

# Angelina Weld Grimké and Racialised Texts

## Jane Duran

Angelina Weld Grimké's Harlem Renaissance fiction is now seldom read, and as at least one of her commentators has mentioned, she is often confused with her great-aunt the white abolitionist Angelina Grimké Weld, because of the similarity of name.<sup>1</sup> But Grimké's work is remarkable for its extended use of metaphor, and for the power that it has to evoke time and place. Despite the fact that her family was well-known for a variety of reasons, she became an accomplished author of the Harlem Renaissance. Stories such as 'Blackness' and 'The Closing Door,' along with some of her poetry, repay close reading, and it will be the argument of this paper that Grimké is an underappreciated writer of the Renaissance whose work is best categorized as an extended metaphor – indeed, one that is heavily metonymic – on race.

In addition, Grimké has also been categorized as a Lesbian writer from a period in which it was not possible for women to write homoerotically. Although much the same has been said of Nella Larsen, there is a sort of coding in Grimké's work that might allow the reader to make sexual inferences. But whatever can be said with regard to the construction of sexuality in the work of Angelina Weld Grimké, race becomes a trope for powerful burdens, and vice versa. Her stories are filled with oppressive atmosphere, and detailed descriptions of scene and time, each with appropriate trappings to evoke gloom and dread. Although some of the same sort of imagery can be found in the work of several of the poets, Grimké has a decided gift for turning the imagery into usable prose, and making that prose into publishable work.

### I

Gloria Hull, writing in a work titled *Color, Sex and Poetry*, devotes one of three chapters on somewhat overlooked women writers of the Harlem Renaissance to Grimké. Part of her concern is to detail for the reader Angelina Weld Grimké's unusual personal background, but she also wants to make it clear that this story was a not uncommon one for the "colored gentry" of Angelina's day, and that it doubtless has something to do with the structure of

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

much of her work.<sup>2</sup> Angelina was driven by a desire to succeed that was instilled in her by her father, the well-educated nephew of the abolitionist sisters who saw to his welfare, but she also was very aware of being the granddaughter of a slave. She thus developed a powerful repertoire of fairly sophisticated literary techniques for writing about Blackness, while at the same time having to pass through a variety of white institutions where she was often the only, or one of just two or three, Black pupils enrolled. Writing about how Grimké's output was affected by the circumstances into which she was born and under which she grew up, Hull notes:

To an indeterminable extent, her background also probably contributed to a kind of personal unhappiness that impelled her toward themes of dejection and loss.... [At her schools] she was probably the only black student (or one of a very few).<sup>3</sup>

One of her earliest publications, and one that speaks volumes about the wide variety of motives inducing her to write, is 'The Closing Door.'

In this piece, Grimké's marked use of symbolism pushes the reader toward a greater understanding of the degree of oppression facing the Black population. A newly-pregnant mother, Agnes, hears about a lynching in her family and begins to develop mental problems when she knows that she is bringing another possible lynching victim into the world. She steals softly through the house, opening and closing doors soundlessly, and ultimately winds up suffocating her newborn in his crib, so that he does not have to face the life of a Black child in America. The ominous build-up of tension in the story is relieved only at the very end, when the reader and narrator discover the child's death.

It is important to note that Grimké's use of symbolism is not only very pronounced, but that it is underscored so as to move in a new direction. By the time that Angelina Weld Grimké began to publish, the late nineteenth century and the period immediately preceding the Harlem Renaissance had seen the emergence of many Black authors. Charles Chesnutt, for one, also writes in a vein with overt – and some would say overdone – metaphor, but it is used to completely different effect. In his short stories, characters speaking in the dialect, who may appear uneducated and ignorant to those around them, often get the better of the white population and the light-skinned. His 'Uncle Julius' character moves in circles around better-off whites, telling them elaborate tales

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<sup>2</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, p. 109. Hull wants to make a point, as she indicates, about what Grimké's family background "teaches about the American black experience."

