

# “Actual Experience”: Correcting Misconceptions Through Analyzing Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*

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African-American writers during the 19th century wrote in the shadow of the prominent romance, sentimental, and domestic fiction. Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) reflects an “alternative social character”, for the female protagonist suffers racism in the free North, because she is a mulatto child. Through depicting the life of free blacks, who supposedly lives a better life than Southern slaves, Wilson exposes how she has actually lived and sensed life in antebellum America. According to Raymond Williams (2011), there are two kinds of literary writings. The first represents the general tendency of the age, and he calls it “dominant social character”; representing the majority content of both the public writing and speaking. But, another different literary writing lives in its shadow; one that usually leads the conflicts of the time. It is the “alternative social character”; the literature of the victims of repression and marginalization, produced by the lower class, women, and blacks. They reflected how they were dehumanized, and exposed their suffering and abasement. They also aimed to prove individualism. The novel reveals how racism in the North could be worse than the slavery of the South. This paper shows Wilson deviation from the “her brethren” in writing her novel. It unveils significant truths concerning black women’s status in antebellum America. It discusses how the author attempts to correct certain misconceptions through her female character.

*Keywords:* structure of feeling, alternative social character, racism, female character, misconceptions

## Introduction

During the mid-19th century, abolitionists spent much effort to gain sympathy for the African Americans who were denied freedom in the South. They attempted to change the slaves’ picture from “a cattle to human beings”; the use of the slaves’ scarred bodies by the abolitionists “was shaped by the cultural and historical factors that were beginning to sentimentalize pain” (Gomaa, 2009, p. 371). The abolitionists promoted the use of “pulpit, story-telling and vivid language”. They also encouraged slaves to expose their physical pains to the audience, to let their scarred bodies expose the amount of abuse and oppression they experienced in antebellum America. To make sure that the representations of the slaves in pain would arouse sympathy, those abolitionists made use of “evangelical revivalism” as a model for sympathetic conversion (Clark, 1995, p. 479). Their assistants were the white middle-class women, the “the angles of the house” whose duty was to guide the family spiritually since they were regarded superior to men in this account.

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Those women's role was to attract the male members of their families to follies of the society, since men's work never allowed them to consider such matters. The blacks' issue became one of these women's concerns. Usually, the black author appeals to the white females, at the beginning of the work, for sympathy and help in order to end his/her misery. The intention was to make white middle-class women feel the suffering and agony of those slaves, to gain the white women's sympathy, since women were seen as the spiritual guidance according to the "cult of true womanhood". They represented the spiritual side of the society and they were known for charity work, compassion, and love of God.

African-Americans first wrote autobiographical and historical discourse; they used narrative writing to resist underdevelopment, indicated Peterson (1992, p. 560). In the 1850s, they turned to fiction as one means of redefining the lives of "the colored folks". This writing, added by Peterson (1992, p. 561), also carried a danger—the adoption of the language of the dominant culture, publication for a readership of whites as well as blacks—the fear of transforming authorship into a tool that would separate them into the structure of hegemony. Those authors expressed varying attitudes, however, they remained united to their desire to envision black subjectivity within the multiple and complex context of African-American experience.

In the 1850s, African-American writers used fiction and specifically the novel, as Bakhtin (1981) suggested, for fiction appears at those moments of crisis when a national culture is decentralized and loses "its sealed-off and self-sufficient character" (p. 370). Peterson (1992) clarified that the 1850s was a critical time for African Americans for they "witnessed the dramatic deterioration of race relations" (p. 561); it was obvious through the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska, and the Dred Scott decision, as well as the "exclusion of the blacks from industrialization in the North" and the augmented demand for slaves in the South.

African-American writers like Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, William W. Brown, Frank J. Webb, and Martin R. Delany began experimenting with fiction hoping to reach border audience. These early African-American novels consisted of intermingled fact and fiction so that they came to occupy special and potentially empowering, "marginal position between authenticable history on one hand and unverifiable fiction on the other" (Andrews, 1990, p. 26). Its strength lays in the fact that fiction is often, in Graff's (1981) terms, "hyper-assertive rather than non-assertive", capable of "making stronger, more universalizable" statements than the "factual" discourse of history or autobiography (p. 146). Those writers wished their writing could make the consideration of serious political issues more palatable to a readership seeking entertainment rather than edification.

