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On Being Black

WRITINGS BY AFRO-AMERICANS
FROM FREDERICK DOUGLASS TO THE PRESENT

Edited by

Charles T. Davis
and Daniel Walden

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To
ULYSSES LEE

Distinguished scholar and teacher
in Afro-American literature and culture

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Introduction

Awareness of being black is the most powerful and the most fertile single inspiration for black writers in America. It is ironic that blackness, for so long regarded as a handicap socially and culturally, should also be an artistic strength. Consciousness of blackness has brought an especial intensity to the statement of theme, as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; a distinction and a beauty to language, evident in the poems of Langston Hughes; and unusual ways of rendering scene, as observed in the work of Jean Toomer. Being black is not all. The American black writer has worked in the American

who expected to succeed in whipping must also succeed in killing me. . . .

I have observed this in my experience of slavery—that whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom. I have found that to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and as far as possible to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man. . . .

CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

Charles Waddell Chesnutt, born in 1858, grew up in Cleveland and in North Carolina. A graduate of the grade school only, he became principal of a North Carolina school, a well-paid stenographer for Dow Jones in New York, and an Ohio lawyer (though he never practiced law). His first short story was published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1887. In 1899 a collection called The Conjure Woman appeared; later that year his "stories of the color line," preoccupied often with the problems of the light-colored Negro of mixed race, appeared in The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories. Chesnutt was recognized as a superb technician, though it was not widely known that he was black. He died in Cleveland in 1932.

The Wife of His Youth

Mr. Ryder was going to give a ball. There were several reasons why this was an opportune time for such an event.

Mr. Ryder might aptly be called the dean of the Blue Veins. The original Blue Veins were a little society of colored persons organized in a certain Northern city shortly after the war. Its purpose was to establish and maintain correct social standards among a people whose social condition presented almost unlimited room for improvement. By accident, combined perhaps with some natural affinity, the society consisted of individuals who were, generally speaking, more

From The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories.