The Wife of His Youth

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHARLES CHESNUTT

Charles Chesnutt was born to a free, mixed-race couple who had left their native city of Fayetteville, North Carolina to live in Cleveland, Ohio just before the start of the American Civil War. Chesnutt was considered Black, even though he had majority European ancestry and could "pass" as white—although he never chose to, instead identifying strongly with the Black community. Although born in Ohio, Chesnutt spent most of his early life in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where his parents moved back to following the end of the Civil War. He worked as a teacher, then became principal of the State Colored Normal School. However, racism in the South at the time led him to move back to his birth city of Cleveland, Ohio, along with his wife and children, where he worked as a clerk while studying to become a lawyer. His great ambition was to become a full-time writer, and he wrote stories and novels in his spare time. Chesnutt published two short story collections: *The Conjure Woman* (1899), which depicted life under slavery, and *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* (1899), which depicted issues of racial identity. Chesnutt also published three novels: *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905). Chesnutt sometimes found it difficult to find a wide readership in his lifetime due to his own racial identity as well as the anti-racist themes of his work. His final two novels, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C* (1921) and *The Quarry* (1928), were only published posthumously due to their subversive treatment of racial identity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As with many of Charles Chesnutt's works, "The Wife of His Youth" deals with themes of racial oppression and the legacies of slavery in post-Civil War America. The end of the Civil War in 1865 resulted in the emancipation of millions of formerly enslaved people, but initial hopes for a more free and racially equal society were shattered in the following decades as new forms of racial segregation and coerced labor were put into place. Because of racist beliefs that originated during the time of slavery, anyone who had any African ancestry, even if they appeared "white," was subject to racial oppression. However, many middle-class Black Americans in the years following the Civil War nonetheless sought to work against racism to gain increased social status, leading to class divisions within the community.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Chesnutt's works, including the other stories of *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, *Paul Marchand, F.M.C*, *The Quarry*, and *Many Oxendine*, deal with themes of racial identity among mixed-race people in 19th- and early 20th-century U.S. society. Another story in the same collection as "The Wife of His Youth," called "A Matter of Principle," is also set in the context of the fictional "Blue Veins" society. It tells the story of a mixed-race man who ruins his daughter's chances of marrying a Congressman because of his prejudice against people with darker skin than his own. Many of Chesnutt's other works deal with the question of whether mixed-race people should seek acceptance in white society, or rather embrace solidarity with the Black community—a question that preoccupied Chesnutt in his own life. Many later American authors, such as William Faulkner—perhaps most notably in *Absalom, Absalom*—dealt similarly with themes of racial identity through characters' internal and interpersonal conflicts. Other notable works about racial identity in the U.S. include George S. Schuyler's *Black No More*, Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Wife of His Youth
- **When Written:** 1898
- **Where Written:** Cleveland, Ohio
- **When Published:** 1899
- **Literary Period:** American Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Groveland, a Northern U.S. city, in 1890
- **Climax:** Mr. Ryder announces Eliza Jane as the "wife of his youth," rather than proposing marriage to Molly Dixon, in front of the guests of his ball.
- **Antagonist:** Bob Smith
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Similar Societies. The city of Groveland in "The Wife of His Youth" is inspired by Chesnutt's native city of Cleveland, Ohio. Chesnutt drew on real-life friends and acquaintances that he knew through his membership in the Cleveland Social Circle, an exclusive society of mixed-race people.

PLOT SUMMARY

Mr. Ryder is a middle-aged, mixed-race man living in the

Northern city of Groveland 25 years after the end of the American Civil War. He is one of the leading figures of the "Blue Veins" society, an association of mostly professional-class, light-skinned mixed-race people seeking social improvement. Mr. Ryder is one of the more conservative members, looking down on people with lower social statuses and darker skin and excluding them from membership in the society. He believes that mixed-race people should seek "upward absorption" into the white race. Mr. Ryder has decided to propose marriage to a woman, Molly Dixon, who is younger, lighter-skinned, and from a higher social status than him. He is planning a **ball** for members of the Blue Veins society as an occasion to propose to her.

But on the day that the ball is scheduled to take place, Mr. Ryder has a chance encounter that causes a life crisis for him: a middle-aged Black woman, Eliza Jane, visits his house and tells him that she is looking for her husband, a mixed-race man named Sam Taylor. She tells him the story of their marriage and how they were separated. Sam was free-born, but he was an orphan and was apprenticed to work on the same plantation where Eliza Jane was enslaved. They married, although marriages made in slavery had no legal status.

One day, Eliza Jane overheard a conversation that revealed the plantation owner, Bob Smith's, plans to sell Sam into slavery, and she warned Sam, allowing him to escape. He promised that he would return someday to free her. However, Smith discovered that Eliza Jane warned Sam, and in retaliation, he sold her away. After the Civil War, she returned to the plantation to see if she could find out where Sam was now, but she couldn't get any information about him, so she started to search everywhere for him, first in the South and then in the North. She has spent the last 25 years looking for Sam, certain that she will find him and that he will love her just as before.

After Eliza Jane tells her story, Mr. Ryder asks to see a **photograph** of her husband, and she shows it to him. He tells her that he will give the matter some consideration and asks for her address so he can inform her if he finds out anything about her husband. Then, he goes into his house and stares at his reflection in the mirror.

At the Blue Veins ball that night, Mr. Ryder gives a speech in which he recounts Eliza Jane's story to the attendees. Then, he asks them to imagine the following scenario: that a husband, soon after escaping being sold into slavery, had discovered his wife had been sold and unsuccessfully tried to find her. Then, the husband made his way to the North to improve his standing, and eventually he became a much more educated and respectable man, putting his humble past far behind him. Finally, he asks the audience to imagine that the man's former wife, who has been searching for him all these years, encountered him by chance, right before he was about to marry another woman. But the wife did not recognize him. The man could either choose not to acknowledge her, and continue his life as before, or he could acknowledge her and reunite with her, giving up his planned marriage to another woman.