<sup>3</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, pp. 110, 115.

from slave life, then using their credulity and the scene-changing nature of the stories to take full advantage of them, often to great financial reward.<sup>4</sup>

Grimké's use of notions of color and cultural difference is to extravagantly different effect. There are no victors in her stories; the combination of circumstances and history is frequently overwhelming. In 'Blackness,' for example, even the opening of the story is fraught:

The swishing, rushing sound of the windless  
rain without, tropical in the verticalness of its  
downpour and intensity, became slowly deadened;  
.... And then, over the place... flowed the chill  
blackness that was all around us.<sup>5</sup>

Lines as evocative as these are typical of Grimké's fiction; indeed, perhaps because of their quality, Hull and others seem to think of her primarily as a poet. Nevertheless, we can guess that – given the comparative popularity of the two genres – Grimké's stories may actually have made more of an impact at the time, and in any case they are remarkable for their tone. Two themes recur in the stories that were printed during her lifetime: lynching, both as an event and as a trope of the Black, and horror for the Black unborn on the part of mothers-to-be, who are afraid that their children may grow up to be shunned by, and be the overt victims of, the white population. As Carolivia Herron notes in her Introduction to Gates's edition of some of Grimké's works, "Her fiction... was too stark in its unflinching description of the violence of lynching."<sup>6</sup>

Angelina Weld Grimké's unusual childhood as the offspring of a father, himself from an extraordinary background, and a white woman from Boston's upper middle-class may have made her more than usually sensitive to a variety of ills, even for a child of mixed ancestry in the early part of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the case, there is no question that her fiction has an

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line* (New York: Penguin, 1996). One such tale is 'Po' Sandy,' a classic in the use of the dialect and the trickster trope.

<sup>5</sup> Angelina Weld Grimké, 'Blackness,' in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 218-19. This particular version of the story was taken by the editor from holograph form, but is simply another version of the story known as 'Goldie,' and published by Grimké during the 1920's in *Birth Control Review* 4 (Nov. – Dec. 1920). As Hull remarks about another of Grimké's stories appearing in the same venue, "It seems somehow wrong that this tale... would appear in such a journal." See Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Carolivia Herron, "Introduction," in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 21. This volume is part of Gates's Schomburg series.

<sup>7</sup> All commentators seem to agree that little is known about her mother, Sarah Stanley, other than that she came from a well-to-do family and disappeared from Angelina's life at an early

otherworldly quality, and one that we can readily contrast to other fiction of her era.

## II

Grimké's construction of Blackness might not be so striking to a reader were it not for the other types of construals placed on ethnicity by writers of the same period. As has been noted, Charles Chesnutt has a range of stories in which lighter-skinned individuals are regularly trounced by the darker-skinned, and in which tragic overtones are usually absent; indeed, tragedy is often replaced by humour. In 'Po' Sandy,' a classic tale featuring Chesnutt's important character Julius McAdoo, the story-within-the-story is used in an intriguing way, and ultimately has a pronounced impact on the white woman listening to it. Julius tells a tale of the hardships of slavery to Annie, the wife of the white man who owns some property near Julius's place. This story, as told by Julius, is so compelling that it draws the reader in, and 'Po' Sandy' appears to be Julius's tale.

More important, the way in which the story unfolds reveals African uses of space and time, which are foregrounded.<sup>8</sup> Although parts of the tale may be pathetic, the only real sadness in either the framing story or Julius's told story is the fact that Annie allows herself to be conned out of some money and a building on her property. Unlike the sort of motivation driving Grimké, however, which appears to be a desire to demonstrate genuine powerlessness and helplessness, Chesnutt is able to show that, with a variety of verbal skills, from time to time the former slaves are in a winning situation. Although colourism appears repeatedly in Chesnutt's work, the airs of the lighter-skinned are usually shown up to quite a disadvantage. Whereas Grimké's take on the one-drop rule – that social construct that made any American with any amount of African ancestry a Black person – is to demonstrate the tragedy afflicting the population, Chesnutt seems to want to show a number of ways around it.

In contrast, Grimké, both in 'Blackness' and 'The Closing Door,' sets up an atmosphere of relentless dread that alters the reader's expectations of the coming events even before anything detailing the plot has occurred. We can hypothesize that her status as both a woman and a Black American had a great deal to do with this. 'Blackness' is the story of a lynching and a murder in reprisal against the lynching, as told by one party to another. The teller of the tale, a nameless attorney, speaks throughout the narrative, but the fact that

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age. Hull glosses the relationship as "something of a puzzle," Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 4. The opening of the tale, with the details of Julius's use of the oral tradition, is at Chesnutt, *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*, pp. 14-15.

Grimké never uses his name – or the name of the individual lynched – makes the atmosphere even more surreal. The only proper name used in the story is that of the listener, whose horrified reaction to the unfolding of the actual facts surrounding the lynching is set down precisely. Even in her descriptions of the room in which the story is told, or the weather outside, Grimké uses the device of heightened and exaggerated affect, as in this passage where the listener narrates how it began to rain outside while he was listening to the speaker's version of the story:

Outside suddenly there came to our ears  
a sound as of myriad tappings. I sat forward  
alert and tense. But it was only the first rain  
drops, another shower had commenced. When  
he spoke again the noise without was so great  
I could not hear what he said.<sup>9</sup>

The entire narration is done in the exaggerated style that Grimké employs to forward the notion of tragedy, while leaving the reader in a state of fear, unalleviated by humor or any other device that would lessen the tension. Describing the atmosphere of the story, existing in at least three versions (other titles are 'The Creakin' and 'Goldie'), Hull notes, "Many of the same leitmotifs occur in all three stories; for example, the husband's love of trees and bird song, and the horrible creaking of the lynch rope (used also in *Rachel*)."<sup>10</sup>

A comparison between Chesnutt and Grimké, as noted here, is very illustrative of the effect of atmosphere in Grimké's works. But even the work of a writer who might be thought to compose in a vein completely different from Chesnutt – Frances E.W. Harper – is also significantly different from, and less tension-ridden, than that of Grimké. Again, some of Harper's main works were composed approximately twenty years before, but although they are closer in time to slavery and to the Civil War, Harper has a structural variation in her works that simply does not exist in Angelina Weld Grimké's short stories.<sup>11</sup> In *Iola LeRoy*, the protagonist suffers greatly because of her ancestry under the 'one-drop' rule (the protagonist is an octoroon), but many portions of the novel are enlivened by humour. Although there are episodes of tragedy – including death and unmerited suffering – Harper chooses to devote entire chapters to tales told in the dialect and to a depiction, insofar as is possible, of the lives of the slaves. These chapters, although not worked through in the same way as Chesnutt's stories, are much closer to them in spirit; here

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<sup>9</sup> Grimké, 'Blackness', p. 232.

<sup>10</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>11</sup> I refer primarily to *Iola LeRoy*; this work, also, is available as a volume in the Schomburg series. See Frances E.W. Harper, *Iola LeRoy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Blackness has its own style, its own accomplishments, and its own ends. There is very little in either Grimké's plays or stories that is anything less than tragic.<sup>12</sup>

Since lynching is one of the main *foci* of Grimké's work, one might wonder how she could have handled this particular topic differently. But the fact that Grimké chose to focus on lynching as specifically as she did was noted by many of her contemporaries, and indeed was commented upon in letters written to her by editors and advisers.<sup>13</sup> One could argue – and Hull seems inclined to want to make this point – that part of what drove Grimké was perhaps a sense of guilt over her comparative privilege, and a recurring sadness or sense of loss about her relationship with her mother.<sup>14</sup> The poignancy of these feelings, indeed a sense of bitterness, may have driven Grimké to try her hand at writing on the one topic that metonymically captured her feelings of loss and entrapment. In any case, rather than using Blackness to forward notions of Black success at the expense of the Euro-derived population, as Chesnutt did, or to enliven a manuscript with episodes of humour and folk tales, as Harper did, Grimké pushes Blackness to its edge, creating a scene of loss, tragedy and unredeemable suffering. It is for these reasons that Hull remarks that Grimké's publications in *Birth Control Review* seem "somehow wrong."<sup>15</sup>

It could be maintained that it is a mistake to focus on the short stories and plays of Angelina Weld Grimké, since it is clear that the bulk of her work was poetic, and since critics in general seem to find poetry her strongest genre. But although a good deal of the poetry deals with general topics, and is much more personal than the prose work, it is no less mournful. Using poetry to establish more openly the metaphoric links that drive much of her work, Grimké is able to provide a platform for her own personal melancholy. Again, strands of parental loss, confusion over identity, rejection from the white population and a sense of fragility are found throughout these efforts, but it would seem to be a mistake to try to make the claim that, even if Blackness rarely comes up as an overt topic, it is not present. Rather, the poetry appears

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<sup>12</sup> Hull makes a distinction between what was published and left in holograph form during Grimké's lifetime. Gates's edition of her work includes much that was in holograph at the time the edition was put together. See Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*.

<sup>13</sup> According to Hull, another writer of the time, Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman, wrote her on the topic of her preoccupation with lynching, and advised that she attempt to work with other material. See Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>14</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, pp. 108-109, addresses the problematisation of the relationship with Sarah Stanley, and mentions it and Grimké's relationship with her mother's relatives throughout the text.

<sup>15</sup> Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, p. 129. See also fn. 5.

to construct a place for needed introspection, in which focus on the personal ramifications of Blackness plays a part.

### III

Although the two poems with racial themes for which Grimké is best known are ‘Tenebris’ and ‘Beware Lest he Wake,’ most of her verse is charged with melancholy and a kind of wistful thoughtfulness, even if it is not overtly tied to matters of race.<sup>16</sup> Taking into account what we know of Angelina’s background – and of the sense of loss that moved her from childhood – it is easy to see how a claim might be made that a good deal of what she expresses in her poetry has to do with race, even if the sorrow expressed is not tied to the concept in such a way as to make it overt.

For example, as Hull notes, an important early poem has to do with the death of her aunt by marriage, Charlotte Forten Grimké, the well-known diarist and activist of the contraband camps during the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> Here we can read lines that speak to both general and at least implicitly racial concerns at once:

Still are there wonders of the dark and day:  
The muted shrilling of shy things at night,  
So small beneath the stars and moon;  
The peace, dream-frail, but perfect while the light  
Lies softly on the leaves at noon.<sup>18</sup>

As is the case with much of what Grimké wrote, images having to do with night and darkness move into the verses, even though this elegiac poem is ostensibly about another human being. It is as if Grimké simply could not write without these sorts of images intruding.

Grimké may have felt more at home with poetry simply because its structure allows for the cascade of images and tropes that was a hallmark of her writing. In ‘Tenebris,’ a very short poem, Grimké makes one of her strongest uses of tropes of the Black culture in verse. This particular piece is usually cited when her poetry is mentioned, and yet it is in a sense atypical, because much of her verse is much more personal. Yet these lines from ‘Tenebris’

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<sup>16</sup> In a brief categorization of her poetry, Hull provides five groupings, of which race is one of the last two; Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, p. 137).

<sup>17</sup> Charlotte Forten Grimké’s *Journals* are today often taught as an example of important writing from the Civil War period, and as evidence of social class distinctions in the American Black culture at that time. Charlotte Forten Grimké, *Journals*, ed. Brenda Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry*, p. 138. The title of the poem is ‘To Keep the Memory of Charlotte Forten Grimké,’ and Hull notes that the piece allays grief by “accepting death as a beautiful phenomenon...”

encapsulate her gift for metonymic linking (the entire poem is not much longer):

A hand huge and black,  
With fingers long and black,  
All through the dark,  
Against the white man's house,  
In the little wind...<sup>19</sup>

Here “house,” with its associations both literal and figurative serves as a marker of the dominance of white culture, and “hand,” with its notions of work, accomplishment and activity links to Black effort. As Grimké says in the next lines, “The black hand plucks and plucks/At the bricks...”<sup>20</sup> The plucking motion is perhaps a bit too delicate for the tasks that the hand wants to undertake, or, as she writes in the last line “[I]s it a shadow?” The lack of substance indicated by the shadow trope signals the ultimate powerlessness of the Black population, a powerlessness with which Grimké was all too aware. It may very well be the case that Hull and others foreground Angelina Weld Grimké’s poetry because it is here that her extended use of metaphor serves her ends best; in the short story genre, there is no question that such usage can sometimes seem forced.

The single most racially-charged poem by Grimké is probably ‘Beware Lest He Awakes,’ which exists in three separate versions in both holograph and published form.<sup>21</sup> As is the case with ‘Tenebris,’ Grimké moves here from the personal to overt statements, many of which are related to the notion of a general Black revenge on the white population. In a critique of a number of poems in Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel*, the critic Christina Britzolakis uses the phrase “‘daemonic’ power of repetition;”<sup>22</sup> the use of this phrase is also not misplaced with respect to ‘Beware.’ This piece is significantly longer than ‘Tenebris,’ and includes the lines:

You are a nobler man  
Because you have no tan,  
And he a very brute  
Because of nature’s soot;  
But though he virtue lack,

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<sup>19</sup> Grimké, ‘Tenebris’, in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> Grimké, ‘Tenebris’, p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> The published version is Angelina Weld Grimké, ‘Beware Lest He Awakes’, in *Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké*, ed. Carolivia Herron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 88-120. A footnote at the bottom of the version states that it is “from the *Pilot* (10 May 1902).”

<sup>22</sup> Christina Britzolakis, ‘*Ariel* and Other Poems’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 112.



And though his skin be black,  
Beware lest he awakes!<sup>23</sup>

Here we have not only the repetition of the ‘beware’ segment – it occurs two or three times in the poem – but a strong use of rhyme, so forced that it itself becomes, as Britzolakis says, a form of repetition. Whether or not ‘Beware’ is in some sense a better, more professionally crafted and more solid piece of work than, for example, either ‘Tenebris’ or “To Keep the Memory of Charlotte Forten Grimké,” it is sharply striking to the reader, and once again represents a use of the heavy and pointed forms of metaphor of which Grimké is fond. In sum, although her work in prose may not be her best work, what both her prose writings and her poetry have in common is a poignant attempt to use images of darkness, shadow, color and lack of light to create a portrait of the condition of the Black population, and one that will remain with the reader.

#### IV

One other line of analysis of the work of Angelina Weld Grimké revolves around the fact that Grimké was, in a sense, a precursor of the strands of analysis that today might be labeled Black existentialism. In other words, much of what she wrote exhibits the existential angst that we associate with later parts of the twentieth century, and that in the works of some authors – Richard Wright, for example – takes a decidedly demarcated turn.<sup>24</sup> Writing in a recent compendium on the subject, Lewis Gordon notes the extent to which philosophical thought in a phenomenological vein focuses on the in-the-bodiness. Part of Gordon’s concern is to delineate such categories as ‘Blackness’ and ‘Mixedness,’ because he wants to show, as Sartre argued, that Blackness, for Europeans, has an even greater degree of immanence attached to it.<sup>25</sup> Grimké is, herself, a precursor and an articulator of this sort of thought, as we have seen from her constant use of images of darkness and shadow, even in the poems that we might ordinarily deem to be more personal. With respect to racial categories and philosophical thinking, Gordon has written:

[A] choice of [mixed] identity, then, functions

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<sup>23</sup> Grimké, ‘Beware Lest He Awakes’, p. 119. The cited portion comes roughly a third of the way in the text; it is preceded by approximately fifteen to twenty lines similar in tone, and followed by another twenty to thirty such lines, the entire poem ending with the line “Beware, lest he awakes!”

<sup>24</sup> Many do not know that one of Wright’s later works, *The Outsider*, is very much influenced by and the product of Continental theory.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘The Oppression of Blacks in the United States’, in *Notebook for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). This piece is frequently cited in discussions of race that have to do with matters philosophical and Continental.

in relation to blackness in dual forms of denial:  
affirmation of whiteness is a rejection of base blackness,  
but so, too, is affirmation of being mixed, since in either  
formulation the black stands as a point at which both  
both white and mixed-race designations will stand,  
like a renaissance humanity that reaches at the gods  
in a flight from the animal kingdom, in a world “above.”<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly enough, these remarks are more than applicable to Grimké, for however we might characterize her identity, she was one who would certainly say that Blackness stood as a point of departure for any writing or theorizing. In addition, and as Wright says in *The Outsider*, the very state of Blackness in American society carries with it an overload of the standard dread and angst that envelops the human condition. In writing about what he witnessed in visiting America during the late 1940's, Sartre used Continental categories to try to delineate a position for the Black American:

