Sexual and Racial Passing: The Illusion of Choice
in the Novels of Eliza Haywood and Charles Chesnutt.

In this essay I will discuss the connection between literary self-reflexivity and the theme of passing in Eliza Haywood’s *The British Recluse* and *Fantomina*, and Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars*. *The British Recluse* (1722) tells the story of Cleomira, a young woman who slept with a deceitful man out of wedlock, and faked her own death after the social fallout. In *Fantomina* (1724), the titular character also sleeps with a man out of wedlock, and when he tries to leave her, she follows him and adopts various disguises and identities in order to continue her relationship with him. Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) chronicles the tale of a pair of bi-racial siblings, Rena and John, who try to pass for white. Frank, “a dark brown young man,” also passes but in a more subtle way: he pretends to be a simple man, but is more intelligent and more observant than anyone realizes (Chesnutt 27). Each of these characters takes on a fictional identity when they pass, because the identities they are expected to fulfill by fictional and social conventions would limit them severely. Passing gives these characters the opportunity to choose identities for themselves, rather than having society choose for them. However, this power to choose is complicated by the fact that the identities the characters choose are just as limited, or more so, than their original identities. The complex choices the characters encounter confront the idea of a constructed identity, and the self-reflexivity each novel features confronts the construction of the novel as a whole. Self-reflexivity and passing are thematic strategies employed by Haywood and Chesnutt to explore and challenge fictional and social conventions. Both authors manage to challenge the origins of these conventions, but they do not overcome or overturn them.
Passing is when a person who belongs to one race or identity tries to change themselves and how they’re seen in order to belong to another racial group or identity, like the characters in Haywood’s and Chesnutt’s novels, who use the generic conventions of fiction in order to pass successfully. Self-reflexivity refers to the literary tool of calling attention to a novel’s fictional status. It can be accomplished in a number of ways: the use of “I” in previously third-person points of view, the reference to fictional works within the fictional world of the novel, or occasionally a blatant admission of fictional status by the narrator. Self-reflexivity is an important tool used by Haywood and Chesnutt, because their novels were written at a time when the importance of a novel was being called into question, even by the novel itself. It is my theory that by reminding readers of the fictional status of their works, Haywood and Chesnutt also remind us why their works were written. I believe the novels discussed here were written to explore the idea of using a fictional identity to gain some power of choice over your own fate. The characters exhibit an interesting and complex power of choice. Each passes and adopts an identity that still limits them in some way, and thus their power to choose their identity is revealed to be an illusion. The power of choice I refer to in this paper is truly, the choice to conform to stereotypes and conventions. While this seems to undercut the power of choice, and because each of these characters still succumbs to an unhappy fate, there is a distinct and subtle power in choosing to submit rather than being forced to do so.

In *The British Recluse*, Cleomira relies on the fictional convention that “ruined” women die tragically to convince her lover Lysander, and everyone else, that she has died, when in reality she lives and has only died socially. “I could not endure, however, to appear publically in the World again, and as Lysander believed me dead, I was willing every Body else should do so too; I ordered a Will to be drawn according to Law” (Haywood 199). The will is a fictional
document, and reference to it is a form of self-reflexivity. The word “will” implies Cleomira’s choice to fulfill the generic conventions of fiction: she will die, but she has chosen to. Her death and her will are fictional, like the story she is in, and the self-reflexivity serves to remind us that all of these things are very carefully constructed in order for Cleomira to retain some power of choice.

Rather than being condemned either to an actual death, or to becoming “one of the most exposed and unpitied Women in the World” (189), Cleomira chooses the fictional identity of a recluse, which gives her the power of choice where before she had none. In the end, she and Belinda, to whom she tells her story, move to the country together, “where they still live in a perfect Tranquility… And where a solitary Life is the effect of Choice, it certainly yields more solid Comfort than all the public Diversions… can find” (224). For Cleomira, tranquility and peace are found in the choice of a solitary life with another woman, and it is her adoption of a fictional identity that gives her this choice. Were she to surrender to the social conventions of the period, she would’ve become an “unpitied Woman,” and were she to surrender to the fictional conventions, she would’ve died. Passing as dead and taking on the identity of the recluse allows Cleomira to live and defy both conventions. The self-reflexivity found in *The British Recluse* reminds us that in this way, Haywood is also able to defy the conventions of the time.

