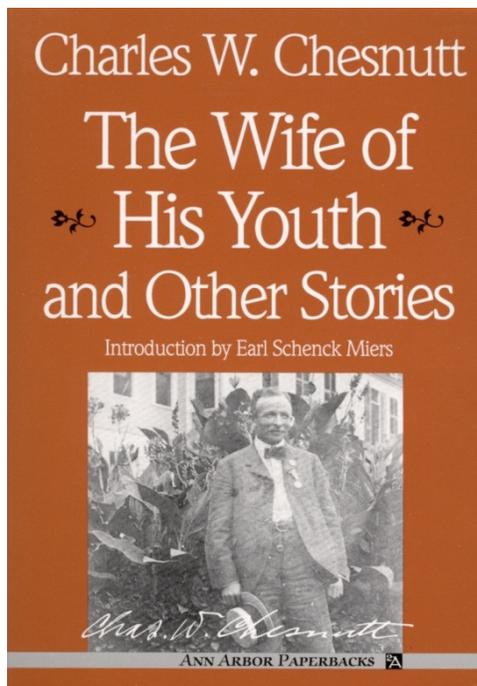


The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line

by Charles W. Chesnutt
A Choose to Read Ohio Toolkit



About the Book

Black literature in America matured over a long period. Rather than considering the rich potentialities in the subject of race relations, the earliest black writers after the Civil War wrote instead of the plantation tradition. This collection of nine short stories by Charles Chesnutt was the first black fiction to attract the attention of the white literary world and reading public as a serious treatment of social problems in postbellum society.

Chesnutt writes here of the Black person's search for identity in the tumultuous period between the Civil War and the turn of the century. His characters are the mulatto, the rising middle-class Black person, the freed slave; his themes are the tensions of interracial and intraracial living which are still relevant today.

The publication of this book, in 1899, and three later novels secured for Chesnutt a reputation as a pioneer in black literature and an important influence on modern black fiction, which began to flourish in the 1920's. His books are not judged on their racial interest alone, however. These stories have undeniable artistic merit: the characters are vivid, their conflicts and solutions are expressed with great poignancy and force.

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Book Details

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<http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=7613>



About the Author

Born in Cleveland in 1858, Charles Waddell Chesnutt was the son of two free African-Americans from Fayetteville, North Carolina. When he was eight years old, Chesnutt and his parents returned to Fayetteville where he worked at his father's grocery store and attended a Freedmen's Bureau school. During this time, Chesnutt became enamored with reading as well as observing the social and political happenings in the world around him. Chesnutt later referred to his childhood in the south as occurring in "one of the most eventful eras of its history." Further entrenching Chesnutt in the socio-political tension was his complex racial heritage; his paternal grandfather was a white slaveholder and Chesnutt himself had notably light skin. However, he identified as African American and went on to broach the topic of mixed race identity and social struggles in his writing.

After his father's store went out of business and his mother passed away, Chesnutt began teaching at a school for black children in Charlotte in 1872. In 1878 he married Susan Perry, a Fayetteville schoolteacher, and by 1880 he had become the principal of the State Colored Normal School in Fayetteville. Chesnutt and Perry went on to have four children together. Chesnutt spent this period continuing his avid pursuit of self-education, studying French, German, rhetoric, and learning stenography.

Increasingly frustrated with the prejudice and white supremacy that reigned in the post-Civil War Reconstructionist South and yearning to become a writer, Chesnutt and his family relocated to Cleveland in 1883. There, he passed the Ohio bar exam and started a successful court reporting business. He also began publishing stories and essays in newspapers and magazines. He was one of the first African-American fiction writers to appear in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Two short story collections, ***The Conjure Woman*** and ***The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line***, were published in 1899 as well as his biography of Frederick Douglass. In the hopes of supporting his family solely as an author, Chesnutt wrote two novels: ***The House Behind the Cedars*** (1900) and ***The Marrow of Tradition*** (1901). Both books sold poorly, and in 1901 Chesnutt returned to his stenography business. His final novel, ***The Colonel's Dream***, was published in 1905. Chesnutt continued to write and speak against racial inequality for the remainder of his life, resulting in his legacy as one of the forefathers of African American fiction and a realist pioneer in writing on racial themes. He died in Cleveland in 1932.



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Author Resources:

The Charles Chesnutt Digital Archive

<http://www.chesnuttarchive.org/>

The Library of America: Charles W. Chesnutt

<http://www.loa.org/chesnutt/>

African American Literature Book Club: Charles W. Chesnutt

<http://aalbc.com/authors/charlesw.htm>

Talk About It!

Spoiler warning! Some discussion questions refer to key events in the book. Do not read if you do not want to find out what happens.

