

COMMENTARY

Our Nig (1859)



Harriet E. Wilson

(1825-1900)

“The first novel by a black American to be published in the United States is *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North: Showing That Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There...* Harriet E. Wilson...paid the Boston firm of G. C. Rand & Avery to print it for her in 1859. Suffering from continuing ill-health that had prevented her from working and caring for her seven-year-old son, Mrs. Wilson expressed in her preface the hope that the novel would make enough money to ‘aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life,’ and she appealed ‘to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite....’

The cause for her illness was said to be the harsh treatment she received when, after the death of her black father, her white mother abandoned her at the house of a family who took in the seven-year-old as a sort of indentured servant and overworked her until she reached eighteen. The novel is a fictionalized version of her childhood, and Wilson is clearly embittered, but she lovingly portrays the family members who had been kind to her and had tried to protect her from the cruel mistress of the household. Fearing that she might ‘palliate slavery at the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North,’ she insisted, ‘My mistress was wholly imbued with *Southern* principles.’ But she also subtly criticized well-intentioned but ineffectual Abolitionists when she commented, ‘I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home.’

Wilson’s novel reveals her to be widely read and especially familiar with the nineteenth-century sentimental novel, of which her own book is a well-written example. Yet, like most privately published books, it received little notice. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who discovered the novel and edited it for republication in 1983, suggests another reason as well: miscegenation. In depicting the marriage of her heroine’s white mother and black father (and, especially, one suspects, in making the father close to saintly and the mother a weak woman who, after her husband’s death, slides closer and closer to depravity), Wilson treated a subject that both proslavery and antislavery forces viewed with extreme discomfort. Yet the subject had been treated before and in another novel by a black American. [*Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown]

Karen L. Rood, Editor
American Literary Almanac
(Brucoli Clark Layman 1988) 30-31

“The broadening range of evils depicted in fiction about black women is also evinced in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859), which Henry Louis Gates has recently identified as the first novel published by a black person in America. As Gates points out, the uniqueness of this novel is that it protests against whites’ racism in the North rather than slavery in the South. Wilson’s heroine is not a slave woman but an indentured servant who, having been abandoned by her white mother after the death of her black father,

was taken into a New England household where she is brutally maltreated. Gates, who claims that most antebellum novels were conventional affairs in which good triumphs and 'everyone lives happily ever after,' argues that *Our Nig* is special because of its rebellious themes and ambiguous ending.

Actually, though, the novel takes standard themes of popular Subversive fiction--deceitful authority figures, persecution of an oppressed character, the sufferings of a woman worker--and concentrates on a heroine who acts much like other nineteenth-century heroines...turns weepy and resolute and in the end rebellious. Wilson's Frado is, like the typical heroine of women's wrongs fiction, at once horribly oppressed and stoically resolute. The originality of the novel lies in its occasional attacks on Northern racism, as seen in one character's rhetorical question: 'Which would you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?' Frado is a rich symbol of the woman victim, since she is exposed to exploitation in her successive jobs as a servant, a seamstress, a hatter, and at last a salesperson. By the end of the novel she has learned 'to assert her rights when trampled on,' as she is thrown on her own resources and left only with faith in herself."

David S. Reynolds
Beneath the American Renaissance
(Harvard 1989) 361

Michael Hollister (2015)