Previously, all works that were written by minor writers, women or colored were neglected by old critics for they were considered "low" culture. Cultural materialists critics revived these works for they believed that all cultural productions can be analyzed to reveal the cultural work they perform; the role of cultural production, in the circulation of power, is to form our experiences by transmitting or transforming ideologies. To recover the history of a text is to relate the works to such phenomena as "enclosures and the oppression of the rural poor, state power and resistance to it" (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1994, p. 3). So, cultural materialists gave life to other cultures which they found to be as much, if not more, important than the high culture for it is the culture of the majority of society.

### **The Actual Experience**

Raymond Williams, in *The Long Revolution* (2011), stated that an art work cannot be "adequately studied" in separation from the particular society within which it was expressed. We should realize "how deeply works or

values could be determined by the whole situation in which they are expressed": It is "an error" to believe that "the social explanation is determining, or that the works... are mere by-product" (Williams, 2011, p. 65). Culture confines the individuals with restrictions set for them; they may struggle against these restrictions or transform them. Williams indicated that each individual has a practical consciousness; it is actually social and material kind of feeling and thinking, virtually always different from "official consciousness". It is a practical and precise quality of social experience and relationship. It gives the sense of a generation or a period and historically distinct from other particular qualities (Williams, 1977, pp. 130-131). Displaying this construction, we find the evaluation of the effort and quality of consciousness fundamentally influences work which displays signs of the changing structure of feeling. Expression or articulation, clarifies Williams, is a category of action exposed to moral and political judgment. Analyzing a piece of literature, by concentrating on forms and conventions of writing and evaluating alongside with different discourses in the society, will show this "structure of feeling".

Williams (2011) used the term structure of feelings to define "the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization" (p. 69). For this reason, arts of the period become very important, because they represent examples of "recorded communication that outlives its bearers" (Williams, 2011, p. 69). But, the many individuals in the community do not congruently possess this structure of feeling, interestingly it does not seem to be learned or taught. Each generation trains its successor in the social character or the general cultural pattern, yet, the new generation shapes its own structure of feelings, which will not seem to have come from anywhere.

Williams (1977) also defined the term "as social experiences in solution" (p. 134); it is different from other social semantic constructions which have emerged into the field of criticism, and is more clearly and directly accessible. He saw that the real creations of most genuine art to be "relate[d] to already manifest social formations, dominant or residual, and it is primarily to emergent formations" (Williams, 1977, p. 134). Williams (2011) clarified that residual and emergent structures of feeling suggest alternative or oppositional positions within a culture; they are the product of a practical consciousness at levels of adjustment with the dominant, and they can rather clearly be perceived to be linked, sometimes, to class formations and experience. There is necessary interaction with wider structural processes that causes their emergence and interaction. This provides a fluid context and contextual frame for thinking about identity practice, historical change, and social structure as processes characterizing the changing formations, arrangements, and traditions that once constituted the industrial cultures.

A social character was the abstract of a dominant group, and certainly the character described was at the time (referred to) the most powerful, stated Williams. Meanwhile, there were other social characters with substantial bases in the society. The dominant social character was different, in many ways, from the "life lived in its shadow", so there was the "alternative social character" that led the "real conflict of the time" (Williams, 2011, p. 84). He stressed on minor groups who work with new tendencies trying to proclaim their existence and improve their situation. He considered those minor groups to be the reason behind change.

The working class is seen as "victims of repression and punitive rehabilitation... and exposure to suffering" (Williams, 2011, p. 84). Those working-class people were formulating alternative ideals; they had important allies from the interaction of other systems. In *Politics and Letters*, Williams clarified the limitations

imposed by oppositions such as those between planned government and individual freedom; inwardness or individuality; and social participation. These oppositions usually engrossed as the matter and frame of representation; they confine the potential for new thought, new responses to experience. The writer's function is to convey and articulate new positions (Williams, 1981). He believed that some art expresses feeling which the general character of the society could not express, as when Wilson reveals racism as an additional burden to the free black woman character. She exposed creative responses which bring new feelings to light. The text may also be a simple record of omission.

One can understand the creative part of a culture, as Williams suggested, by referring to different activities: new institutions, different forms of relationships, the slow creation of different images of community, new organizations, and the middle-class reformers. They are considered as valuable and strong as the major art and thought. The true value of a culture work can be seen more clearly when it is related to the whole organization where it was used, such as relating Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) with racism showing how free black women experienced double suffering—for being “colored” and women.

