseech you, and I shall soon pass out of your neighborhood as I have passed out of your life, and hope to pass out of your memory,”

Around that time, Wain’s persecution and Tryon’s presence in the vicinity make her extremely upset, and by the last week of the school she realizes that she has almost reached her breaking point.

After school one day Tryon arranges for Plato to take Rena to a spot in the woods. All the way back she is completely absorbed in her own thoughts so she is startled when she realizes that Plato has disappeared entirely. She calls, “Plato!” “Plato!” and glancing around fearfully again and again. She suddenly is aware that two men are approaching her from two paths. On one side she recognizes the face of Tryon and on the other, she sees Jeff Wain. Her fearfull climaxs. and she frantically turns and flees. In the stormy darkness she loses her way, stumbling over a projecting root and falling to the ground.

As Rena does not appear at supper time, the Johnsons inquire around the neighborhood and organize a search party. They find her lying unconscious on the edge of the swamp a couple of hours later. Rena’s illness, however, is more serious than her friends imagine. She has brain fever. During the night she runs away from Johnson’s house when everybody is sound asleep. Tryon tries to trail her along the road, but in vain.

Frank Fowler, who loves her with all his heart, continually worries about her, and when he hears about Jeff Wain’s bad reputation, he decides to find out the truth, and, if possible, do something to protect Rena against harm. On the way to Sampson County, he stops to water his mule at a scenic spot. Suddenly he hears a noise in the ticket and accidentally finds Rena in miserable condition. He tries to get her to come to her senses, but when she sees him she cries, “Yes I know, Jeff Wain. Go away from me! Go away! and mumbles, “George, dear George, do you love me? How much do you love me? Ah, you don’t love me.”

Frank rides all day and all night to take her to the house behind the cedars.

Dr. Green comes to see her but she breathes her last breath after saying, “Frank, my good friend — my best friend — you loved me best of them all.”

Around this time, Tryon, seated in a dusty buggy drawn by a tired horse, reaches the gate of the house behind the cedars and is informed of her death.

IV. The House Behind the Cedars (II)

Chesnutt said in his letter of April 4, 1898 to Page: “I am going to work on the novel I have been speaking of; it is a North Carolina story. With your permission, I shall sometime soon write you a note briefly outlining the plot and general movement, and ask you whether there is anything in the subject that would make it unavailable for your house.” He began to prepare for his novel ten years before its publication. The outline for The House Behind the Cedars was finished by June 5, 1890. His long letter to Cable is preoccupied with the story; “On my return to the city after an absence of several days, I find the MS. of story, ‘Rena Walden’ with your letter and Mr. Gilder’s . . . There is ‘something wrong,’ though Mr. Gilder doesn’t tell you what it is . . . The
construction seems to be 'well enough,' a part of the writing is 'excellent' (it is the past to which I gave most time and attention, and leads me to hope that equal care would improve the rest) but the sentiment is 'amorphous.' I very much fear that I suspect that my way of looking at these things is 'amorphous' not in the sense of being unnatural, but unusual. There are a great many intelligent people who consider the class to which Rena and Wain belong as unnatural ... I am a little surprised at Mr. Gilder's suggestion of a want of humor in the writer. Almost everything I have written has been humorous, and I had thought that I had a rather keen sense of humor ... Pardon my earnestness. I write de plein coeur — as I feel. Mr. Gilder finds that I either lack humor or that my characters have a 'brutality, a lack of outlook that makes them uninteresting.' ... I will go right to work at 'Rena Walden,' and send you a draft when completed. ... I am grateful to Mr. Gilder for his interest in me, which the letter sufficiently testifies — I dread the printed slip.\(^{(15)}\) After sending this letter he rewrote the story and sent it to the publisher on July 25, saying "I send you herewith a new draft of 'Rena Walden.' I have endeavored to obviate as far as I could see them the things complained of by Mr. Gilder. In the first place, I have given the mother more heart, I think to the improvement of the character. I have also shaded Wain down so that he is not quite so melodramatic a villain, and Rena's speech and so forth so that she is not quite so superior a being, leaving her to depend for her interest more on the element of common humanity. The intimated attempt of the old woman to poison Rena is ascribed to senile idiocy, so to speak. I have tried to word the dialogue so as to give the people a little more imagination, a little broader outlook. And I have also taken pains to refer in terms of the narrowness of their lives, and to ascribe it to the influence of their surroundings. I have endeavored to have the mother realize, vaguely, her own terrible speciousness (I think I have even got you word 'speciousness' in these years). I have put so much of my time and my heart into this story; it has been so very well spoken — the last was a cultivated gentleman who is familiar with English and French literature, with whom I went on a journey a few weeks ago, that I mean to have it published."\(^{(16)}\) During almost ten years, he tried to revise and expand it despite several rejections.