Mr. Ryder asks the audience which option this man should have chosen. The audience members realize that Mr. Ryder is, in fact, referring to his own situation—that he is Sam Taylor, the husband that Eliza Jane has been searching for all this time. Molly Dixon is the first to say that the man should've acknowledged his former wife, and the rest of the guests agree. Mr. Ryder says that this is the response he was expecting, and he leads Eliza Jane into the room, announcing that she is "the wife of [his] youth."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor – Mr. Ryder is the protagonist of "The Wife of His Youth." At the start of the story, he is a middle-aged, mixed-race man living in a Northern city 25 years after the end of the American Civil War. He has worked his way up as a railroad clerk, educating himself and earning respect as a leading figure in the "Blue Veins" society, an organization of mixed-race people formed for the purpose of social advancement. He believes that mixed-race people should seek "upwards absorption" into whiteness, and for that reason, he looks down on people with darker skin or lower social statuses and excludes them from the Blue Veins. His desire for social advancement is the main reason why he wants to marry Molly Dixon, a younger woman with a higher social status than his own. But Mr. Ryder's chance encounter with his former wife, Eliza Jane, who he married during the time of slavery, forces him to reckon with his past. He was born free, with the name Sam Taylor, and was an apprentice on a plantation because he was an orphan. While working there, he married an older enslaved woman, Eliza Jane. When Eliza Jane warned him that the plantation-owner, Bob Smith, was planning to sell him into slavery, he escaped, promising that he would come back to free her. But he was not able to keep his promise, because she was sold away in retaliation for warning him, and there was no way he could find her. So, he went North to try to improve his social standing. Mr. Ryder sees himself as a man of honor, but even so, he hesitates when Eliza Jane encounters him after 25 years and tells him her story (without recognizing him as her husband). To acknowledge Eliza Jane would be to give up his planned marriage and his desire for upward advancement. However, Mr. Ryder is so moved by Eliza Jane's faith in him that he knows, after thinking over the matter, that he must acknowledge and reunite with her. In this way, Mr. Ryder overcomes some of his earlier, narrow-minded views and recognizes that love is more important than social status.

Eliza Jane – Eliza Jane is Mr. Ryder's long-lost wife, a formerly enslaved woman whom he married while apprenticing as a

young man on a plantation. After overhearing a conversation between the plantation owner, Bob Smith, and his wife, Eliza Jane warned Mr. Ryder (whose name was Sam Taylor at the time) that the planter planned to sell him into slavery. He escaped and promised that he would return to free her soon. But the planter sold her away in retaliation for warning her husband, so that Sam couldn't fulfill his promise. After the Civil War, Eliza Jane searched incessantly for her husband, starting in the South and going to the North. Even after 25 years of searching, she is convinced that he still loves her, that she will eventually find him, and they will live happily together again. However, when Eliza Jane does finally encounter her husband, she does not recognize him because he has changed so much. The gap between their social status has widened significantly: while Mr. Ryder is modestly well-to-do, respectable, and self-educated, Eliza Jane has never been able to escape from a life of menial labor (she works as a cook) and her speech betrays her lack of formal education. But Eliza Jane is a heroic character in the story because of her tireless faith and devotion in searching for her husband. Her love and loyalty move Mr. Ryder so much that he undergoes a transformation, questioning his previously held values about race and class and abandoning his earlier plans to marry Molly Dixon.

Molly Dixon – Molly Dixon is the woman whom Mr. Ryder intends to marry before his chance reencounter with his former wife, Eliza Jane. She is much younger, lighter-skinned, and better-educated than him. Before coming to Groveland (the Northern city where the story is set), she taught at a school in Washington, D.C. She has "refined manners" and a "vivacious wit," and she has a decent income because of the life insurance money she received after the death of her husband, who had worked as a government clerk. Molly Dixon proves to be a sympathetic character when, despite her desire to marry Mr. Ryder, she is the first guest at the ball to say that Mr. Ryder should have acknowledged and reunited with Eliza Jane. Molly Dixon is Eliza Jane's opposite of in terms of social status, and therefore Mr. Ryder's planned marriage to her stands in stark contrast to his former marriage with Eliza Jane—making his choice between the two women all the more difficult and consequential.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Bob Smith – Bob Smith owned the plantation where Sam Taylor (who later became Mr. Ryder) apprenticed and where Eliza Jane was enslaved. After Eliza Jane warned Sam that Smith planned to sell him into slavery—which allowed Sam to escape—Smith sold Eliza Jane in retaliation, resulting in the couple's 25-year separation.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE AND CLASS

The story's protagonist, Mr. Ryder's, internal struggles reflect the complexity of race and class status in post-Civil War America. His transformation shows that even oppressed people can hold internalized racist and classist beliefs, but also that people can overcome these internalized prejudices. Mr. Ryder is a mixed-race man living in a Northern city 25 years after the end of the Civil War. He was born free and has a light skin tone, but society still considers him Black. He is the unofficial leader of a society called the "Blue Veins," which consists mostly of professional-class, light-skinned, mixed-race people and was formed for the purpose of social advancement. Even though Mr. Ryder himself is part Black, he's one of this organization's more conservative members and is prejudiced against people with darker skin and lower social statuses than his own. However, Mr. Ryder insists that he *isn't* prejudiced and is only looking out for mixed-race people's "self-preservation." He believes it would be a "backward step" for mixed-race people to marry people with darker skin tones, and that it is better to hope for "absorption" into the white race. One of Mr. Ryder's motivations for deciding to propose marriage to a younger, lighter-skinned woman, Molly Dixon, is precisely his desire for this "upward process of absorption." In this way, the story suggests that Mr. Ryder has internalized racism and classism because American society as a whole is racist and classist—and, in turn, people like him feel forced conform to these prejudices in order to survive and move upward in society.

