

## Critique

"Depictions of Elderly Blacks in American Literature" is more suggestive than satisfying. It offers a useful introduction to its topic, but could have attempted either a more extensive catalog of elderly blacks in a wider range of American literature or a deeper and more thorough reading of a specific period or group of writers.

The basic categories of Deck's discussion are acceptable, though a much fuller gathering of elderly black figures might reveal some limitations in this taxonomy. In discussing the "primordial" black advisor/storyteller, the friend and aider who conveys affection and wisdom, Deck properly identifies an established literary type that has become a problematical myth. A particularly relevant observation here is that the Uncle Remus figure has been widely accepted among whites because of his passive nature and submissive manner and because his contact with white society is affectionate and avuncular interaction with a child. In short, Uncle Remus is embraced only because his voice is soft, his message supposedly frivolous and transitory (because oral), his presence nonthreatening; he is domesticated. The point that the Uncle Remus type provides a protective and comforting (and deceptive) buffer between black culture and white readers is reinforced by Deck's observation that we should distinguish on a structural level between literary frames and the tales they enclose. In the case of Joel Chandler Harris, the frame should remind us of both his cooption and his transmogrification of black culture.

Deck's discussion of *The Conjure Woman* is perceptive, but too brief. In particular, the theme of apparent vulnerability as a mask for the shifty and subversive might have been pursued more fully—and tied more precisely to Julius's tale-telling as a "way of working magic on his white boss." Further development might concentrate more on oral folklore as rhetorical ruse and psychological tool. Even more crucially, Deck might have pursued further the relationship between rationality, reason, and formal learning on one hand and ethnicity, folklore, and magic on the other. More can and should be developed about the complex interaction in ethnic experience between the formal and imposed (whether literary or experiential) and the informal and intuitive.

The section of the article on characters in Faulkner and Welty is too limited and rhetorical to give an adequate sense of the way they present elderly blacks; the limited sampling really does not allow us to justify conclusions concerning the work of these writers and their possible roles as promoters of stereotypes and platitudes. In addition, to juxtapose the work of Faulkner and Welty to that of writers such as Walker and

Giovanni is to compare and contrast the attitudes and approaches of different generations, and this (specific questions of race and culture notwithstanding) is always a problematical undertaking. Finally, Deck's criticism that Welty "simply imagined" Phoenix in order to create a "highly romantic" picture—rather than actually speak with the old black woman who inspired her—suggests a much more empirical and sociological approach to fiction than most writers find comfortable.

The discussion of interactions between black generations should be deeper and more extensive in future analyses—whether those interactions involve conflict or harmony. For example, if there are no conflicts between Miss Jane Pittman and the black generations that follow hers, why is this so? In *The Chaneyville Incident*, what, precisely, is the justification for Old Jack Crawley's animus toward formal education, and what, for a younger generation, is its relationship to "the wisdom gained from lived experiences"? What, more generally, is the relationship in black experience between formal knowledge and such matters as meditation and a return to ethnic roots? Is formal education merely another version of domestication? This seems to be a fundamental—and vexing—question in ethnic writing generally (one thinks, for example, of Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, 1982) as well as black literature specifically. With what new consciousness does *Invisible Man* emerge from his illuminated hibernation? What of the perjorative image of the older, "preacher" figure in Gaines's "The Sky is Gray," in confrontation with the educated young activist in the dentist's office? Or, consider the simultaneously enabling and compromising role of "white" education in Walker's "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring." Such questions become even more complex when the matter of sex roles is introduced, as in the fiction of Hurston and Morrison. The educative roles and functions of older black women constitute a rich subject in their own right, one with many more ambiguities and dilemmas than suggested.

Deck has introduced a number of critical questions regarding depictions of elderly blacks in American literature. These questions should be pursued by Deck and others.

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