### **The Background and Significance of the Work**

*Our Nig* is considered the first African-American novel written and published by an African-American woman in the United States. It was published in Boston at “Wilson's expense”. It appeared in 1859, two years before the Civil War, “a time marked by anti-slavery agitation, fugitive slave laws, and a group of extraordinary activities” (Jefferson, 1983, p. 675). But it did not get popularity at its time and eventually went through 124 years of literary oblivion. In 1982, the text was found by Gates in a Manhattan bookshop. He retrieved very hard to gather little biographical information from public documents. He also wrote a thorough introduction to the book in which he analyzed the book's social and literary history, its link to contemporary slave narratives and, particularly its use and revision of women's sentimental fiction.

It is supposed to be a fictional third-person autobiography. But, the fact that the book is based on the writer's life in the North, and it reads as a slave narrative changes a few things. She writes it as a fictionalized autobiography of an abandoned mulatto child who hardly survives the horrors of indentured servitude in antebellum Massachusetts. The novel depicts the female character's (Frado) progress in learning to defend herself from the harsh treatment of her mistress by fighting back with words and actions and finding her voice. The work is a slave narrative in spite of its novel form for Wilson have grafted a slave narrative onto a sentimental novel through which she creates “a harrowing account of captivity suffused with the effective atmosphere and moral ideology of American women's fiction of the 1850s” (Stern, 1995, p. 447). Wilson uses the sentimental frame as a structure of the containment; however, the gothic protest seething beneath the narrative surface is in suppressible.

The novel failed to gain popularity because, as Elwood-Farber (2010) believed: “It critiqued northern racism, instead of unveiling the horrors of slavery in the south” (p. 471), it also deviated in the way it exposed the evils of oppression through capitalism. However, it is considered as “a historical account” of the ways in which Northern people thought and behaved towards black people, especially women (Elwood-Farber, 2010, p. 471). So, Wilson deviated from what was assigned to her by the abolitionists who usually promoted the slaves works to serve in achieving abolitionists goals.

### Harriet Wilson's Deviation

The novel is considered “an experiment; a unified fiction informed by the genres of the sentimental novel, the gothic autobiography, the slave narrative, and realism” (Gates, 1983, p. xvii). Wilson drives her plot from sentimental novels where we usually have the story of a poor, abandoned child in a manner mixed with gothic undertones. The author uses the prevailing sentimental genre, originally used to serve the domestic discourse, to tell the story of a poor colored woman. She uses the genre of sentimental novel to critique racist notions of the true womanhood ideal and its obligations towards morality. She exposes clearly how she, the free mulatto child goes through social discrimination and abuse in the North similar to slaves' suffering in the South. She challenges the traditions of the social character of her day which believes that only white middle-class women could possess the characteristics of true womanhood. Contradicting these false assumptions, she presents her poor mulatto female to carry most of these features while white female characters, like Mag, Mrs. Bellmount, and her daughter Mary to upset commonplace assumptions of the inherent virtue in whiteness.

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The author uses the genre of sentimental novel to critique racist notions of the true womanhood ideal and its obligations towards morality. She exposes clearly how she, the free mulatto child goes through social discrimination and abuse in the North much similar to slaves' suffering in the South. Hence, the novel unveils the hypocrisy of the northern abolitionist's agenda to advocate an end to slavery, while internalized racist notions of “negroes”. Slavery was deep rooted inside the majority and they could not overcome their feeling of superiority over the blacks.

However, Wilson deviates from the sentimental novel's tropes and plot structure in certain ways: Firstly, she depicts her protagonist suffering from continuous violent attacks; secondly, she does not develop to become a securely fortified Christian believer; thirdly, she does not live happily ever after. Gates (1983) believed that if Wilson “did not exactly create a subgenre of the sentimental novel, at least introduces a stunning innovation” (p. xxxix). Comparing the work with its society, we find, in these characteristic forms and devices, evidences of deadlocks and unsolved problems of the society; they are admitted to consciousness for the first time in this way. It reflects a deep desire to move beyond it (Williams, 2011). Her female character looks beyond traditional domesticity- to work- for her liberation (Larson, 2009). Wilson's novel expresses feeling which the general character of the society cannot express; racism is shown as an additional burden to this free black woman.

The third-person narrator enables Wilson to maintain control over the plot; it also allows various outside view points on the fictionalized self which “achieve a perspective of omniscience, unattainable in traditional autobiography” (Peterson, 1992, p. 564). It gives her freedom to talk about her experience through her character. It is a third-person autobiography based on her life in the North, yet written within the conventions of a slave narrative. There is an episodic story, the description of beating by people who call each other Christians, the short

schooling she is allowed, and the presence of the moment of defiance (Elwood-Farber, 2010, p. 472). One should remember that Frado is an indentured servant in the free North; however, she is treated as a slave.