It is also true that there is an initial attitude of the For-itself that freezes the other into an object. With the outcome that the Negro who can read is that Negro over there that I see at this moment, that inferior and half-damned creature, come into possession of a stolen, almost external power that he only knows how to make use of for evil.<sup>27</sup>

Sartre was obviously speaking historically, but the interesting point is that the attitude about which he writes is one that is at the forefront of Grimké's work, in both her novels and her poetry. Writing as one who is a “half-damned creature,” Angelina Weld Grimké limns the grief of not wanting to bring a child into the world, or of having witnessed a lynching. She writes of black hands chipping away at stones, and of her awareness of the general fear that the possessor of the hand might ‘awake.’ In that sense, Grimké is an existentialist writer before her time, and one whose work deserves mention by those engaged in the project of recovering Black existentialism just as surely as any of the Caribbean writers or others whose names are usually cited with regard to this effort.

Finally, Grimké's writing is a testimony to the power of the one-drop rule. Were it not for the social construction of race at the time she was writing, she probably would not have been drawn to the topics to which she was drawn. But this woman of the 1920's – daughter of a white woman, herself a Boston Brahmin, and daughter of a mixed-race man who was only half-black – identified strongly with the various parts of the Black culture, and was able to

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> Sartre, ‘The Oppression of Blacks’, p. 563.

write in a vein that allowed for such identification. It is remarkable that she chose to address the issues as fully as she did, because the pain of the issues seemed to become commingled with her personal sadness, and the intensity of the feeling was somewhat redoubled. Works such as 'Tenebris' and 'The Closing Door' are the results of moving personal pain to the level of awareness of group oppression, and then trying to delineate the aspects of group oppression that can be expressed in literary terms.

The sort of writing that Gordon will later go on to term 'Black existentialism' is part and parcel of the project of Angelina Weld Grimké, since it is clear that she feels both her place in the general scheme of things and her place as an American Black woman to be the sources of high levels of anxiety and depression. Given her personal life, it might be thought to have been inevitable that she would choose to focus on issues that merged these two themes. But Grimké has gone above and beyond the call of duty in her writing; she has pushed the limits of what might be a response to her Black heritage, and has also broken new ground as a woman of the twentieth century who is aware of the difficulties for women in general and Black women in particular.

## V

I have been arguing that Angelina Weld Grimké presents us with literature that, employing a number of tropes and strategies, provides a startling overview of Blackness, and that is underappreciated, even within the framework of the Harlem Renaissance canon. In works of her period, and in the decades leading immediately up to it, a variety of stratagems was employed by authors to try to outline Blackness in America. As we have seen, Chesnutt and Harper, among others, tied the concept of cultural Blackness to moments of humour and pathos, and, at least in Chesnutt's case, to a sort of victoriousness over the dominant culture.

Grimké, to an extent seldom essayed by other authors, does not do that. Rather, she gives new meaning to the notion of the tragic, and a new sense in which lynching, murder and victimization are seen as exemplars of the Black condition, with no escape. Hull notes the publication of Grimké's fiction in the *Birth Control Review*; Grimké did not, of course, choose this venue lightly. Perhaps because of the circumstances of her own life – and her thoughtful and reflective nature – she is unable to see a happy or even moderately sufficient future for the Black population.

We may take issue with the extent to which Grimké casts Blackness in tragic terms, but it is difficult to take issue with the notion that her overall corpus is an original and striking body of work. From her short stories to her poetry – and from her holograph writings, now available, to work published in

her time – Grimké exemplifies the ways in which a fairly high degree of formal education and privilege could work, given the constraints on a female author, to further the project of Black literature. Angelina Weld Grimké, whose name is often confused with that of the white abolitionist, stands as a gifted and underappreciated author of the Harlem Renaissance who provided us with a new way of seeing.