At the start of the story, Mr. Ryder fails to see how his obsession with race and class simply solidifies the prejudices of the society he lives in. However, he's forced to reassess his beliefs when he has a chance encounter with his long-lost wife, a formerly enslaved woman named Eliza Jane who has been searching for him since the war. She has had none of the advantages he has enjoyed due to her lack of education, lifetime of menial work, and darker skin. Yet her devotion to Mr. Ryder so deeply moves him that he decides to reunite with her, giving up his hopes of marrying Molly Dixon. Although the story does not directly reveal how Mr. Ryder's thoughts on race have changed, renouncing his earlier plans for marriage and reuniting with his former wife suggest that he has at least partly changed his earlier prejudiced views. Through Mr. Ryder's transformation, the story suggests that love transcends race and status, and that people can potentially overcome prejudice through close relationships with people of other skin colors and social classes.

LOVE, LOYALTY, AND HONOR

"The Wife of His Youth" centers on two key instances of love, faithfulness, and honor: first, Eliza Jane spends 25 years searching for her former husband, from whom she was separated when she was enslaved before the American Civil War. Second, Mr. Ryder (who turns out to be Eliza Jane's long-lost husband) decides to acknowledge and reunite with Eliza Jane as his former wife. This is significant because as a light-skinned, mixed-race man in post-Civil War America, being in a relationship with someone who has darker skin and a lower class status than him means letting go of his desire to be "absorbed" into the white race and rise up in society. Given the other characters' approval of his decision, the story suggests that choosing love over self-interest is the honorable choice and demonstrates the redemptive potential of devoting oneself to another person.

When Eliza Jane first meets Mr. Ryder and tells him her story, she has complete faith that her husband will want to reunite with her. She dismisses all of Mr. Ryder's objections: that her husband might be dead, that he might have lost interest in her or remarried, or that she might not even recognize him if she saw him. She is certain that her husband will still love and accept her. But Mr. Ryder—who, unbeknownst to Eliza Jane, *is* her former husband—knows that her faith in him is not fully deserved. Whereas she has stayed loyal to him, he has almost forgotten her as part of what now feels like the distant past, and he's on the verge of proposing marriage to someone else. The fact that Eliza Jane doesn't recognize him emphasizes how much he's changed in the decades they've been separated, and he hesitates on the question of whether to even tell her who he is. But Mr. Ryder, with his strong sense of honor, is so deeply moved by her devotion that he knows, after overcoming his initial hesitation, that he must reunite with her. In doing so, he also overcomes his destructive beliefs in the supreme importance of skin color and social prestige, showing how love, loyalty, and honor can transform people for the better.

HISTORY AND IDENTITY

"The Wife of His Youth" is, in one sense, a story about the impossibility of creating an identity that's divorced from the past. This is especially true in the context of post-Civil War America, in which slavery's legacy continued to profoundly shape people's identities and opportunities in society, despite former slaves being legally emancipated. Although Mr. Ryder was never enslaved, as an orphaned, mixed-race boy, his early life wasn't so different from enslaved people's lives, as he apprenticed on a plantation and only narrowly escaped being sold into slavery. Mr. Ryder seems to be ashamed of this aspect of his past, and so he has struggled to shape an identity for himself that's as distant as possible from who he used to be—by moving North, working his way up the social ladder, and winning the respect of the "Blue Veins" society (an exclusive group of well-educated, middle-class, mixed-race people). Before his chance reunion with his former wife, Eliza Jane, Mr. Ryder seems to have deliberately forgotten everything about his own past. This desire to put history behind him might also be the source of his desire for mixed-race people like himself to "absorb" themselves into the white race, as this might (in theory) allow them to definitively put the legacies of racism and oppression behind them.

However, Mr. Ryder's desire to escape from the past is challenged when he encounters Eliza Jane, a formerly enslaved woman who's been searching for him for 25 years, since the end of the Civil War. She does not recognize him, leaving him with a choice: either he can pretend not to know her and continue avoiding his own past, or he can acknowledge and reunite with her, and in this way recognize that the past is part of his identity. In the end he chooses the latter option, symbolizing his acceptance that history—slavery and the Civil War—has, in fact, shaped who he is. His choice is a recognition that the past must be faced, not ignored.

COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

"The Wife of His Youth" demonstrates the importance of overcoming divisions to forge solidarity between oppressed people. The story centers around the fictionalized "Blue Veins" society, an exclusive association of middle-class, mixed-race people who band together to try to improve their social conditions. In late 19th-century American society, mixed-race people are considered Black and subjected to racial oppression, even if they have majority European ancestry and appear white. The existence of the Blue Veins society, which allows mixed-race people to come together over their common struggles, is an example of humans' fundamental need to form communities in which they feel accepted, especially when broader society shuns them.

However, the Blue Veins members' sense of community comes at the expense of a severing of ties with people who have darker skin or a lower social status. They do so because they hope to be accepted into the white race and rise up in society—but this only reinforces the racism and classism, which damages the Blue Veins members just as it hurts those lower than them on the social ladder. But ultimately, Mr. Ryder (the unofficial leader of the Blue Veins) decides to acknowledge the formerly enslaved woman Eliza Jane as his former wife, even though this goes against his earlier class and racial prejudices because she's dark-skinned and working-class. Even more crucially, the other members of the Blue Veins society are deeply moved by Eliza Jane's story, and they approve of Mr. Ryder's decision to acknowledge her as his former wife when he asks them for guidance. This suggests that the Blue Veins society has come to recognize the importance of solidarity within the Black community, rather than differentiating

themselves on the basis of skin tone and class status to try to get ahead.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE PHOTOGRAPH

The daguerreotype photograph of Sam Taylor (the former name of Mr. Ryder) that Eliza Jane carries around her neck symbolizes her intense devotion to her former husband, despite the many changes that have occurred over the course of 25 years. When Mr. Ryder tells Eliza Jane that she might not recognize her husband if she met him, considering how many changes 25 years could bring, she insists that she would certainly recognize him, because she has been carrying his picture with her all these years to make sure she never forgets what he looks like. Mr. Ryder asks to see it, saying that "it might help me to remember the original"—although, of course, he already knows that he himself is her long-lost husband. When Eliza Jane gives the photograph to him, Mr. Ryder studies it for a long time, seeing that the photograph has "faded with time" but nonetheless that it is still possible to see "what manner of man it had represented." This moment symbolizes how distant the world of Mr. Ryder's youth seems to him now, but also how, deep down, he is the same man as he was then—driven by honor and determined to keep his promises.