Throughout their history in America, the blacks are concerned with the meaning of being black in a culture that is preoccupied with whites. Wilson fictionalizes this concern through the complex characterization of her female character. The work "is obviously concerned with sociopolitical dimensions of slavery; [Wilson's] very title condemns Northern slavery" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 15). *Our Nig* critiques severe racism of the North for Frado "is treated as if she were a house servant under plantation slavery" (Stern, 1995, pp. 440-441). This is one of the reasons behind the novel's burial for over a century.

Even in her Preface to the novel, Wilson pleads her "colored brethren universally for patronage" (Preface) to support her book and defend it rather than appealing to white women as habitually slave narrative writers did in their prefaces. This action cuts off any support from northern white women that she might have had with her preface statement. Wilson has isolated a total audience that did not have the money to support her and buy her book instead of her "colored brethren" who had very little means to support her (Elwood-Farber, 2010). That is a second reason for the oblivion of the book.

The novel is seen, often, as having been too threatening to its contemporary white audience. Wilson, as some other black writers, is "doing some effort to redirect public attention from the narrow confines of pro and anti-slavery writings to a broader perspective of issues facing black Americans which were not to be solved by emancipation" (Pratofiorito, 2001, p. 31). So the work is challenging the status of prominent antebellum discourses of race.

### **The Female Experience**

Frado is the female character around whom the story revolves. She represents Wilson's life and experiences from childhood to the time of writing the novel. She is a mulatto child; the product of the marriage between a fallen white woman and a black man—Wilson's mother was Irish while her father was a free African-American. This makes her distinction even more scrutinized. After the death of Frado's father, Jim, her mother marries another black man and they decide to leave town since business is not good there. Frado, is seen as a burden, so she is "given away" (Wilson, 2011, p. 6) to a Northern family in town.

The six-year-old child, Frado, goes through much distress by white women in her life. It starts with the indifferent mother who abandons her at the door of another family never thinking of her as a human being, but as a mere object that does not afford any profit. When Jim, Frado's father was alive, Mag never thought of getting rid of her children for Jim was supporting her financially. Her second black husband does not want the child, she is "none of mine", he says, and Mag obeys him blindly sacrificing her child to please her new supporter.

Living an outcast for a long time, the hardness of poverty "had crushed the sharp agonies of an awakened conscience", so Mag "ceased to feel the gushing of a better life, she descended lower and entered the darkness of perpetual infamy" (Wilson, 2011, p. 6). Mag lives in a capitalist society where feelings of maternity are lost; in fact, she herself is a cruel and selfish mother in comparison with Hester Prynne's compassion to her child; the love, care, and struggle to nurture her own infant in *The Scarlet Letter* (1848).

Wilson is defying a wrong assumption concerning the differences between white and black women. Sexuality, here, is associated with the white woman; it is reflected in Mag's character who keeps committing sinful

deeds, since amalgamation was considered a very unfavorable unity, so she “descends another step down the ladder of infamy” (Wilson, 2011, p. 4). Wilson corrects the created mythic “loose black woman” which was a necessary correlate for the ideal woman (Dowling, 2009). Here, Wilson reverses this image; Frado lives decently, and, at the last part is struggling—pains of weak health, to gain money and support her sick child through writing. Although Frado is not white, yet she is able to live decently as any white woman and fulfill her maternal role—what Mag fails in performing.

Mag inflicts another evil deed by putting Frado in indenturing servitude. Though she is a free white woman, she acts like black women. Her cruel decision matches an act commonly done in antebellum period by “poor free black single mothers” who cannot afford a life for their children so the child would be bind into “indentured servitude” (Sterling, 1984). But Mag’s case is different since she is a white mother of a mixed-raced child. Moreover, Mag knows well how brute is Mrs. Belmont to her servants; she calls her “she-devil” (Wilson, 2011, p. 8) for Mag has experienced firsthand the woman’s behavior as an employer, having to do some work for the family.

However, several days later Frado is “given away” to that woman, and Mag never comes back to her. Abandoned by a mother who thought of gaining money more than caring about a little child, forces her to stay at the Belmont’s; in this “new home”, Frado waits “for the close of the day, which was to bring back her mother”, but “it never came” (Wilson, 2011, p. 8). This action has its bad impact on the child for it makes her feel lonely, neglected, and homeless all the time.