In 1890 the first version of *The House Behind the Cedars* was a short story; by 1897 it had almost taken the form of a novel. Chesnutt wrote in a letter to Walter H. Page, "I am prepared to follow up a volume of stories by a novel. I have completed the first draft of a long story which I mentioned to you when I saw you in Boston, and have started on the revision; in a month or two I hope to have it completed. It deals with no race problems, but mainly with a very noble order of human nature, more or less modified by circumstances. I have also the raw material, partly digested, of a story on the order of what you suggested might be written along the line of my shorter stories. When I get this other of the way, I shall attack it seriously."\(^{(17)}\) In spite of his great efforts, his novel could not appear in print. Chesnutt's letter of March 22, 1899 to Page expresses his dismay: "Your house has turned down my novel Rena in great shape. They have condemned the plot, its development, find the distinction on which it is based unimportant, and have predicted for it nothing but failure. I have not slept with that story for ten years without falling in love with it, and believing in it, and I should feel very unhappy about it if it came back without your having read it, if you have not already. The fact it met with your approval in the rough, was my chief incentive in rewriting it. Whether I took the wrong track in my revision I don't know; perhaps I did; but if you find time, I should like you to read it — even if it is already
disposed of — in order that I may be able to discuss it with you when I see you again. If the distinctions on which that story is based are so unimportant as to foredoom to failure any story based on them, then I have yet to find my métier as a story writer, for they are my strong cord, I firmly believe. . .” (18) In response to his letter Page wrote the following: “I feel, I think, as badly as you do about Rena. I read it just before I went away, but the House declined its publication not on my reading — certainly not wholly on my reading (this I tell you in confidence), but their judgement was made up after the most thorough consideration of the whole problem from every point of view, and it was reached, you may be sure, with great regret by everybody concerned. While I had a feeling that the story would probably succeed, I could not throw away another feeling, that you had not by any means, even yet, done your best work on it, or had developed to the fullest extent the possibilities of the story. It has great possibilities, and while it has many attractive qualities as it stood, I believe that a year hence if you read it over again you will agree with me that it is not even yet sufficiently elaborated and filled in with relieving incidents — not sufficiently mellowed — there is not sufficient atmosphere poured round it somehow — to make it a full-fledged novel.” (19)

As the result of his long endeavor, at last, his first novel was accepted by Mifflin & Company. In March 1900, Chesnutt received a letter to inform him that “We have decided to take Rena (under the title The House Behind the Cedars) in place of The Rainbow Chasers, and to publish it next fall on the same terms as The Wife of His Youth. . .” The expectation and the uneasiness he felt over the publication of his new book is expressed in many of his letters: “…The House Behind the Cedars, to the public who ought to be eagerly awaiting something from my pen — I only wish I knew they were! . . . I hope the book may raise some commotion, I hardly care in what quarter, though whether, from the nature of the theme it will, I don’t know.” (a letter to Houghton Mifflin & Co., September 27, 1900) (21) ; “Am still reading proofs of The House Behind the Cedars, which is slated for publication, October 27, I hope it may make a favorable impression. . .” (September 28, to his daughters); “Have also finished reading the proofs of The House Behind the Cedars, which has been improved by the process. I see it advertised as containing ‘a bold plot, developed with much force, and elaborating a sociological problem of great significance.’ I hope the book may ‘catch on.’ I should like to have it make a success, both critical and popular, though I hardly expect it to do more than fairly well ” (October 12, to his daughters) (23); and “I received yesterday an advance copy of The House Behind the Cedars, which has a very handsome dress. I will today write the publishers to send you a copy which will get there, I suppose, in a few days” (October 29, to his daughters). (24)

After publication, the novel received considerably good reviews. According Helen M. Chesnutt, “The reviews were highly favorable. The House Behind the Cedars was called ‘a brilliant performance — clear, to the point, keen in its interests, penetrating in its presentation of character . . . so uniform in its construction, so strong in its treatment, so vital in its interest, that one will sit up far into the night to read it through . . .’” (25) Chesnutt himself must be encouraged even by the publication and he “has had requests from two of the biggest publishes in the United States for his next novel.” (26) He wrote to his daughter that “They want a strong race problem novel, and someday shall have it!” (27)