However, Mr. Ryder still needs to consider the situation before revealing that he is the same person as the young man in the photograph. Shortly after looking at the photograph, when Eliza Jane has left, he gazes at his own reflection in the mirror, as if comparing himself to the photograph, trying to figure out how much has changed and how much has stayed the same. In this way, the photograph symbolizes both what has changed and what has stayed the same between these two characters in the 25 years that have passed since their last meeting. While their appearances and social positions have both changed considerably, Eliza Jane is just as driven by devotion to her husband as she was then, and Mr. Ryder, as he proves in his final decision to reunite with Eliza Jane, is just as driven by his sense of honor and desire to keep his promises.

THE BALL

The ball that Mr. Ryder is planning for the "Blue Veins" society, as an occasion to propose marriage to Molly Dixon, symbolizes the refined social world that Mr. Ryder occupies now, in sharp contrast to the brutal oppression he lived through during his youth in the pre-Civil War American South. Mr. Ryder's plans for the ball also reveal his mindset at the start of the story: he wants the guests to be "quality," meaning people whose "complexions and callings in life" are up to his standards. This attitude demonstrates his prejudiced beliefs toward those he perceives to be lower on the social ladder than himself. These beliefs are challenged considerably when he has a chance reunion with his former wife, Eliza Jane, a woman of very low social status who nonetheless moves him deeply through her intense love and fidelity to him. After his conversation with Eliza Jane, and his decision to acknowledge and reunite with her as his wife, the ball—and the social world it represents—provides a sharp contrast to the story of resilience and devotion in face of adversity that Eliza Jane tells him. The contrast between the ball and the world of Mr. Ryder's youth not only heightens the impact of the choice that he makes, but it also symbolically suggests the impossibility of fully escaping from the legacy of the pre-Civil War past, no matter how high one might rise on the social ladder.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt* published in 2008.

Part 1 Quotes

"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 white than black. Some envious outsider made the suggestion that no one was eligible for membership who was not white enough to show blue veins.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes the "Blue Veins" society, which provides the story's social backdrop and informs the protagonist, Mr. Ryder's, personal values. In American society in the late 19th century, when this story is set, anyone with any African ancestry was considered Black and excluded from the privileges that went along with being

white, even if they were mixed-race and/or able to "pass" as white. The very existence of societies such as the "Blue Veins" (an exclusive organization of light-skinned, mixed-race people) shows the need for people within this mixed-race community to band together to try to improve their social position in spite of the society's prejudice against them.

Yet this emphasis on maintaining "correct social standards," according to what American society of the time viewed as "correct," could run the risk of reinforcing those very prejudices that this community is trying to escape. For instance, it reinforces the racist idea that lighter skin is better than darker skin, or the classist idea that professional occupations are inherently better than working-class ones. The fact that its members tend to be "more white than black" demonstrates the Blue Veins society's exclusionary nature, showing that this marginalized community is not immune from the dominant society's prejudices.

> The Blue Veins did not allow that any such requirement existed for admission to their circle, but, on the contrary, declared that character and culture were the only things considered; and that if most of their members were light-colored, it was because such persons, as a rule, had had better opportunities to qualify themselves for membership. Opinions differed, too, as to the usefulness of the society. There were those who had been known to assail it violently as a glaring example of the very prejudice from which the colored race had suffered most; and later, when such critics had succeeded in getting on the inside, they had been heard to maintain with zeal and earnestness that the society was a lifeboat, an anchor, a bulwark and a shield,—a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, to guide their people through the social wilderness.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis

This passage shows Black Americans' differing opinions as to whether exclusive societies such as the Blue Veins harm or help the cause of racial equality. Proponents argue that the society's membership does not reflect racial prejudices—rather, it is simply a product of the society as a whole, which tends to offer greater opportunities to lighter-skinned people, thus making it more likely for them to acquire the "character and culture" needed to qualify for membership. Critics, however, argue that the society's membership reinforces society's racial prejudices because it supports the idea that lighter-skinned people are better—a belief that ultimately damages even light-skinned mixed-race people.

But proponents view the benefits of the society as far outweighing the costs, because the sense of community and solidarity that it provides—albeit limited to an elite group of mixed-race people—makes it easier to navigate a hostile white society. They believe that it serves as a "lifeboat," "anchor," "bulwark," or "shield"—in other words, it's a means to preserve one's dignity and self-worth in face of a "social wilderness" apparently bent on destroying those things.

At the heart of these debates over the Blue Veins society is the question: is it better to have solidarity with those lower on the social ladder, or is it better to look out for oneself and try to climb one's way to the top? The story's protagonist, Mr. Ryder, will start out siding with the latter position, but the events of the story will challenge this and seemingly force him to change his mind.

> Another alleged prerequisite for Blue Vein membership was that of free birth; and while there really was no such requirement, it is doubtless true that very few of the members would have been unable to meet it if there had been. If there were one or two of the older members who had come up from the South and from slavery, their history presented enough romantic circumstances to rob their servile origin of its grosser aspects.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reveals that the Blue Veins' membership reflects not only a prejudice against darker-skinned and working-class people, but also against formerly enslaved people. This prejudice may have been unintentional, as formerly enslaved people would've faced more barriers to achieving the kind of wealth, education, and social status that would allow them to be perceived as people of sufficient "character and culture" to be admitted to a society such as the Blue Veins.

However, this tendency to exclude formerly enslaved people may also suggest a desire among the Blue Veins

members to distance themselves from the legacy of slavery. Because American society of this time (the post-Civil War era) generally viewed people of "servile origin" as lowly, admitting formerly enslaved people to the Blue Veins society could seem to go against its aim of improving mixed-race people's social prestige.

Ultimately, though, it's impossible for this mixed-race community to fully avoid the legacy of slavery, because this past is the source of the racism they are struggling against, as well as a part of their own family histories. This is a reflection of the protagonist's internal struggles: just as Mr. Ryder will have to confront his own internalized racism and classism in this story, so too will he have to confront the legacy of slavery in his own past.

> Mr. Ryder was one of the most conservative. Though he had not been among the founders of the society, but had come in some years later, his genius for social leadership was such that he had speedily become its recognized adviser and head, the custodian of its standards, and the preserver of its traditions.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides important characterization of the story's protagonist, Mr. Ryder. His beliefs are "conservative," suggesting—in light of the story's background information on the Blue Veins society—that he is disdainful of people who have darker skin or a lower social class than him. In this way, he harbors some of broader society's racism and classism. Mr. Ryder's role as "custodian of standards" and "preserver of traditions" for the Blue Veins society suggests that he is staunchly in favor of the society's exclusionary membership standards.

At the same time, however, this passage gives a sense of Mr. Ryder's positive qualities—for instance, his "genius for social leadership," or his ability to build a close-knit community and rally it around a common cause. Mr. Ryder clearly values the sense of community that the Blue Veins society provides him in an otherwise hostile social world. This passage thus establishes both the strengths and weaknesses of Mr. Ryder's character at the outset of the story. By showing readers the flaws in his current worldview, it sets up the possibility that he might be forced to question or change those views.

> His ball must be worthy of the lady in whose honor it was to be given, and must, by the quality of its guests, set an example for the future. He had observed of late a growing liberality, almost a laxity, in social matters, even among members of his own set, and had several times been forced to meet in a social way persons whose complexions and callings in life were hardly up to the standard which he considered proper for the society to maintain.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor, Molly Dixon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Ryder is planning to throw a ball for the Blue Veins society as an occasion to propose marriage to Molly Dixon, a younger, lighter-skinned woman with a better education and social standing than his own. Mr. Ryder wants to throw the ball not only as an occasion to propose marriage, but also as a way of asserting what he believes should be the exclusionary membership standards of the society, by inviting only those people whom he sees as "quality," a term that suggests (based on what has already been shown of his "conservative" beliefs) people of lighter skin tone and higher social standing.

Mr. Ryder's disdain for people with "complexions" and "callings in life" that he considers to be beneath his own demonstrates his worldview that people with lighter skin tones and higher social prestige are inherently better than those who are lower down on the social ladder or racial hierarchy. These internalized prejudices ultimately harm Mr. Ryder himself. Even though he's mixed-race, white society also considers him inferior to the white elite. Mr. Ryder seems to hold these prejudices out of a belief that by distancing himself from people that the dominant society views as inferior, he'll be able to gain access to that dominant society. But the events of the story will force him to question whether this approach really is the right one.

"I have no race prejudice," he would say, "but we people of mixed blood are ground between the upper and nether millstone. Our fate lies between absorption by the white race and extinction in the black. The one doesn't want us, but may take us in time. The other would welcome us, but it would be for us a backward step. 'With malice towards none, with charity for all,' we must do the best we can for ourselves and those who are to follow us. Self-preservation is the first law of nature."

His ball would serve by its exclusiveness to counteract leveling tendencies, and his marriage with Mrs. Dixon would help to further the upward process of absorption that he had been wishing and waiting for.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor (speaker), Molly Dixon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

This passage establishes Mr. Ryder's worldview about race as well as his motivations at the outset of the story. He believes that mixed-race people are caught between white and Black, and that this state can't last forever—ultimately, they must be "absorbed" into one race or the other. Although the Black community would "welcome" them, Mr. Ryder believes that this would be a "backwards step." Rather, the best hope for mixed-race people is to win acceptance from white people until intermarriage between the two groups becomes possible.

Mr. Ryder's belief that greater integration into the rest of the Black American community would represent a "backwards step" for light-skinned mixed-race people demonstrates his internalized racism and colorism—the idea that lighter skin is inherently better than darker skin. Mr. Ryder's own exclusionary worldview reflects an assumption that it's possible to be accepted into the dominant society if only one adopts its prejudiced beliefs. Moreover, Mr. Ryder's emphasis on "self-preservation" demonstrates his view that it's better to look out for one's own interests rather than show solidarity with those lower than oneself on the social ladder. Later events in the story, however, will force Mr. Ryder to question his single-minded focus on self-advancement.

Finally, this passage clearly lays out Mr. Ryder's motivations at this point in the story. He wants to reinforce the Blue Veins' exclusionary membership standards, as well as to propose marriage to Molly Dixon so that he can both increase his own social status and achieve an "upwards process of absorption" into whiteness.

Part 2 Quotes

She looked like a bit of the old plantation life, summoned up from the past by the wave of a magician's wand, as the poet's fancy had called into being the gracious shapes of which Mr. Ryder had just been reading.

Related Characters: Eliza Jane , Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Eliza Jane, as she appears to Mr. Ryder, emphasizes the social differences between the two characters. Before Eliza Jane's appearance, Mr. Ryder is reading through a Tennyson poetry collection, a marker of education and, by implication, his elite social status—although, in fact, Mr. Ryder has had no formal education and is entirely self-taught.

In contrast, Eliza Jane appears to Mr. Ryder as an image of "old plantation life," because of her old age (shown through her wrinkled face and gray hair), her low class status (shown through her simple clothing), and her "very black" skin. All of these aspects of Eliza Jane's appearance, which Mr. Ryder notices right away, mark her as a formerly enslaved woman and therefore as a representation of slavery in his mind.

In light of Mr. Ryder's beliefs about race and class revealed in Part 1 of the story, Part 2 situates Eliza Jane as exactly the kind of person who Mr. Ryder might consider to be beneath him and not up to the standards of the Blue Veins society. However, the story Eliza Jane is about to tell Mr. Ryder will challenge his initial impression of his own superiority to her.

"I's be'n lookin' fer 'im eber sence," she added simply, as though twenty-five years were but a couple of weeks, "an' I knows he's be'n lookin' fer me. Fer he sot a heap er sto' by me, Sam did, an' I know he's be'n huntin' fer me all dese years,—'less'n he's be'n sick er sump'n, so he could n' work, er out'n his head, so he could n' 'member his promise."

