Identifying Satire: Our Nig

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Tue May 31 12:43:22 2005
IDENTIFYING SATIRE

Our Nig

By Elizabeth Breau

In his introduction to Harriet Wilson’s novel, Our Nig, Henry Louis Gates argues that the book is both a sentimental novel and an autobiography.1 Establishing the autobiographical nature of the text is his first concern; he begins his essay by referring to the historical data—publishing records, census information, and the death certificate of Wilson’s son—that helped him establish Wilson’s historical identity and authorship. He supports his argument by comparing the plot details of Our Nig with the information contained in the three appendices that follow the text.

A reader guided by this interpretation of Our Nig reads it as a serious text, written by one who “preferred the pious, direct appeal to the subtle or ambiguous.”2 The image of Harriet Wilson as a desperate mother “forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” hovers over Our Nig as we read, underscoring the similarities between the author’s claims in the preface and the suffering of her heroine, Frado.3 Gates claims that Wilson would have produced an inferior product had she strayed from her lived experience and attempted to write fiction:

the ‘autobiographical’ consistencies between the fragments of Harriet Wilson’s life and the depiction of the calamities of Frado, the heroine of Our Nig, would suggest that Mrs. Wilson was able to gain control over her materials more readily than her fellow black novelists of that decade precisely by adhering closely to the painful details of suffering that were part of her experience.4

Gates also implicitly disparages Wilson’s creativity in his discussion of the ways in which her narrative compares with what Nina Baym has called the “overplot” of the sentimental fiction produced by Wilson’s white female contemporaries. Although Gates credits Wilson with the creation of a new form of fiction, “the black woman’s novel . . . because she invented her own plot structure through which to narrate the saga of her orphaned mulatto heroine,” he implies that Wilson mimicked that literature with which she was most familiar, altering it only when it did not conform to her real life experience.5 The picture drawn of Wilson in Gates’ introduction is therefore not that of a creative writer comfortably in control of her material, but instead that of a nearly illiterate woman who stumbled onto originality because her life story—the only story she was equipped to tell—did not conform entirely to contemporary literary convention.

Gates’ definition of Our Nig as largely autobiographical convinces us that we must ignore indications that Wilson’s meaning is not always straightforward and that tex-
tual inconsistencies or “inversions” may not be due to lack of authorial skill. Once Our Nig is perceived as a true life story, similar to the slave narratives written by Wilson’s contemporaries, it becomes difficult to read the text’s satiric or ironic moments as more than the angry aberrations of an unskilled writer. A detailed examination of Wilson’s prose, however, suggests that large portions of Our Nig are satiric and that Wilson’s indictment of antebellum Northern racism derives most of its power from that satire.

Michael Seidel writes that one of the first hints that a text may be satiric is “the claim to truth as a narrative privilege.” Although this is most notably true in those satires that are patently false, such as Don Quixote, Candide, or Gulliver’s Travels, a satire that disguises itself as truth need not be obviously fantastical. Our Nig purports to be truthful in several ways. Its full title 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. By ‘Our Nig.’ Gates comments that “the boldness and cleverness in the ironic use of ‘Nig’ as title and pseudonym is, to say the least, impressive, standing certainly as one of the black tradition’s earliest recorded usages.” Wilson’s “pseudonym” functions to convince her readers that the author and protagonist of her tale are the same. The pseudonym also suggests that, as a true narrative, Our Nig will conform to the generic model of the slave narratives that themselves mimicked the sentimental fiction written by white women. The allegorical phrase, “Two-Story White House, North,” further suggests a serious, non-satiric text because it also conforms to the generic expectations of both abolitionist literature and sentimental fiction.

In contrast, the juxtaposition of “Our Nig” and “Free Black” does not conform to such generic expectations but instead implies that the narrative concerns itself with an aberration from the status quo. This part of the title supports Wilson’s satiric pseudonym, challenging beliefs in Northern equality and suggesting social depravity. As a satirist, Wilson is outraged that slavery, or its partner, indentured servitude, can exist among those who congratulate themselves on their moral superiority to Southern slaveholders. Significantly, Frado is not even legally indentured; she is bound by default as it becomes increasingly clear that her mother is never going to return for her. The Bellmonts, at whose home she is abandoned, never consider that Frado might do something besides work for them; by the time she becomes an adolescent, she knows she is compelled to remain with them until her eighteenth birthday.