Even many years after the publication Chesnutt recieved favorable reviews without only few
exception. In 1931 Vernon Loggins stated, "... the outlook on the life portrayed in each is
decidedly naturalistic. The House Behind the Cedars presents a beautiful and sensitive heroine,
Rena Walden, who, although classed as colored, is so white that her Negro identity is
easily mistaken." In 1937, pointing out Chesnutt's shortcomings, Benjamin Brawley, the
author of The Negro Genius, said, "Chesnutt's novels are not quite as well done as his short
stories and occasionally seem forced or unreal, but each has the vitality that comes from honest
grappling with life. In The House Behind the Cedars are treated some of the most searching
questions raised by color-line." In 1948 Hugh M. Gloster insisted that "The House Behind
the Cedars represents Chesnutt's initial large-scale attempt to counteract the propaganda of race-
baiting writers and to establish the novel of Negro life on a sound esthetic foundation. In this
work the passer is not censured, and the attachment between the colored heroine and her white
lover is exhibited as decent and respectable. This method of handling such a relationship furnishes
sharp contrast to that in Dixon's novels, which consistently depict interacial sexual contacts as
sensual and demoralizing."

In the contrast to these reviews, in 1957 Robert A. Bone criticized the novel sharply: "The
House Behind the Cedars conforms to the prototype of the early Negro novel. Structually
speaking, Rena's social aspirations are played off against the constraining effects of caste, in a
manner calculated to arouse the reader's indignation. The stereotype of the tragic mulatto is
employed, with all its moral and aesthetic limitatins... in the end, Chesnutt avoids his artistic
responsibilities by arbitrarily putting his heroine to death."

From a detached viewpoint, as Carl Van Vechten pointed out, "Charles W. Chesnutt, in his
interesting novel, The House Behind the Cedars (1900), contributed to literature perhaps the
first authentic study on the subject of 'passing.' " To be sure, The House Behind the Cedars
was the first model for the "passing" novel. However, there are at least three shortcomings in this
novel. The first is the character stereotyping, especially the beautiful mulatto as the heroine;
the second is the stereotypic conflict between the black-sheep and the white-goats; the third failing
is the novel's melodramatic plot. The following opening passage sets a melodramatic tone:

TIME touches all things with destroying hand; and if he seem now and then to
bestow the bloom of youth, the sap of spring, it is but a brief mockery, to be surely
and swiftly followed by the wrinkles of old age, the dry leaves and bare branches
of winter. And yet there are places where Time seems to linger lovingly long after
youth has departed, and to which he seems loath to bring the evil day. Who has not
known some even-tempered old man or woman who seemed to have drunk of the
fountain of youth? Who has not seen somewhere an old town that, having long since
ceased to grow, yet held its own without perceptible decline?

In the last scene the melodrama reaches a climax:

"Rena wants to see you, Frank," said Mis' Molly, with a sob. He walked in softly,
reverently, and stood by her beside. She turned her gentle eyes upon him and put out
her slender hand, which he took in his own broad palm.
“Frank,” she murmured, “my good friend — my best friend — you loved me best of them all.”

The tears rolled untouched down his cheeks. “I’d ’a’ died, fer you, Miss Rena,” he said brokenly.

Mary B. threw open a window to make way for the passing spirit, and the red and golden glory of the setting sun; triumphantly ending his dialy course, flooded the narrow room with light.

Between sunset and dark a traveler, seated in a dusty buggy drawn by a tired horse, crossed the long river bridge... reached the gate in front of the house behind the cedars. . . “Who’s dead?” demanded Tryon hoarsely, scarcely recognizing his own voice. “A young cullud ‘oman, suh,” answered Homer Pettifoot, touching his hat, “Mis’ Molly Walden’s daughter Rena.” (34)

In spite of these shortcomings, however, it is safe to say that he established his position as a novelist by this novel after a long struggle.

NOTES

3) Ibid., p.31
4) Ibid., p.158
5) Ibid., p.37
7) Ibid., p.86
8) Ibid., p.110
9) Ibid., p.162
10) Ibid., p.231
11) Ibid., p.233
12) Ibid., pp.259-260
13) Ibid., p.264
14) Helen M. Chesnutt, op. cit., p.93
15) Ibid., pp.57-59
16) Ibid., pp.59-60
17) Ibid., p.86
18) Ibid., pp.107-108
19) Ibid., pp.108-109
20) Ibid., p.146
21) Ibid., p.151
22) Ibid., p.153
23) Ibid., p.154
24) Ibid., p.154
25) Ibid., p.156
26) Ibid., p.154
27) Ibid., p.154
33) Charles W. Chesnutt, op.cit., p.1
34) Ibid., pp.264-265