The Belmont family, verbally, seems to agree on terms of Frado’s service though they never record it officially. Technically, Frado is not a slave but an indentured servant. Nevertheless, she is treated as if she is a house servant under plantation slavery. Mrs. Belmont treats the child with violence so brutal and sustained that looks like a form of torture. She never loses a chance to torture her.

Frado undergoes a change from a human being into a commodity. Starting with her mother who disregarded her as something not useful anymore; an additional burden that she has to get rid of. So she disregards Frado as she does with an unwanted material which she simply throws away.

In the Belmont’s house, she is regarded as an object, “acquisition” of the family. The moment she enters the house, she is hailed as “our nig”; they turn her to a slave, one of their belongings. Jack comments that: “it wouldn’t be two days before [Mary] would be telling the girls about OUR nig, OUR nig!” (Wilson, 2011, p. 9). Hence, she becomes an object to boast about in front of others. The six years old Frado is overburden with excessive housework. Mrs. Belmont admits to her husband that Frado “did the work of two girls”, she also says that “[t]here was never one of my girls could do half the work”, and her husband replies: “I think she can do more than all of them together” (Wilson, 2011, p. 37).

Frado remains there for 12 years during which she undergoes various kinds of punishment, torment, and humiliation; finally, she ends up with “falling health” which “was a cloud no kindly human hand could dissipate” (Wilson, 2011, p. 50). Long years of oppression lead her to lose interest in life and people and wish for death several times: “I ha’n’t got any mother, no home, I wish I was dead” (Wilson, 2011, p. 46). Another time she is heard by James, the Belmont’s elder son, talking to her dog saying: “Why was I made? Why can’t I die? Oh, what have I to live for?” Finally, she concludes: “Oh, if I could die” (Wilson, 2011, p. 31).

The humiliation is both physical and verbal; Mrs. Bellmont usually puts a piece of wood in Frado's mouth to keep her silent while she beats her severely, and always calls her: "lazy jade", and "lazy nigger". It is a challenge from Wilson to describe the black body in pain for it "intervenes in the racist attempt to classify black as bestial not be taken on the sexualizing narrative but by testifying to a black subject ability to feel pain and condemn torture" (Dowling, 2009). Frado does not reflect any bestiality; on the contrary, it is Mrs. Bellmont's punishment that shows inhumanity and brutality.

When James comes home, he wishes to see that "object of interest"; the mulatto whose mother has abundant, and now she is turned to an object of his mother's torment. All the male characters, aunt Abby, and the elder daughter Jane have sympathy for Frado, but none interferes in stopping the mother's evil deeds. She dehumanizes the girl in different ways; "SHE" "shaved her glossy ringlets", and puts her in "coarse cloth gown and ancient bonnet", so she would look like "anything but an enticing object" (Wilson, 2011, p. 28). While Aunt Abby tries to teach her Christianity for she sees in the girl "a soul to save"; but Mrs. Bellmont "hardly believed" that the nig "had a soul" (Wilson, 2011, p. 36).

Frado is made to carry the burden of black self-representation alone. Neither her free birth, nor her beautiful features could change Mrs. Bellmont view of the girl. She underestimates her both for being a mulatto and poor. Mrs. Bellmont is a woman with a very bad temper who looks down upon poor people: "Poverty to her was a disgrace, and she could not associate with any thus dishonored" (Wilson, 2011, p. 48). She treats her servants very rudely; Mag says that "she can't keep a girl in the house over a week; and that Mr. Bellmont wants to hire a boy to work for him, but he can't find one that will live in the house with her" (Wilson, 2011, p. 6). She is "self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and sever" (Wilson, 2011, p. 9). Her ill-treatment to people around her, even her own family, makes everybody run away from the house, even her own children.

Feeling quite positive that Frado will leave the house the moment she reaches eighteen, for all the injury she inflicts on her, Mrs. Bellmont makes sure to release the girl completely damaged. She is not her own slave to sell or exchange, nor could she keep her in service any longer. Her plan is to ruin the girl and consume her: Frado becomes a victim of "economic racial discrimination" (Craby, 1987, p. 41). As "SHE" cannot get benefit from the girl, she will not let anybody else have that benefit.

### **Frado's Femininity**

The Preface and the text both expose the repression of Frado's expressive powers; limitations are put on Frado's physical freedom, and she is persecuted by her evil oppressor. There is also violence done to her identity through racism by erasing all features of her mixed heritage and her femininity. The mistress tries to refashion Frado by inscribing blackness onto her body, because racial degradation does not signify unless it is made visible. She is described as mulatto, but the distance between her and the conventional figure is immense for she is a pale negro, with soft- texture hair. She looks pretty: "keep her" says Jack Bellmont to his mother in the first day, "she's real handsome and bright, and not very black, either" (Wilson, 2011, p. 9).