Wilson’s preface invites inspection. Beginning with the usual demurrals regarding her literary talents and a seemingly straightforward statement about her financial desperation, she disguises her purpose with a disclaimer that conforms to the satirist’s tendency “to deny what they are doing at the same time that they are doing it, and this presents the satirist as something of a hypocrite (her)self.” Wilson tells us that she “would not . . . palliate slavery at the South by disclosures of its appurtenances North.” By accepting this statement, innocently placed after a description of how her poverty has induced her to write, the reader is lulled into accepting the assertion (surprising for Wilson’s time) that the injustices commonly said to belong only to the South also exist in the North. Although Wilson hastens to reassure us that “my mistress was wholly imbued with southern principles,” the text contains no other indications that
Mrs. Bellmont is a southerner, and none of the book’s other characters are so excused. Wilson continues:

I do not pretend to divulge every transaction in my own life, which the unprejudiced would declare unfavorable in comparison with treatment of legal bondmen; I have purposely omitted what would most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home.

Wilson could, in other words, make the North seem even crueler and more inhumane than the South, had she the desire to do so. And, in telling us that she has omitted the worst of her tale, the real cruelty, she has ironically informed us that the free North is crueler to its black residents than the slaveholding South. As the events of Frado’s life make clear, “our good anti-slavery friends at home” have every reason to feel ashamed.

Before beginning my analysis of the text proper, I would like to say a few words about the three letters appended to it. Gates relies heavily on these to support his claim that Our Nig is autobiographical, even going so far as to suggest that Wilson’s style reveals that she felt less anxiety about those portions of the text that are historically verifiable than she did about those sections for which we have no supporting documentation. Wilson could not have known, however, that those reading her work in the twentieth century would have access only to certain historical records—we have her marriage certificate, for example, but do not know either the exact date of her birth or who her parents were. Moreover, Gates does not remark on the ways in which the appended letters are inconsistent with the careful authentication that usually accompanies nineteenth-century African-American autobiographical texts. Wilson’s text lacks, for example, prefatory letters by distinguished white friends of the author vouching for her honesty and integrity. This lack of white approval sets Our Nig apart from other antebellum African-American texts and indicates that it may not be restrained by the author’s deference to her white patrons. Wilson further indicates the extent to which her text rejects white assistance by ending it with three letters that supposedly verify the events it depicts. The placement of the letters at the end of the text, rather than at its beginning, inverts the form of antebellum African-American literature and suggests that Wilson may be parodying generic requirements.

The authorship of the three appended letters is dubious. The second letter, written by “Margaretta Thorn,” “is the source of the little that we know about the author’s childhood . . . she was hired out to a family ‘calling themselves Christians’ . . . [who] put her to work . . . allegedly ruining her health by unduly difficult work.” Although this account corresponds with Frado’s servitude in the Bellmont household, it seems odd that Gates should suddenly forget his meticulous concern with verifying every detail of Wilson’s life with historical documentation enough to be silent on the identity of Margaretta Thorn, the author of this crucial letter. Even her name, “Thorn,” is strange, underscoring the ways in which her anonymity prickles at the reader seeking reassurance that Wilson is a reliable black storyteller and not one who takes advantage of white sympathies and credulity.
The first and third letters are even less convincing as authenticating documentation. The first letter is signed “Allida,” with no surname. Although Gates declares Allida’s letter conclusive in establishing the autobiographical nature of *Our Nig*, he gives no more thought to the identity of Allida than he does to that of Thorn. He is a little more concerned with the author of the third letter, who has simply signed with the initials, C. D. S. Since these initials were a “legal abbreviation for ‘Colored Indentured Servant,’” Gates concludes that C. D. S. was either an indentured mulatto or a white friend who chose not to sign his or her name.\(^\text{12}\)