Related Characters: Eliza Jane (speaker), Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64-65

Explanation and Analysis

Eliza Jane says this to Mr. Ryder at the end of her story of how she came to be separated from her former husband, Sam Taylor, while she was enslaved. She demonstrates her love and devotion to her husband, both through her 25-year-long search for him and also through her faith that he's also been looking for her this whole time. She believes that Sam will hold true to his promise to reunite with her no matter what.

Eliza Jane forms a sharp contrast with Mr. Ryder here in many ways, most obviously at the level of her speech. While Mr. Ryder's speech is refined, characteristic of the middle or upper class, Eliza Jane's speech, rendered by Chesnutt in phonetic dialect, is characteristic of the Black American working class of this period (the late 19th century). Their differing speech patterns, then, are reflective of racial and class differences between the two characters.

But the substance of what Eliza Jane says here also differentiates her character from Mr. Ryder's. First, she's clearly much more rooted in the past than Mr. Ryder, talking about 25 years as if it "were but a couple of weeks," whereas for Mr. Ryder, the pre-Civil War past is more like a distant dream he's tried hard to forget.

There's also irony in this passage that further underscores the contrast between Eliza Jane and Mr. Ryder. Unknown to Eliza Jane, Mr. Ryder is, in fact, her former husband, the man who used to be known as Sam Taylor. Despite her insistence that her husband would never forget his promise to her, Mr. Ryder seems to have long since pushed it from his mind—after all, he is on the verge of proposing marriage to another woman. Although moving on after 25 years might seem expected, he has still clearly not shown the same level of devotion to her that she has for him.

In this way, the surface-level distinctions of class and race between the two characters are belied by the more fundamental differences between their personalities. While the former differences mark Mr. Ryder as Eliza Jane's societal superior, the latter suggests that she is, in fact, the far more heroic character.

> "Do you really expect to find your husband? He may be dead long ago."

She shook her head emphatically. "Oh no, he ain' dead. De signs an' de tokens tells me. I drempt three nights runnin' on'y dis las' week dat I foun' him."

"He may have married another woman. Your slave marriage would not have prevented him, for you never lived with him after the war, and without that your marriage does n't count."

"Would n' make no diff'ence wid Sam. He would n' marry no yuther 'oman 'tel he foun' out 'bout me. I knows it," she added. "Sump'n's be'n tellin' me all dese years dat I's gwine fin' Sam 'fo I dies."

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor, Eliza Jane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

After Eliza Jane tells Mr. Ryder the story of how she's searched for her former husband for 25 years, he raises these objections. How does she know her husband isn't dead, and if he's still alive, does she really believe he would honor a marriage that had no legal standing for such a long time?

Eliza Jane's responses indicate the differences between Mr. Ryder's worldview and her own, as well as her level of devotion to her former husband. She is convinced that her husband is still alive simply because of dreams and other "signs" or "tokens." This indicates her superstitious worldview, which could be read as a sign of her lack of formal education. Although Mr. Ryder also lacks formal schooling, he has adopted a more rational worldview through his self-education.

With the knowledge that Mr. Ryder is, in fact, Eliza Jane's former husband, there is also irony in the fact that Eliza Jane insists that her husband would never marry another woman. In fact, Mr. Ryder *is* about to propose marriage that very night to another woman. Eliza Jane's faith that her husband has been searching and waiting for her all this time is all the more poignant knowing that Mr. Ryder has, in fact, apparently moved on from her by now. However, there are some hints that perhaps her faith in him isn't so misplaced. The fact that it's taken Mr. Ryder over 25 years to remarry suggests that he may, indeed, have been holding out some latent hope that he might be reunited with Eliza Jane, or at least a desire not to betray his commitment to her. This also raises the possibility that Mr. Ryder might have enough of a

sense of honor and devotion himself to acknowledge and reunite with Eliza Jane.

> "Perhaps he's outgrown you, and climbed up in the world where he would n't care to have you find him."

"No, indeed, suh," she replied, "Sam ain' dat kin' er man. He wuz good ter me, Sam wuz, but he wuz n' much good ter nobody e'se, fer he wuz one er de triflin'es' han's on de plantation. I 'spec's ter haft er suppo't 'im w'en I fin' 'im, fer he nebber would work 'less'n he had ter. But den he wuz free, an' he did n' git no pay fer his work, an' I don' blame 'im much. Mebbe he's done better sence he run erway, but I ain' 'spectin' much."

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor, Eliza Jane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

By raising this objection to Eliza Jane—that perhaps her husband has improved his social status and would rather marry a woman of higher social standing—Mr. Ryder is, of course, hinting at his own situation. Mr. Ryder's sense of having "outgrown" his former wife by "climb[ing] up in the world" is solidified by the superficial contrasts between them, including their speech patterns, age, clothing, skin tone, and other class and racial signifiers.

His remark that perhaps her husband "wouldn't care to have you find him" suggests his own internal conflict. Unbeknownst to Eliza Jane or the reader at this point in the story, Mr. Ryder is questioning whether he will betray his desire to hold onto his current worldview and his plans to marry Molly Dixon, or whether instead he will acknowledge and reunite with Eliza Jane despite how this choice would complicate his life.

There is also irony in Eliza Jane's disbelief that her former husband could ever climb his way up in the world. She views him as someone who dislikes hard work because of how he behaved while working under circumstances very similar to slavery (although he was technically free, he worked alongside other field laborers, wasn't paid for his labor, and was at risk of being sold away). However, Eliza Jane is aware that he may have disliked work because of the circumstances that he worked under back then, and his free status. Of course, the truth is that Mr. Ryder works quite hard to try to climb up the social ladder from his humble beginnings, now that he's in the North and can be paid for his labor.

> "You may have passed him on the street a hundred times during the twenty-five years, and not have known him; time works great changes."

She smiled incredulously. "I'd know 'im 'mongs' a hund'ed men. Fer dey wuz n' no yuther merlatter man like my man Sam, an' I could n' be mistook. I's toted his picture roun' wid me twenty-five years."

"May I see it?" asked Mr. Ryder. "It might help me to remember whether I have seen the original."