To the mother, these beautiful features present a threat. She racializes these features: Frado "was never permitted to shield her skin from the sun" when she is sent to "rake hay or guard the grazing herd" (Wilson, 2011, p. 39) no matter how powerful the heat is. Mrs. Bellmont seeks to refashion the mulatto child by inscribing blackness onto her body so the racial degradation would signify and made visible. She forces Frado into the sun



without a bonnet in order to “darken” her well beyond the few shades that originally distinguishes Frado’s skin tone from that of her daughter Mary. The narrator says: “At home, no matter how powerful the heat when sent to rake hay or guard the gazing herd, she was never permitted to shield her skin from the sun” (Wilson, 2011, p. 39). So “Mrs. Belmont was determined the sun should have full power to darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best befitting” (Wilson, 2011, p. 39).

Skin color and hair are physical attributes which define a black person as a slave and a white person as his master. Frado’s hair does not resemble the black, coarse, afro-texture; it is soft and light in color therefore it is “shaved” by Mrs. Belmont. She also dresses her in motley made up of Jack’s old clothes, so she would look like a boy. Through these changes made on the poor child, Mrs. Belmont satisfies herself in reducing Frado to be their “nig”. The mistress maintains “hostility towards the mixing of race”; it is something Americans had inherited “from the earliest days of colonialism and slavery” (Stern, 1995, p. 443). The mulatto girl should be reduced to her position in the social order of hierarchy.

The white mistress does her best to dehumanize the little girl. She treats her as an object from whom she can get utmost benefits. Frado works inside the house and out in the field for Mrs. Belmont wants to “beat the money out of her” (Wilson, 2011, p. 38), since “SHE” has taken her under her roof and fed her for twelve years. Frado sleeps in the smallest room there; she is not allowed to share the family their table, and her food, is usually the remains of others, and it must be eaten in the kitchen; she has no dress to wear; she is sent bare footed to school, and has no dress to wear for James’ funeral.

It is not only the race classification that drives Mrs. Belmont to “masculinize her servant”; the child’s gender and sexual identity is degraded through a systematic program by her mistress. Making her wear boys’ clothes and shaving her hair are meant to erase the girl’s beauty and femininity. She fears Frado’s emerging sexuality: “Thought you were getting too handsome, did she?” (Wilson, 2011, p. 70) says Jack to her commenting upon her humiliating haircut. Frado’s existence in such painful, contradicting world makes her obtain a sense of deprivation and rage which she resists through her longing for suicide.

Mrs. Belmont forbids the girl from displaying her emotions, such as her sadness at her mother’s failure to return to her and her grief for James’s serious sickness. The mistress shut Frado up when she found her weeping on James account, and she: “whipped her with the raw-hide, adding an injunction” warning her “never to be seen snivelling again because she had a little work to do” (Wilson, 2011, p. 93). Frado was very cautious “never to shed tears on his account, in her presence, afterwards” (Wilson, 2011, p. 77). When James time came, “it was a great effort for Frado to cease sobbing; but she dared not be seen below in tears; so she choked her grief” (Wilson, 2011, p. 96).

Aunt Abby encourages Frado to be “a believer in a future existence” (Wilson, 2011, p. 84), and obtains a desire for salvation. Oppositely, Mrs. Belmont believed “Religion was not meant for niggers” (Wilson, 2011, p. 68), so she never permitted Frado to attend church with them. Once she found her “reading and shedding tears over the Bible. She ordered her to put up the book, and to go to work, and not be snivelling about the house, or stop to read again” (Wilson, 2011, p. 87). The mistress kept giving her instructions that heaven is meant for whites, and “if she get to heaven at all, she would never be as high up as [them]” (Wilson, 2011, p. 100). Frado thought that if her mistress who is a professor of religion is going to heaven, then she did not wish to go to heaven; “she resolved to give over all thought of the future world” (Wilson, 2011, p. 104).

So, her mistress aim was to destroy the girl physically and spiritually; since she is not her slave and she cannot keep her forever, she will “beat the money out of her, if [she] can’t get her worth any other way” (Wilson, 2011, p. 90). Small Frado always lamented “her loneliness and complexion”, she obtained the feeling of inferiority, and her miserable life made her more than once wish for death.