Rather than suggesting that Gates overlooked essential information that holds the key to *Our Nig’s* authenticity, I would like to propose that the three appended letters function as a deceptive claim to truth, masking the novel’s satiric intent by parodying the form of slave narratives. If parody, as Linda Hutcheon writes, “is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, *not always at the expense of the parodied text,*” and if Wilson was writing a satiric tale of slavery in the ostensibly free North, it seems logical that she would mimic, without insulting, the genuinely autobiographical slave narratives that were also written to advance the position of African-Americans.\(^\text{13}\) Wilson could, in other words, have written all three letters herself. The placement of the letters at the end, rather than the beginning of the text, constitutes one parodic inversion; that they are signed in two cases with incomplete names (either female or neuter), rather than with the names of respectable, well-known (male) citizens is another.

It is no trivial matter, given the ongoing pressure felt by African-American scholars to verify the claims made by slave narratives, to suggest that Wilson’s narrative is not an authentic autobiography. A false or fictional autobiography impugns the claims of black abolitionists to be truthful and undermines assertions about the horrific nature of slavery. As I suggest above, however, the expectation that nineteenth-century black-authored first-person narratives contain only unaltered truth restricts our ability to see the authors of such texts as creative artists and confines them to the limiting role of political advocates who did their inadequate best with the existing white literary tradition.

Wilson recognized the trespass her fiction constituted and addressed it by including a portrait of a dishonest African-American who misrepresents his suffering under slavery within her text. Frado’s husband, Samuel, “left her to her fate—embarked at sea, with the disclosure that he had never seen the South, and that his illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists.”\(^\text{14}\) In a genuine slave narrative, this disclosure of Samuel’s fraudulence would be accompanied with moralizing, the author’s lament about how the degradations of unequal treatment had bestialized the man so that he could no longer comprehend the damage his imposture did to his race. Wilson, in contrast, merely has Samuel die, less than a page later, “of yellow fever, in New Orleans.” His death serves as a satiric punishment: *yellow fever* signifies his cowardice and dishonesty. It is also fitting that he, a pretended runaway slave, should die in the deep South, captured, as it were, by his own falsehood.

The text proper of *Our Nig* is rife with inconsistencies that, to the reader who interprets all statements at face value, suggest authorial incompetence or error. The story begins with a discrepancy that should alert the wary reader that this text may contain
more than it appears to at first glance. Although Wilson uses only third-person narration, the first three chapter headings are all in the first person: “Mag Smith, My Mother,” “My Father’s Death,” and “A New Home for Me.”  

The titles of the remaining chapters conform to the third-person narration, leaving Gates to suggest that Wilson’s anxiety over her credibility led to a psychological spillover. Even if this were true, however, it seems doubtful that the error would have gone unnoticed during the lengthy, meticulous processes of editing, typesetting, and printing. Given the unlikeliness of such a glaring oversight, we must search for another explanation.

The first three chapters concern the downfall, degradation, and ultimate descent into heartlessness of Frado’s mother, Mag Smith. Frado only enters the story in the middle of chapter two and does not become a prominent character until after her mother abandons her in chapter three. The chapter headings inform the reader that Mag Smith is not the protagonist and that her adventures are only the impetus behind the sufferings of her daughter.

In addition to stressing yet again that the author and the protagonist are the same person, the first-person chapter headings remind us that this individual is not white, but “our Nig.” This recollection is crucial; without it, one would be tempted to read important lines of Wilson’s prose as though they were written by one who agreed with white racist ideology. When, for example, the “kind-hearted African,” Jim, resolves to propose marriage to the destitute, white Mag, he reasons that “she’d be as much of a prize to me as she’d fall short of coming up to the mark with white folks. I do n’t [sic] care for past things. I’ve done things ’fore now I’s ashamed of. She’s good enough for me, any how [sic].”

If one accepts the literal meaning of these words, Jim’s acceptance of white superiority and his conviction that a “white wife” is a “treasure” is disturbing in a black-authored, ostensibly non-racist text. The reader’s discomfort increases with Jim’s proposal speech:

You’s had trial of white folks, anyhow. They run off and left ye, and now none of ’em come near ye to see if you’s dead or alive. I’s black outside, I know, but I’s got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?

Jim’s conflation of skin tone with morality identifies him as entirely coopted by a white supremacist ideology that insists on a correlation between criminal or immoral behavior and a non-white skin. The reader can, however, still hope for authorial condemnation of Jim’s ignorance, at least until the next page when the narrator, “our Nig,” exclaims that Mag’s marriage to Jim “has sundered another bond which held her to her fellows. She has descended another step down the ladder of infamy.”

Both Jim’s proposal and the narrator’s lament become less problematic, however, if interpreted as irony. Wayne Booth explains that when interpreting ironic writing, the reader compares the literal meaning of the words with his or her knowledge of the author, the context, and the intentions of the text. Wilson’s content and delivery appear at odds with her supposed belief that racial inequality is wrong. Assuming, as Booth does when considering a potential ironist, that Wilson was neither crazy nor
stupid and that she further did not believe in white racial superiority, her words must be interpreted ironically as meaning the opposite of what they say.

Wilson’s depiction of Mag’s sexual downfall is also satirically motivated, geared as it is toward discrediting white northerners. Mag’s moral decline begins not, as we might expect, with the loss of her “priceless gem” to a deceitful lover, but with her “pious” thankfulness at the death of her illegitimate child. Her grateful prayer is an inversion of normal parental grief: “God be thanked,” ejaculated Mag, as she saw its breathing cease; “no one can taunt her with my ruin.”20 Although Mag’s words could indicate a conviction that life tainted with a moral stain is not worth living—a commonplace of sentimental fiction—her later abandonment of Frado suggests that her relief at the child’s death is motivated more by selfishness than by religious sentiment.

Mag’s “ruin” is not a private affair. Even among strangers, she is beset with “foul tongues” that “jest of her shame, and averted looks and cold greetings disheartened her.”21 The narrative voice sermonizes on the condemnation that haunts Mag as the plot reveals how “disdaining to ask favor or friendship from a sneering world,” she vows to “die neglected and forgotten before she would be dependent on any.”22 The cruelty experienced by Mag, Frado’s white mother, prepares the reader for a society in which the vulnerable are persecuted as a matter of course; “our good anti-slavery friends at home” have even more on their consciences than the victimization of African-Americans.

Mag is not merely characterized as a victim, however. As an unchaste, degraded woman who is unmotherly enough to abandon her daughter to Mrs. Bellmont, a woman she herself describes as a “she-devil,” she also introduces Wilson’s portrayal of white women as cruel, lustful, and unmotherly—the opposite of the nineteenth-century ideal of women as nurturing, gentle, kind, and chaste. Wilson’s attack on this image also works along racial lines. Not only were black women believed to be more lustful than white women, but slave-owning ideology denied that family bonds were operative within the African-American community, insisting instead that black women felt no love for their children. Rather than attempting to prove that black women are as pure and motherly as their white counterparts, Wilson attacks images of white women as angels in the house through both Mag and Mrs. Bellmont, a woman devoid of any of the lofty, “feminine” sentiments for which her sex was so praised by Wilson’s white contemporaries.

Gates includes Mrs. Bellmont in his description of Wilson’s “thinly veiled fictional account of her life in which she transforms her tormentors into objects, the stock, stereotypical objects of the sentimental novel,”23 implying that Wilson was inept at character development. However, satire frequently subordinates the character development normally expected of the novel to a two-dimensional portrayal of vice; Frances Burney’s Madame Duval and Captain Mirvan, for example, are thoroughly incapable of reform. Mrs. Bellmont is similarly two-dimensional and vice-ridden.

Mrs. Bellmont’s primary sins are racism and cruelty, recalling Juvenal’s description of bloodthirsty female slave owners.24 She believes that Frado needs no more nourishment than “skimmed milk, with brown bread crusts,” and that she needs neither shoes in the winter nor an education: “Mrs. Bellmont was in doubt about the utility of attempting to educate people of color, who were incapable of elevation.”25 Here,
Wilson satirizes people of Mrs. Bellmont’s ilk merely by reporting their beliefs in her dryest, most sophisticated prose, underscoring that her verbal and intellectual capabilities far exceed theirs.

