

COMMENTARY

Clotel, or The President's Daughter (1853)



William Wells Brown

(1814-1884)

“Like [Harriet] Wilson’s later novel [*Our Nig* (1859)], *Clotel* (1853) faces miscegenation head on and in an even more controversial manner. In making his heroine, Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson and a black mistress, Brown may have helped to perpetuate a story that modern historians still argue over. Whether or not Brown’s story is literally true, its suggestion that the greatest symbols of this nation’s values are tainted by the fact of slavery has metaphorical validity.

Brown intended his novel ‘to show that the present system of chattel slavery in America undermines the entire social condition of man,’ and he drew extensively upon his own experiences. Indeed, he has been accused of trying to fit too much into one novel. Overshadowed by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and probably too melodramatic for the tastes of most twentieth-century readers, *Clotel* is still a ground-breaking novel, all the more effective for its basis in firsthand experience.”

Karen L. Rood, ed.
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