### **Discussion**

Certain ideologies were contributed during the nineteenth century in white America; some of them concerned “notions of race that white people used as an excuse to oppress black Americans” (Elwood-Farber, 2010, p. 471). Notions like the superiority of the whites over other races—Africans and the Natives. The whites were seen as the civilized, educated, Christians whose task was to lead other races to the right ways of life; to save the others from the darkness of their primitive life. They enforced these notions in the society to the extent that all non-white races started actually to believe in this image.

The whites could never overcome their feeling of superiority over the blacks even if the latters were free and not quite dark in complexion. Appiah (1985) in his essay about race in the 19th century indicates that “one race gets conceptualized in biological terms, such low opinions of black people would lead easily to the belief that these in capacities were part of an inescapable racial essence” (p. 286). Many years after emancipation this same notion was still carried by the whites: “physicians and ministers—sometimes working together, often just drawing on each other’s work—continued to claim that blacks were fundamentally physically and morally different, of course, meant inferior” (Price-Herndl, 1995, p. 555). Wilson criticizes racism in the North in a unique way, showing how racism is based on a set of assumptions which are reflected in her character’s life.

Mag’s marriage to Jim is considered disgrace, another sinful deed: She “commits the ultimate sin in choosing amalgamation over starvation” (Elwood-Farber, 2010, p. 481). This is the way society looked at the relation. Whites were against mixing race with blacks out of their wrong assumptions regarding colored people whom they considered inferior, uncivilized, godless savages. However, the union of her parents defies the image of the savage black man who rapes the white women. Jim asks Mag: “which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?” (Wilson, 2011, p. 4). A sensible question is asked here, who is better, the deceitful white man who ruined Mag’s life, or the compassionate black who accepts to marry her and save her from need and starvation?

Frado’s agony and misery are doubled. She is not white, she is also not a slave, and meanwhile, she is abused physically and mentally by her white benefactor, and ignored by those who have power to support. The author exposes, in depicting Frado’s life with the Bellmonts, racist exploitation. It shows how the assumptions of race, based on biological racial distinctions, are found in the physical and moral sense in terms of Christianity and femininity. Because Frado is a mulatto, her racial distinctions are scrutinized even more for she is the product of miscegenation. Mrs. Bellmont subordinates Frado to see herself the way “SHE” wants her to be seen. She treats her as a servant though she is not. She is striped from her aspects of beauty and feminine features; by cutting her hair and making her wear Jack’s old cloths, now she looks like a boy and seems as a real nig. She is also denied from literal and spiritual education. Finally, she loses even health out of excessive, heavy work. Hence, she is forced to live a slave- like condition.

Mrs. Bellmont wants Frado to feel that she is inhuman; she is not like people whom she is living with for she

is "Other". She is unequal to the Belmont girls; Mary goes to school wearing the best clothes while Frado goes wearing rags that are "a source of great merriment to the scholars" (Wilson, 2011, p. 14), and bear footed. She is not allowed schooling except for three years. She has no right to dream like Jane who hopes to get away from her mother's hell by marrying the man whom she loves, Frado's utmost dream is to be taken away, as a servant, by one of the kind Belmont sons, as they marry and leave the house.

Even aunt Abby's attempts to save Frado's soul, by taking her to Sundays meeting and instructing her to read the Bible, are rejected by Mrs. Belmont for SHE "hardly believed that [Frado] had a soul" (Wilson, 2011, p. 36). The evilness of her mistress, who "was a professor of religion" (Wilson, 2011, p. 45), who "talked like one schooled in a heavenly atmosphere" (Wilson, 2011, p. 43), made her doubt religion too. She wonders how someone like this woman might go to heaven just because she is Christian and white regardless of the harm she causes for others. She makes Frado even doubt whether there is a heaven for blacks. Finally, she "resolved to give over all thoughts of future world" (Wilson, 2011, p. 45) since her mistress is going to be there.

Consequently, she manages to kill all spiritual and beautiful feelings inside the girl. She feels unworthy, unwanted, and miserable. Again Wilson goes into a forbidden territory; this woman lacks all the virtues of "true womanhood" which are believed to be exclusive to white middle-class women. She does not do any charity works for she hates the poor; she lacks compassion even with her own children and acquaintances; she rejects the attempts of "saving" Frado's soul which proves that she is not close to God. So, Wilson defies another misconception that is essential in the culture of the time. *Our Nig* makes use of the dominant culture's literary strategies in order to overthrow several prevailing ideologies. The sentimental novel and slave narrative conventions are engaged and turned against their own predominant standards.