Additionally, Mrs. Bellmont’s cruelty toward the helpless, patiently enduring Frado flatly contradicts the portrait of women as angels of mercy and kindness. The enjoyment she derives from frequently beating Frado is probably the text’s most recurrent theme, and if there is one image, usually “fantastic” and violent, at the heart of every satire, then in Our Nig it is surely the picture of Frado imprisoned in a closet with a piece of wood inserted by Mrs. Bellmont “propping” her mouth open. This image, compelling because of the immediacy of the pain it conveys, is also a powerful satiric inversion—Frado cannot speak because her mouth is open. The piece of wood is both an unusually painful gag and a parodic one, depriving Frado of the speech that should emerge from her open mouth. The “norm” concealed behind this violently imposed speechlessness is the white-abolitionist-assisted liberation of black speech. Although many slave narratives begin with the author’s thanks to his or her white benefactors, Wilson, notably, does not thank anyone. Frado’s silencing by such a white “benefactor” indicates Wilson’s disgust with the self-congratulatory tendencies of the abolitionist movement that ignored the ongoing abuses around them.

The Bellmont family is a microcosmic reproduction of white abusiveness and hypocrisy, with the better-natured of the Bellmonts either helpless or unwilling to prevent the cruelty of Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter, Mary. Although Mr. Bellmont, Jack, Jane, Aunt Abby, and James all oppose Frado’s abuse, they are only able to help her sporadically and cannot prevent her starvation or severe beatings for any prolonged time. The power dynamics by which the majority continually succumbs to the evil authority of Mrs. Bellmont and Mary are complicated, including an inversion of traditional sexual politics, a satire against women modelled on male-authored misogynist satire, the satiric depiction of men as weak, effeminate, and hypocritical, and an exclusively female power struggle in which the evil women invariably defeat the good. The apostolic names given to the members of the Bellmont family indicate the extent to which Wilson believes Christianity is implicated in the brutality of slavery: Mary could not be less like her gentle namesake, and James is almost completely unable to inspire Frado with Christian devotion.

Mrs. Bellmont rules the Bellmont household. Her husband, when asked by the kindly Aunt Abby why he does not assert himself on Frado’s behalf, replies, “How am I to help it? Women rule the earth, and all in it.” The narrator has explained earlier that opposing Mrs. Bellmont’s wishes is “like encountering a whirlwind charged with fire, daggers and spikes,” indicating Mr. Bellmont’s helplessness in the face of his wife’s wrath. A silenced, unwilling witness to Frado’s daily torture, Mr. Bellmont is “feminized” to the extent that he can only shed silent tears in sympathy with her misery. Having acquired a power never meant for her gender, both Mrs. Bellmont’s femininity and her humanity have become completely distorted, and only her feminine flaws remain: she is irrational, tyrannical, manipulative, and given to crocodile tears when thwarted.

Jack and James, the Bellmont sons, are more effective at helping Frado than their father—when they try. Jack buys Frado a dog, and James teaches her Christian doc-
trine and compels his mother to permit her to eat at the table. As the narrative continues, however, their help becomes both less frequent and less effective. James' influence is weakened as he lies dying of a lingering sickness while his attempts to teach Frado to love God and Jesus lead her to love him instead. Here, James' illness and his ineptitude as a religious instructor indicate the powerlessness of the abolitionist movement. Jack, representing another kind of abolitionist, becomes progressively less sensitive to Frado's suffering. On one visit home he remarks, "Same old story, is it; knocks and bumps? Better times coming; never fear, Nig." Here, the reader hardly needs the narrator's lament about Jack's new callousness; we recall that he is responsible for coining Frado's degrading nickname.

