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*In Ole Virginia* Analysis

*In Ole Virginia* was published in 1893 as a collection of short stories that included blacks and whites as traditional southern voices. “Polly,” “Ole ‘Stracted,” “Marse Chan,” and “Unc’ Edinburg’s Drowndin’” were four of the short stories that conveyed Thomas Nelson Page’s main message; the differences between the pre-Civil War and post-Civil War settings, the indirect characterization of contrasting white and black relationships before and after the war, and the iconic use of symbolism in the plots in *In Ole Virginia* emphasize the way the Civil War ended what Thomas Nelson Page believed to be the “golden age” in the south, particularly white slave owners relationships with black slaves.

The setting of the south in the antebellum period differs greatly from the south during Reconstruction. The conditions of the slaves before the war, according to Page, were satisfactory and plentiful in terms of living conditions and food. In “Polly,” Page claims, “…tables were all spread for the great dinner for the servants next day [Christmas]…” (223). Page makes the allusion that life was great for slaves before the war; he goes as far as saying that slaves were even given special holiday meals, attempting to make the point that slaves’ food was a priority to their masters. Likewise, Ole ‘Stracted was a freed slave who reminisced on the golden days in “Ole ‘Stracted” when he said, “He used to live on dis plantation, an’ yit he al’ays talkin’ ‘bout de gret house an’ de fine kerriges dee used to have…” (143). Page had Ole ‘Stracted use adjectives such as “gret” and “fine” to express how nice and extravagant the slave quarters were in the antebellum period in contrast to the Reconstruction. “Dee” was also used to portray how the slaves considered the possessions of their master to be their possessions as well, according to Page. During Reconstruction, Ole ‘Stracted lived in a “little cabin, surrounded by dense pines and covered with vines…was the most desolate abode a human being could have selected, most of the dwellers in that section gave the place a wide berth, especially toward nightfall…” (152). The cabin was further described as “…perfectly dark inside the door, and there was not a sound. The bench where they had heretofore held their only communication with their strange neighbor was lying on its side in the weeds which grew up to the very walls of the ruinous cabin…” (155). Inside the cabin “… the only article of furniture which the room contained was the wretched bed or bench…” (156). The freed slave house described in “Ole ‘Stracted” paled in comparison to the slave quarters that were illustrated in “Polly.” According to Page, the lives of the slaves were changed for the worst after the war. Before the war the slaves were given food, but after they were freed they were left to fend for themselves and often had very little, if anything, to eat in the eyes of Page. Similarly, Page believed that the antebellum period was also better for the whites. In “Marse Chan” Page expressed, “Their once splendid mansions, now fast falling to decay…” (1). Page also claims, “The numerous out-buildings and the large barns and stables told that it had once been the seat of wealth” (2). The differences in the setting between the two time periods displays that Page believed that slavery was beneficial to blacks and whites, and the time before the war truly was the golden age in the south.

In addition to the settings of the antebellum period and Reconstruction, the characterization of white and black relationships differed drastically between the two time periods. Page was a strong believer that whites and blacks had mutually beneficial and meaningful relationships before the war in the south. In “Ole ‘Stracted,” for example, Ole ‘Stracted says, “…twelve hunderd dollars-dat’s what dee went for. I wucked night an’ day forty year to save dat money for marster…” (158). Page exemplifies that slaves wanted to be owned by their masters so much that they would save every penny that they earned for their master to buy them back. They are lost without their master providing them with food, clothing, shelter, and giving them work to do every day. Similarly, Polly, the daughter-in-law of Ole ‘Stracted, asks, “I wonder whar Marse Johnny is?” (148). Page alludes to the fact that the freed slaves are so lost without their previous masters that they wish for them in difficult times. The whites in the north believed that the slaves in the south would flee the slavery filled south and seek freedom in the north, but in Page’s reality the freed slaves questioned what they were supposed to do next. The slaves had a strong relationship with their masters, according to Page. For example, in “Polly” Colonel threatened to sell his slave Torm every day, but this empty threat troubled his niece Polly. Polly thought of Torm as a friend. Colonel knew that Torm was important and that he could not survive without him (188-189). Likewise, a white slave owner risked dying to save his drowning slave in “Unc’ Edinburg’s Drowndin’ (74-75). This alleged bond is also apparent in scenes where slave owners offered their slaves’ freedom before the Civil War ended. Slave and master bonds were so tight that slave Sam denied his offer of freedom from his master (19). Blacks were loyal to their white slave owners before, during, and after the Civil War. In contrast, white slave owners were not loyal to the former slaves after the war ended and the slaves were free. This was evident in “Ole ‘Stracted,” Ephum was going to buy land from a white landowner. The landowner changed his mind on the price of the land and expected Ephum to come up with the money right away and threatened to evict Ephum’s family including Ole ‘Stracted (147-148). Post-war, the white landowner only saw the black former slaves as a source of money. There was no longer a sentimentalized relationship between the two races. The characterization was intensified by requiring knowledge of the differences in the relationships between whites and blacks before and after the Civil War.

The setting and characterization involved in *In Ole Virginia* allow the symbolism in the plot to have a significant impact on the ways that the “golden age” in the south ended after the Civil War. In “Polly,” the Colonel’s niece does not want their slave, Torm, to be sold. She is attached to him and he does a good job, so Colonel keeps him around. Polly runs off with Bob after Colonel threatens to separate Polly from Bob. When Polly returns, the first place she goes is the slave quarters. Polly gets Torm to tell Colonel that Polly and Bob are back and are eloped. Polly instinctively going to the slaves when she returns home demonstrates that Polly trusts and respects the slaves enough to get them to talk to her uncle for her. It also shows that Colonel respects Torm enough to not harm him. Polly was scared that her uncle would hurt her or Bob or not allow her to leave with her husband (187-230). Polly’s faithful relationship with Torm and the other slaves demonstrates Page’s message that whites and blacks had relationships during the antebellum period.

In the same way white and black relationships are symbols in plot in “Polly,” money is a major symbol in the plot of “Ole ‘Stracted”. The white landowner wanted his money for the land, but the black family of Ephum did not have the money. Ole ‘Stracted saved all of his money to give to his master in order to be his master’s property again. Ole ‘Stracted dies after the realization that Big Ephum is the son of Ole ‘Stracted. After the death of Ole ‘Stracted, the money that was intended for the master is given to Ephum. The money is used to pay off the white land owner and the Ephum family can remain in their house on the land that the family now owns (140-161). Loyalty was symbolized by money. The black slave, Ole ‘Stracted, saved all of his money for a master that did not come looking for him. That money was then handed over to a white landowner. After the debt for the land was paid off, it’s probably safe to assume that the white man did not have further interaction with the Ephum family. Ole ‘Stracted saved all of his money to give to his master, the money conveyed a sense of loyalty that he had to his former master. After the deal of Ole ‘Stracted the money was passed down to Big Ephum who used to money to pay off the white land owner. The money was needed to pay off the debts, because there was no loyalty between the blacks and the whites after the blacks were free. The symbolism in the plot of “Ole ‘Stracted” shows how the whites did not care about the blacks after the Civil War ended and reinforced Page’s idea that the antebellum period truly was the golden age in the south.

*In Ole Virginia* focused on the differences in the south before and after the war. Thomas Nelson Page believed that the south was a better place during the “golden ages”, because the antebellum period was allegedly better for black and white relations. Page portrayed his thoughts through the juxtaposition of the setting and white and black relationships during the antebellum period and Reconstruction, along with the relevant symbolism in the plots of the stories.

# Works Cited

Page, Thomas Nelson. *In Ole Virginia*. Nashville, Tennessee: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1991.