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor, Eliza Jane (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is ironic because Mr. Ryder knows that he is, in fact, Eliza Jane's former husband, but Eliza Jane does not recognize him despite her insistence that she would if she saw him. Eliza Jane's belief that her husband would've stayed similar enough over the course of 25 years to make her old photograph still useful in helping her recognize him shows again how much more rooted in the past she is compared to Mr. Ryder.

Mr. Ryder's desire to see the photograph, despite already knowing that he is Eliza Jane's former husband, suggests that he is contemplating his own identity—thinking about what kind of person he was then and what kind of person he is now. He's trying to decide whether he is the kind of person who would acknowledge and reunite with Eliza Jane, or the kind who would let her keep searching for him forever. In this way, the photograph serves as a symbol of how the past is part of Mr. Ryder's identity, whether he recognizes it or not—and the central question of the story is, in fact, whether he will recognize it.

"I don't know of any man in town who goes by that name," he said, "nor have I heard of any one making such inquiries. But if you will leave me your address, I will give the matter some attention, and if I find out anything I will let you know."

She gave him the number of a house in the neighborhood, and went away, after thanking him warmly.

He wrote the address on the fly-leaf of the volume of Tennyson, and, when she had gone, rose to his feet and stood looking after her curiously. As she walked down the street with mincing step, he saw several persons whom she passed turn and look back at her with a smile of kindly amusement. When she had turned the corner, he went upstairs to his bedroom, and stood for a long time before the mirror of his dressing-case, gazing thoughtfully at the reflection of his own face.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor (speaker), Eliza Jane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Mr. Ryder is careful not to lie directly to Eliza Jane, while also not revealing anything about his identity, as he buys himself time to think about what to do: whether to acknowledge her as his former wife, or to continue concealing his identity.

It's true that there's no one in town going by the name of Sam Taylor—that's an old name that Mr. Ryder has long abandoned by now—and it's true that no one is making any inquiries about him besides Eliza Jane. But Mr. Ryder's words here are nonetheless a lie by omission, designed to delay or altogether avoid revealing his true identity to her. This clearly shows that he hasn't yet resolved his internal conflicts to the point that he feels certain about revealing who he is. But it's also clear that he wants to maintain the possibility of doing so, by asking for her address so he can find her again if he chooses.

Because the story is told from an omniscient third-person perspective, the reader isn't given direct access to Mr. Ryder's thoughts in this passage. Therefore, it's necessary to infer aspects of his internal conflict through his actions. His action of standing in front of the mirror, gazing for a long time at his own reflection, suggests that he's comparing his present-day self with the young man in the photograph and with the man Eliza Jane depicted in her story. Mr. Ryder's encounter with Eliza Jane has clearly compelled him to reevaluate his own past and identity, and the choice she has unwittingly presented him with has put him in the position of trying to decide what kind of person he really is.

Part 3 Quotes

[Mr. Ryder] then related, simply but effectively, the story told by his visitor of the afternoon. He gave it in the same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips, while the company listened attentively and sympathetically. For the story had awakened a responsive thrill in many hearts. There were some present who had seen, and others who had heard their fathers and grandfathers tell, the wrongs and sufferings of this past generation, and all of them still felt, in their darker moments, the shadow hanging over them.

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor, Eliza Jane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs after Mr. Ryder is invited to give a speech at the Blue Veins ball on the subject of "The Ladies." Originally, Mr. Ryder had been planning to use this as a chance to propose marriage to Molly Dixon, but now he uses it as an occasion to re-tell the same story that Eliza Jane told him that afternoon. The fact that Mr. Ryder chooses to re-tell Eliza Jane's story in the same dialect she speaks in, which "comes readily to his lips," suggests that he shares a similar background as Eliza Jane. Perhaps he used to speak in a similar manner as her during his youth, before he taught himself to speak in a more refined, middle-class dialect.

The fact that Eliza Jane's story "awakens a responsive thrill" in the Blue Veins members' hearts indicates that, despite their apparently more elite status, slavery has indeed irrevocably shaped their lives. The older members have witnessed it themselves, while for younger members, it is part of their family history. Moreover, this legacy of the past still shapes the society they live in, serving as the source of the prejudices that they continue to struggle against in the present.

For this reason, Mr. Ryder's re-telling of Eliza Jane's story has a similar impact on the audience as it had on himself. Eliza Jane's story has made Mr. Ryder question his worldview of "self-preservation"—of seeking social prestige,

even if that means leaving others behind—pushing him closer to a vision of solidarity with and commitment to other people. The sympathy with which the audience listens to Eliza Jane's story shows that, despite the exclusionary nature of the Blue Veins society, they, too, are receptive to this message.

"Suppose that this husband, soon after his escape, had learned that his wife had been sold away, and that such inquiries as he could make brought no information of her whereabouts. Suppose that he was young, and she much older than he; that he was light, and she was black; that their marriage was a slave marriage, and legally binding only if they chose to make it so after the war. Suppose, too, that he made his way to the North, as some of us have done, and there, where he had larger opportunities, had improved them, and had in the course of all these years grown to be as different from the ignorant boy who ran away from fear of slavery as the day is from the night. Suppose, even, that he had qualified himself, by industry, by thrift, and by study, to win the friendship and be considered worthy of the society of such people as these I see around me to-night, gracing my board and filling my heart with gladness; for I am old enough to remember the day when such a gathering would not have been possible in this land."

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor (speaker), Eliza Jane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 68-69

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Ryder puts forward this "imagined" scenario to his audience at the ball after he re-tells Eliza Jane's story. Mr. Ryder has not yet revealed that he is Eliza Jane's former husband and therefore presents this chain of thought as mere speculation. But it is, of course, his own personal history, his side of the story that Eliza Jane has told.

In this story, Mr. Ryder reveals that he did, in fact, try to stay true to his promise to return to free Eliza Jane, but he wasn't able to because she'd been sold away and he wasn't able to gain any information about her whereabouts. Then, he lists all the reasons why it might be understandable for him not to acknowledge Eliza Jane as his former wife: their differences of age, complexion, education level, and social status, as well as the legal invalidity of their marriage under slavery.