Fantomina also uses passing to give herself a choice. She relies on social and fictional conventions to convince Beauplaisir that she is a different woman each time she dons a disguise. Her true identity is that of an upstanding lady of the court. She first meets Beauplaisir while she is at the playhouse. The playhouse is a reference to another form of fiction and serves as an example of self-reflexivity. It allows Haywood to call attention to the fictional processes of *Fantomina*, which help to create Fantomina’s various identities. The meeting at the playhouse is
significant, because like the plays they watch, Fantomina’s identities are staged and a performance for Beauplaisir. Her identity as a court lady grants her very little choice when it comes to expressing her desire for Beauplaisir, so she dons the identity of a prostitute. “She had often seen him in the Drawing-room… but then her quality and reputed Virtue kept him from using her with that Freedom which she now expected he would do” (228). As a prostitute, Fantomina has the “freedom” to choose Beauplaisir. Social conventions would lead us to believe that an upper class lady, such as Fantomina’s original identity, would have more freedoms than a prostitute, but that is not the case here. For instance, Fantomina is able to trick Beauplaisir the first night they meet by telling him, “she was under Obligations to a Man who maintained her, and whom she durst not disappoint” (228). Beauplaisir believes this story, because the “story [was] so like what those Ladies sometimes tell” (228), implying that prostitutes often had very little choice in whom they went home with. Yet Fantomina uses the identity of a prostitute to choose to go home with Beauplaisir, when she wishes to. Feminine characters in fiction are supposed to be obedient, much like Fantomina is supposedly obedient to “the Man who maintained her,” yet she is obedient only to her own desires. With the story and her fictional identify, Fantomina challenges social and fictional conventions. By passing as a prostitute and withholding her real name, she can express her desires without putting herself in danger of “being exposed” or “public Ridicule” (230). The “story” Fantomina tells is another example of self-reflexivity and reminds readers that even though Fantomina’s story is fictional, as is the novel of Fantomina, they still have importance. In this case, the self-reflexivity calls attention to the power of choice Fantomina manages to maintain through her fictional identity.

Frank, from The House Behind the Cedars, relies on fictional conventions associated with his race in order to convince Rena and everyone else that he is in fact invisible, unimportant,
ignorant, and unintelligent. The characters who identify themselves as black in the novel speak in an expected black dialect. Frank says “frien’s,” while bi-racial Rena Walden, who passes for white, says “friends” (Chesnutt 29), despite the fact that both have grown up in the same town. When we first meet Frank, we are told he “was not proud,” and that he has “humble devotion” for Rena (28). The first service we see him offer to Rena and her mother, that of driving Rena in her cart, is regarded as “the height of the ridiculous” (29) by the other characters. Yet Frank is able to use this identity to see everything and everyone for what they really are, without letting himself be seen. When Rena goes to a new town to pass for white, Frank follows her just to see her and finds her at the local tournament. “Frank had surmised that Rena would be present on such an occasion. He had more than guessed, too, that she must be looked for among the white people rather than among the black… The result has already been recounted. He recognized her sweet face” (88). Despite never being told about the Waldens’ secret, he is aware of Rena’s plan to pass. Chesnutt’s reminder that the encounter between Frank and Rena has already “been recounted” calls attention to the created status of the novel. The self-reflexivity suddenly makes us aware that although Frank is passing as a background character, he is much more important than he first seemed. The actual tournament takes place many chapters before, with a quick reference to an unnamed black man, who is later revealed to be Frank. As quickly as he appears, he is gone, and does not resurface for several more chapters. In retrospect that we realize that Frank is often in the background, watching and making connections that other characters fail to, and only very rarely taking action or being noticed.