Jack's loss of interest in Frado's well-being is a satiric depiction of the hypocritical abolitionists who sustain interest in their cause only as long as it remains interesting and present. When Jack sees that Frado continues to live and suffer within his mother's household, she becomes merely a fixture: familiarity leads to complacency. Wilson's disgust with "professed abolitionists, who did n't [sic] want slaves at the South, nor niggers in their own houses, North. Faugh! to lodge one; to eat with one; to admit one through the front door; to sit next one; awful" underlies her characterization of those who claim to feel sympathy but take no concrete action: although Frado begs both Jack and James to take her with them to their new homes, neither does, preferring to leave her a prisoner in their mother's household. Helping Frado would involve not only defying their vicious, repulsive mother but would also entail accepting moral responsibility for Frado's well-being. If they allow her to serve them as she does their mother, they would be implicated in Mrs. Bellmont's crimes, whereas granting Frado freedom (or simply paying her) would require making an independent moral decision. Like the insincere abolitionists against whom Wilson inveighs, Jack and James find it more convenient to observe the status quo while mouthing words of opposition to it. That Mrs. Bellmont is the mother of these professed philanthropists indsicts all white Americans for the oppression of African-Americans; their deeply ingrained prejudices and ongoing complicity with a slavery system from which they benefit belie all claims of opposition to black suffering.

The dynamics between Mrs. Bellmont (and Mary, who supports her in every way) and the good women who reside in her household differ from those between Mrs. Bellmont and the men because both Aunt Abby and Jane are dependent on Mrs. Bellmont for economic support, whereas her sons and husband are not. Although Jane and Aunt Abby are not subject to the physical abuse Frado endures, their attempts to defy Mrs. Bellmont are often thwarted. In fact, we suspect that Jane's efforts to assert independence have been frustrated so often that she can no longer muster even the most passive resistance: she never defends Frado and needs the help of both her father and Aunt Abby to marry the man of her choice. Aunt Abby, whose moral guilt is perhaps lessened by her lack of a blood tie to Mrs. Bellmont (she is Mr. Bellmont's sister), does help Frado, but is threatened with expulsion from the household and denied entry into James' sickroom as a result. Aunt Abby and James are also partners in their attempt to instruct Frado in the tenets of Christianity; here, their good intentions are foiled when Mrs. Bellmont convinces Frado that only white people are admitted to heaven.
The most sustained conflict takes place between Mrs. Bellmont and Frado, whose defiance takes several forms. Not only does the girl survive, despite Mrs. Bellmont’s best attempts to the contrary, but she manages to charm all those who know her with her persistent cheerfulness, sense of humor, and predilection for playing practical jokes (another possible sign that Wilson herself is joking). Frado’s patience and ability to endure do not endear her to those around her, however, since their native selfishness permits only an interest in that which amuses them. Thus, the hired farm hands cheer Frado’s antics on the barn roof, but do not help her with her work. Even Frado’s popularity suffices to enrage Mrs. Bellmont, however, prompting her endeavor to spoil the child’s looks.

Mrs. Bellmont keeps Frado’s hair shorn as close to her head as possible, never gives her anything but rags to wear, and forbids her any protection from the sun so that her fair, almost white, complexion will darken. These particular persecutions are Our Nig’s only indications of the sexually motivated conflicts that usually predominate in nineteenth-century narratives about female mulattoes. Our Nig is unusual because its interracial heroine, Frado, is not an object of white men’s lust, but is sexually oppressed only by the jealousy of Mrs. Bellmont, who sees her beauty (a hallmark of the female mulatto story) as a threat to the desirability of white women. Frado’s freedom from sexual harassment is significant, stressing both the passivity and weakness of the male characters and the female nature of the conflict. In other words, if Mrs. Bellmont is derived from traditional, male misogynist satire such as that of Juvenal and is a wrongful holder of male power, the ability of the male characters to molest Frado would signify incomplete emasculationization. The power they would acquire over Frado from forced sexual relations with her would undermine Mrs. Bellmont’s tyrannical hold over her. By not permitting any threats to Mrs. Bellmont’s power, and by removing the danger of rape, Wilson completes the sexual inversion of Our Nig and forces her readers to concentrate on the racially- and class-derived oppressions that marked most black-white relations.