Wilson does not write an autobiography, but she makes sure her readers know that it is her own life story. The title is "Our Nig; Sketches of a Life From a Free Black, in a Two Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There By 'Our Nig'". She indicates that it is not slavery but, its shadows, racism that is practiced against blacks in the North. So there is oppression and suffering out of racism; it is veiled, but reflected in various ways. The author is "Our Nig"; she uses the title which is enforced on her by the Bellmonts, one of the many things used to erase her identity and individuality, a method to degrade her and make her feel inferior.

The first two chapters are given the titles: "Mag Smith, My Mother" and "My Father's Death" indicate subjectivity, for she wants to tell the readers that it is her own life story she is talking about. So whatever she is mentioning is might be very close to what she has gone through. In the final chapter, she appears again to assert that "TRUTH is stranger than fiction" (Wilson, 2011, p. 56). So, the readers should believe that these "Sketches" are part of the truth of what is happening to blacks in the free North.

Harriet Wilson has unveiled the falsity of many misconceptions of the time through her novel. The original purpose from writing the novel was gaining money to support her sick child after being left by her husband. Abolitionists had a distinguished influence on printed and published materials at the time. Wilson could have easily imitated her "black brethren" by writing a narrative, according to the conventions assigned to them by the abolitionist. Being ultimately oppressed, subjugated, and dehumanized, Wilson's outrage leads to unveil all these evils, to write following a different technique, and disregard the abolitionists' disciplines. This action caused in the failing of the book, losing her child and fame for her novel did not become popular, and it was forgotten for too long.

Wilson's writing represents the "alternative social character", which was different from the social character of the time, and lived in the shadow of the latter, leading "the real conflicts of the time". The alternative social character is the literature of those who were "victims of repression and punitive rehabilitation" (Williams, 2011, p. 84). The black authors were writing in the shadow of the romance, sentimental, and domestic fiction which were prominent during the nineteenth century.

The dominant ideology of the Northern white Americans was showing themselves as abolitionists fighting with the blacks to end their slavery. They showed concern and encouragement to African American writers to display blacks' sufferings and pains through their books, and most of the time edited these works. The abolitionists who were fighting to end slavery were internalizing notions of race. They advocated ending slavery; however, they were the same who passed the Dred Scott Decision of 1858 that maintains right to slaveholders.

Such act reveals the inconsistent of those people. They are represented in Wilson's novel through all white male characters, Aunt Abby and Jane; they all refuse Mrs. Belmont's rude treatment to Frado, they interfere sometimes to stop her going on further in her punishment, but they certainly do not cease it ultimately. Mr. Belmont has a distinctive role in the house for the few times he takes decisions nobody can object, but most of the time he is indifferent. Aunt Abby and Jane are compassionate but they fear Mrs. Belmont's rage, and the boys seem to forget the case as soon as they leave the house. So there is no real attempt to end the misery. Those characters reflect the inaction of the abolitionists when serious decisions were needed.

Most critics agree on the fact that this critique, to the white people in general, is the real reason for the book's unpopularity. While Elwood-Farber, in her article "Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*" (2010), attributed the failure of the book to lack of advertisement. She refers to the publisher George C. Rand and wonders why he did not afford good advertisement for the book? In a book review in *The Nation* (1983, p. 675), Jefferson revealed the fact that Wilson herself published the book on her expense. This is the answer to Elwood-Farber's wonder. Obviously, the content of the novel did not appeal to the publisher who was himself an abolitionist. He could not reject the work openly, however, he allowed Wilson to publish on her expense. At the same time, he did not supply it with the needed advertisement, a scheme to prevent it from being spread and gain people's attention. Moreover, Wilson/Frado experience with the whites in the North would discourage the slaves' resolve for freedom since the book exposes whites' insistence on treating blacks as Others even if they were free. Apparently, the book's unpopularity turns to be another indication of those people's hypocrisy.

### **Conclusions**

Various elements interfere in the creation of a literary work, and the work itself is a cultural discourse that affects the culture in which it is produced. These discourses have their influence on the writer's way of thinking that shapes the work according to his/her sense of life. Wilson's structure of feeling stimulated her to expose the hypocrisy of Northern whites, and corrects many misconceptions concerning the differences that are assumed between white and black women. Unveiling these facts cause Wilson much loss; her work, fame, career, and her own child. However, she is able to maintain her self-esteem since she bravely exposes the falsity of many conceptions concerning her race, and condemn those who pretend to be saviours and benefactors.

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