Later in the novel, at Rena’s going-away party, we are introduced to Mr. Wain, “a light brown” man who has hired Rena to be a teacher at his new school (137). The two leave together at the end of the night, and all of the guests are enchanted by Mr. Wain and his stories. Only
Frank has misgivings about Mr. Wain, and he is not even allowed at the party. He waits in the garden hoping to speak to Rena, and while watching the party remarks “In [Mr. Wain’s] shifty eye he read the liar – his wealth and standing were probably as false as his seeming good-humor” (150). Frank, unworthy of attending, is able to recognize the dangers in Mr. Wain, before anyone else. Frank also passes as self-deprecating, as if he believes in the segregation of blacks and whites: “The taint of black blood was the unpardonable sin, from the unmerited penalty of which there was no escape except by concealment” (89). Frank recognizes that the only way to “escape” is through “concealment,” which can be interpreted as his own decision to pass. By concealing his intelligence, he is able to pass as an invisible man and therefore sometimes to escape the fictional and social conventions associated with his race. Yet he also says “If God had meant to rear any impassable barrier between people of contrasting complexions, why did he not express the prohibition as He had done between other orders of creation?” (197). His true feelings are that skin color matters very little. By passing as self-deprecating and as a believer in segregation, Frank is able to cultivate his invisible personality, an identity that can pass through towns largely unnoticed while he notices all. The fictional identity of invisibility allows him to choose when to use his skills of observation and his intelligence, and when to remain unnoticed in the crowd. Frank chooses to be invisible, and his identity is as carefully constructed as the story he is in.

Each of these characters uses passing to work within, rather than tear down, the social construct they find themselves in. Cleomira does not move out of London until the end of the story; Fantomina does not pretend to be a man to gain more freedoms; and Frank does not try to pass for a white man. Instead, each character adopts an identity that would seemingly have fewer choices: a dead woman, a prostitute, and a simple black man. By choosing these fictional
identities, which are created by fictional processes and rely on fictional and social conventions, these characters manage to subtly gain power without alerting other characters to their designs. Each character uses this power to choose their own path. Cleomira chooses to survive, Fantomina chooses to embrace desire, and Frank chooses to hide. Each of the characters passes by choosing to conform to stereotypes, in the hopes that in choosing to accept the fates of a colored man or sexually “ruined” woman will change the fates associated with these identities – marginalization or death. They are unsuccessful, and each succumbs to fate at least partially.
Cleomira ends up hiding for the rest of her life with only one friend; Fantomina is sent to a nunnery; and Frank loses the love of his life to sickness. However, each of the characters lives and thwarts the fictional convention that they must die in order to be passively or femininely heroic. Together these examples send the moral message that, even if you choose an identity, you will still be powerless. It is important to note that the endings are much less harsh than social and fictional conventions of the time demanded; both Haywood and Chesnutt use their passing characters to show readers a new way of looking at these types of characters, but neither author ventures entirely into new territory as they remain partially true to fictional conventions. They are the spark, but not the flames of literary revolution.

In “Masquing Desire: The Politics of Passion in Eliza Haywood’s Fantomina” by Margaret Case Croskery explores the passions involved in Fantomina, and the way both feminine and masculine passion, and therefore roles, are explored and deconstructed. While she says that Haywood’s feminist voice effectively challenges traditional fictional gender roles, she also says “Haywood’s emphasis on the involuntary female response to her own desires seems to imply a lack of female agency even as it champions the power of female desire” (71). The idea that
women should and can act on their desires is empowering. The idea that feminine desires are overwhelming takes some of that power away.

In “Eliza Haywood and the Masquerade of Femininity” Catherine Craft-Fairchild states: “Haywood’s masquerade fiction helps both to construct and deconstruct eighteenth-century cultural conceptions of femininity” (53). She argues that Haywood’s masqueraders, or passers, challenge the fictional and social conventions of the time, including patriarchy, by not having her passer’s die tragically as was the convention. Simultaneously, the passers also support the hierarchy because their actions are based on the desires of men, despite Haywood’s belief in feminine desire and femininity. Characters like Cleomira and Fantomina challenge the fictional conventions, but do not entirely overcome them.

Ryan Simmons explores Chesnutt’s use of realism. In connection with the portrayal of Frank, he says “Frank, however is neither a spoof of blackness nor the embodiment of African American heroism” (71). He argues that Frank is a manifestation of Chesnutt’s friend, Booker T. Washington, and is meant to represent Chesnutt’s opinion that Washington’s ideas about education were “a dead-end compromise” (71), because Chesnutt felt they were not enough. This explains why Frank is always merely watching, and has a very passive role in the plot, despite his deep knowledge and awareness.

In Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel M. Giulia Fabi analyzes Frank’s passing as an invisible man, saying “it constitutes a strategy to complicate and destabilize traditional literary representations of race… However, its effectiveness in The House Behind the Cedars remains limited because the author… never explicitly thematizes the trope of invisibility he uses in his characterization of Frank” (88). Fabi points out that Frank is present for almost the
entire novel, but is only noticed in very few chapters. The role he plays is important in the end, but he is under-utilized until then. Thus, Frank’s choice to pass is revealed to be almost useless.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail Bakhtin explores the origins of the novel and language as a whole. Bakhtin argues that the novel’s flexibility and openness contributes to its ability to incite literary and social change. “The novel sparks the renovation of all other genres, it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness” (7). Haywood and Chesnutt’s novels “spark” the idea of changing literary conventions for the passer (which have resonating effects on social conventions for women and colored people), but the novels are “inconclusive,” and succumb to the still-standing conventions of the time. According to Bakhtin’s argument, the very structure of the novel leads to the passing character’s inability to completely overcome their circumstances.

In *Origins of the English Novel*, Michael McKeon also explores the origins of the novel. McKeon writes that “The early novelists can be seen as struggling towards a form that would defetishize the spirit by freeing it from the realm of the ideal, whence it might descend to inhabit the world of human relations, the material ground on which the real battle against the deadening materialization of the spirit would have to be fought out in future times” (312). This can certainly be applied to Haywood and Chesnutt, who were struggling towards a novel that would allow people to no longer obsess over race and gender without fully understanding their impact. Then the impact would be freed “from the realm of the ideal”, that is, understood and explained in the common vernacular, in order to be discussed and explored fully. Haywood and Chesnutt sought to make these issues “descend to inhabit” the everyday world, but they left the “real battle” to be “fought out in future times.” So while they were able to bring these issues to the forefront of our minds, the real battle had to be fought by the readers.
The true poignancy in Haywood and Chesnutt’s novels is not in the characters’ triumph over fictional and social conventions, or even in the challenging of these conventions. The power of these works is in exposing the fictional and social conventions of the time period, and exploring the possibility that these conventions are not simply true, but in some way constructed; partially by the very people affected and limited by them. The self-reflexivity of these novels serves to remind readers not only of the constructed identity each character adopts, but of the constructed nature of the novel as a whole. This in turn, allows readers to question the nature of fictional and social conventions. Chesnutt and Haywood seem to be sending the moral message that choosing your own path is admirable, but they also recognize the complexity of the issue. Identity, gender, and race are very convoluted ideas, and Chesnutt and Haywood, while they made incredible strides in challenging social and fictional conventions about these ideas, did not manage to completely overturn them. The female characters still think about men and desire falling in love for most of *The British Recluse* and *Fantomina*; and the black character still seems to be less intelligent than the white characters for a good deal of *The House Behind the Cedars*. Most of the characters who chose their own path and identity ended up facing circumstances out of their control, and their endings were not what they had hoped for. This implies that although Chesnutt and Haywood believe in challenging social and fictional conventions, they are unsure if these conventions can be fully overcome, which implies that perhaps there is a grain of truth in these conventions. The suggestion is that the ideas about race, gender, and identity as a whole may exist for a reason. Unfortunately, the origins of stereotypes is not as easily researched as the origin of the novel. It is unclear how much of our ideas about gender roles and racial identity stems from natural instinct and how much is based solely on the opinion of society. Chesnutt and Haywood manage to bring the issues forward, and force us to confront these questions and the
uncomfortable feelings that accompany them. We as readers are forced to examine our
prejudices, and to wonder where they stem from. We are forced to challenge our own ideas of
gender and race and identity, to pick up the battle where Chesnutt and Haywood left off. We are
forced to confront our ideas about dishonesty, and what is an acceptable form of passing, which
is simply another form of lying. We are sympathetic to the passing of Cleomira, Fantomina, and
Frank, but we detest the lies of Lysander, Beauplaisir, and Mr. Wain. Yet nearly every character
in these three novels is passing in one way or another. The characters we feel sympathy for end
up unhappy, and the characters that we dislike are mostly unscathed. The moral message of these
works is as complex as the issues they attempt to explore. The self-reflexivity of the novels
serves to remind readers that despite the fictional status of the work, the ideas are real and have a
real impact on the world. For, much like Cleomira, Fantomina, and Frank, we too have choices
to make about our identities.
Works Cited