Whereas the sexual harassment that usually faces female mulattoes in nineteenth- (and twentieth-) century fiction adds awareness of gendered power imbalances, it also permits readers to focus on the titillating details of sexual pursuit and conquest while ignoring the social criticism embedded within the plot. By desexualizing her plot, in other words, and therefore rendering it less arousing, Wilson forces her readers to maintain their awareness of her exposure of social evil. Frado’s mixed racial heritage is less important to the plot of Our Nig than is usual for a book of this type; here, Wilson’s deviation from the norms of sentimental fiction furthers her satire by not permitting her readers to coast through a familiar plot line.

Frado’s one overt act of defiance occurs when Mr. Bellmont, concerned for her ongoing ill health, advises, “you are looking sick . . . you cannot endure beating as you once could.” Frado responds to this generous counsel by verbally defying Mrs. Bellmont for the first and only time in the book:

“Stop!” shouted Frado, “strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you;” and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts.
Mrs. Bellmont backs down, as does the overseer in the scene from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in which Douglass defeats his oppressor in a fight. However, unlike Douglass, whose victory began his journey toward freedom, Frado is content to know that her one disobedience has lessened her beatings, although she still works just as hard, continues to be physically unwell, and receives as many “scoldings” as before. Here, Wilson satirizes the lofty goals supposedly held by those who flee captivity; in a world where no one is heroic, the persecuted are content merely to lessen their suffering. Frado, unlike Douglass, does not feel “the stirring of free and independent thoughts,” but simply stands “like” one who does. She is appearance rather than content and this, if anything, is her fatal flaw. Because Frado is satisfied to endure and suffer, her health is destroyed. Although adulthood brings her freedom from Mrs. Bellmont, she is able to work only for short periods. Dependent on the charity of those who house the poor for money, she is shunted about, becoming weaker and more helpless all the time. As *Our Nig* ends, merging with the “biographical” data that follows it, Frado’s fate as a perpetual victim once again inverts the plots of slave narratives and sentimental fiction, both of which reward the suffering of their protagonists with self-sufficiency and happiness.

Satire’s endings must mete out justice. Just as Frado’s fate reflects and punishes her passivity, Mrs. Bellmont becomes so “irritable” that even her family shuns her, and she finally dies “after an agony in death unspeakable.” Mary also dies a painful death, Aunt Abby “enters heaven,” and James dies from his lingering sickness. These judgments on the worth of each character enable Wilson to condemn the world she depicts without ever making explicit the alternative she considers acceptable. Such moralizing is unnecessary, however, because Wilson’s satire paints such a bleak picture of northern antebellum society that her criticism of it cannot be missed. *Our Nig* was thus doomed to failure: a poor, black woman, Wilson had no right, in the eyes of the community in which she lived, to censure any aspect of white society. White contemporary readers almost certainly saw her as ungrateful and impudent; black abolitionists who were dependent on the patronage of white allies probably viewed her book as one that could potentially alienate that support.

Wilson’s satire targeted her for what may be the worst punishment any author, satirist or otherwise, can receive—her book was ignored. Her particular vulnerabilities of race, class, and gender made it possible to disregard what would otherwise have been hailed as a significant literary event: the publication of the first novel by a black woman in the United States. That novel’s content, however, compelled both the white abolitionist movement, normally supportive of black literary endeavors, and the budding African-American male literary community to ignore this unpleasant text published by an outsider. The text’s survival, due mainly to the efforts of Henry Louis Gates, forces us to reassess our notions about the literary capabilities of nineteenth-century African-Americans and reminds us that aspiring genres are capable of great creativity and innovation. Wilson’s titular phrase, “Two-Story White House, North,” intimates her innovations to us; her story is in fact two stories, a multi-layered text that combines aspects of two genres with a satire that undercuts many of the conventions of both. Our recognition of her abilities requires that we replace our image of the desperate, awkward writer with that of an intelligent woman who was capable of both conceiving and executing a groundbreaking work of literature.
Notes

2. Gates, xl.
5. Gates, xlvii.
15. Wilson, 5, 14, and 24.
17. Wilson, 9, 11.
18. Wilson, 12.
20. Wilson, 6.
22. Wilson, 7–8.
25. Wilson, 30.
27. Wilson, 44.
29. Wilson, 36.
30. Wilson, 70.
32. Wilson, 129.
33. Wilson, 104.
34. Wilson, 105.