- How do you feel that Chesnutt's mixed-raced identity and real-life circumstances influenced his writing? What themes from the author's life do you see present in these short stories?
- How does Chesnutt use satire and irony in his stories – particularly in **“The Passing of Grandison”** and **“Her Virginia Mammy”** – to convey his feelings about race relations and social/political tensions of the era?
- In **“Uncle Wellington’s Wives,”** mixed-race young man Wellington Braboy moves to the North in anticipation of wealth, opportunity, and a reprieve from the prejudices of the south. How does his actual experience compare to the idyllic construct of life in the North for the black man? How does his newly-acquired white wife factor into his imagined successes and/or actual failures?
- Many of the stories in ***The Wife of His Youth*** deal with miscegenation, the mixing of different racial groups through marriage and social/sexual relations. In several stories, such as **“A Matter of Principle”** and **“The Wife of His Youth,”** Chesnutt goes beyond revealing the difficulties faced by racially blended individuals to expose the severe prejudices they held against African Americans with darker skin. How do you think this prejudice developed and how did it hinder – or help – the progression of African Americans following the Civil War and Reconstruction?
- **“The Web of Circumstance”** and **“The Sheriff’s Children”** reveal Chesnutt's insight and emotional reaction to the destructive effects of slavery and Reconstruction in the south. How would you describe Chesnutt's feelings on these topics after reading these stories?
- **“The Wife of His Youth”** explores themes of identity, migration, and dislocation from one's past and heritage through the protagonist of Mr. Ryder, a mixed-race “mulatto” man who enters into the prominent ranks of the northern black elite (“The Blue Vein Society”) and must choose between a future of high social standing and the reality of his past. Consider these questions about the story **“The Wife of His Youth”**:



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- What is the "Blue Vein Society?" What are their values? What role do they believe they play in the contrasting social classes of whites and blacks?
- At one point, Mr. Ryder declares: "Self-preservation is the first law of nature." What does this motto mean to you? How does it relate to the Blue Veins' social values and their construction of the social "color line"?
- Mr. Ryder intends to propose to Molly Dixon, identifying her "many attractive qualities." Among these qualities are her young age, "refined manners," wealthy inheritance, light skin, and high level of education. Why do you think these qualities make Mr. Ryder finally "wish to change his condition to that of a married man?" How do they align with Ryder's own values and personal qualities? Is his intention based more on social values, personal attraction, or both?
- Do you sense that Chesnutt identifies or sympathizes with Mr. Ryder?
- Mr. Ryder claims that he has no "race prejudice." Based on his character and his ultimate decision to embrace Liza Jane as his wife, do you believe this to be true?
- Do you think Mr. Ryder knew his decision to introduce Liza Jane as his estranged wife before the ball? Or did he decide to act upon hearing the thoughts and opinions of his fellow Blue Veins? How does the timing of his decision impact your perception of it? Was it a brave and moral decision or a calculated move?
- Discuss the contrast in characterization between Ryder and Liza Jane. Where do their most significant differences lie? How does Ryder's reaction to Liza Jane reveal his feelings toward the ethical dilemma she represents?
- Liza Jane insists that her long-lost husband Sam has "be'n huntin' fer me all dese years" and that she would easily recognize him in a crowd of a hundred. What is Chesnutt's intention in the ironic exchanges between Mr. Ryder and Liza Jane? Which is more significant: Liza Jane's undying faith or Mr. Ryder's social evolution? Do you believe Mr. Ryder ever truly attempted to find his estranged wife?
- Mr. Ryder recites the classic Shakespearean line when explaining his dilemma to the Blue Veins: "'This above all: to thine own self be true.'" How does this compare to his earlier declaration that "Self-preservation is the first law of nature"?
- Discuss the idea of marriage and its meaning to Ryder; how does his previous marriage to Liza Jane compare to his intentions to marry Molly Dixon? What are the differences in these two unions and how has perception of the role of a wife changed to Ryder over time?
- How do you think Ryder's choice to not marry over the last 25 years relates to his relationship with Liza Jane?



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Explore More!

Additional ideas and resources to use with *The Wife of His Youth*.

Visit Charles W. Chesnutt's Grave

<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=7938356>

After his death in Cleveland in 1932, Chesnutt was buried in the Lake View Cemetery in Cuyahoga County. Visit the "Find a Grave" website for more information on his burial as well as photos of and directions to the cemetery.

Family photographs from the Charles W. Chesnutt Collection

<http://cplorg.cdmhost.com/cdm/landingpage/collection/p4014coll12>

This collection of 45 digitized historic photos is part of the Cleveland Public Library Digital Gallery (<http://cplorg.cdmhost.com/>).

National Afro-American Museum & Cultural Center

<http://consumer.discoverohio.com/searchdetails.aspx?detail=70699>

Located in Wilberforce, Ohio, this museum seeks to preserve and promote African American history and culture through programs, exhibits, research, and publications as well as speakers and educational activities. Visit this museum to learn more about the culture behind Chesnutt and the characters he created.

Check it Out:

Go deeper into the mind of the author by reading Charles W. Chesnutt's journals, edited by Richard H. Brodhead (*The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, 1993). Written between the ages of 16 and 24, Chesnutt's journals reveal his innermost thoughts, observations, and activities as he strives for self-improvement and chases his own intellectual ambitions. It offers an intimate and compelling view of the struggles and experiences of the author in the post-Civil War South. Look for a copy of *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt* at your local library: <http://www.oplin.org/content/find-a-library>.

About Choose to Read Ohio

Choose to Read Ohio, a project of the State Library of Ohio and the Ohioana Library Association, encourages public libraries, schools, families, and others to build a community of readers and an appreciation of Ohio authors and literature. CTRO is adaptable for use in classrooms, libraries, bookstores, by book discussion groups, families, and other community groups.

Explore Choose to Read Ohio resources & toolkits: <http://library.ohio.gov/ctro>.

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