At the end of this passage, Mr. Ryder also hints at the importance of the community that the Blue Veins society provides to him. such a society of middle-class Black Americans wouldn't have been possible in pre-Civil War America. This sense of community is one reason why he trusts them with the personal appeal—the question of whether or not he should've acknowledged Eliza Jane as his wife—that he is about to make to them.

"Suppose, too, that as the years went by, this man's memory of the past grew more and more indistinct, until at last it was rarely, except in his dreams, that any image of his bygone period rose before his mind. And then suppose that accident should bring to his knowledge the fact that the wife of his youth, the wife he had left behind him,—not one who had walked by his side and kept pace with him in his upward struggle, but one upon whom advancing years and a laborious life had set their mark,—was alive and seeking him, but that he was absolutely safe from recognition or discovery, unless he chose to reveal himself. My friends, what would the man do? I will presume that he was one who loved honor, and tried to deal justly with all men. I will even carry the case further, and suppose that perhaps he had set his heart upon another, whom he had hoped to call his own. What would he do, or rather what ought he to do, in such a crisis of a lifetime?"

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor (speaker), Eliza Jane , Molly Dixon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Here, as Mr. Ryder continues his speech about Eliza Jane to his audience at the ball, he presents his own internal dilemma quite clearly. First, Mr. Ryder points out that unlike Eliza Jane, who has always held steadfast to their past life together, for him the pre-Civil War past has become a distant memory—perhaps because he has tried so hard to repress it and put it behind him. Second, Mr. Ryder again emphasizes the social distance between himself and Eliza Jane—while he has managed to claw his way up from humble origins, she has never had the opportunity, remaining uneducated and living a life of menial labor. Third, Eliza Jane does not recognize him, leaving the choice of

whether or not he reveals his identity to her or not completely up to him. Fourth, Mr. Ryder he sees himself as someone with a strong sense of honor and justice. And fifth, Mr. Ryder had been planning to propose marriage to another woman.

After laying out all dimensions of the dilemma he is faced with—including all the reasons why it might be understandable for him not to acknowledge Eliza Jane—Mr. Ryder then poses the same question to the audience that he is faced with himself. Although there seem to be many reasons why Mr. Ryder might not want to acknowledge Eliza Jane, including what the reader knows of his worldview—his exclusionary beliefs, his desire for "self-preservation" and upwards social movement—his sense of honor and justice is the key factor that keeps him from rejecting her.

Even though there is much in his life that Mr. Ryder would have to give up by reuniting with Eliza Jane—for instance, his plans to marry Molly Dixon—the stakes are just as great if he ignores her. In that case, she would continue to search for him for the rest of her life, a situation that his own sense of honor would perhaps not allow him to live with.

> It seemed to me that he might hesitate, and I imagined that I was an old friend, a near friend, and that he had come to me for advice; and I argued the case with him. I tried to discuss it impartially. After we had looked upon the matter from every point of view, I said to him, in words that we all know—
>
> 'This above all: to thine own self be true
>
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
>
> Thou canst not then be false to any man.'
>
> "Then, finally, I put the question to him, 'Shall you acknowledge her?'"

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor (speaker), Eliza Jane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Ryder continues to expand on this "imagined" scenario to his audience members, although it is becoming increasingly clear now that he is, in fact, presenting his own personal crisis to them. Mr. Ryder does not try to present himself as heroic or fully honorable—he is honest about the fact that he hesitates about the question of whether to reveal his identity to Eliza Jane.

The lines that Mr. Ryder quotes here, in his imaginary conversation with himself, are from a speech by Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. These lines sum up the heart of what's at stake for Mr. Ryder, because the choice that he makes is also a reflection of what kind of person he really is. These lines are also the first hint of the choice that he's made—because Mr. Ryder quite literally decides to "be true" to himself here. In other words, he chooses to recognize that he and the young man from Eliza Jane's story are the same person. Just as his former self, Sam Taylor, had a sense of honor and commitment to Eliza Jane back then, so too does Mr. Ryder now. The line "thou canst not then be false to any man" suggests that Mr. Ryder cannot conceal himself or lie to Eliza Jane, because this would be a betrayal not only of her but also of who he really is.

Mr. Ryder's closing question, in which he asks the audience whether he should've acknowledged Eliza Jane as his former wife, might seem at first like he is asking for their guidance—but, as becomes clear by the end of this passage, he's actually already made his decision. Instead, this question may either be a sort of test for the audience—to see whether their hearts truly align with his own—and also a request for validation and acceptance of the choice that he's made.

> "And now, ladies and gentlemen, friends and companions, I ask you, what should he have done?"

There was something in Mr. Ryder's voice that stirred the hearts of those who sat around him. It suggested more than mere sympathy with an imaginary situation; it seemed rather in the nature of a personal appeal. It was observed, too, that his look rested more especially upon Mrs. Dixon, with a mingled expression of renunciation and inquiry.

She had listened, with parted lips and streaming eyes. She was the first to speak: "He should have acknowledged her."

"Yes," they all echoed, "he should have acknowledged her."

"My friends and companions," responded Mr. Ryder, "I thank you, one and all. It is the answer I expected, for I knew your hearts."

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor, Molly Dixon (speaker), Eliza Jane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69-70

Explanation and Analysis

After Mr. Ryder lays out his dilemma to his audience at the ball, he then poses the question to the Blue Veins members to decide for themselves: should he have acknowledged Eliza Jane as his former wife?

The fact that Mr. Ryder looks at Molly Dixon here with an expression of "renunciation and inquiry" gives a hint of the choice he has made—to reunite with Eliza Jane at the expense of his marriage with Molly Dixon. In addition, the fact that it is Molly Dixon who is the first to speak up and say that he should've acknowledged his former wife is a testament to her character. She seemed to truly want to marry Mr. Ryder, but she also recognizes that it is more important for him to reunite with Eliza Jane. Her tears suggest how much Eliza Jane's story has moved her, as well as her sadness at having to give up her relationship with Mr. Ryder.

Finally, the fact that the rest of the audience agrees with Molly Dixon shows how, despite their elite status and exclusionary membership, the Blue Veins members ultimately identify with other people in their community who have been oppressed. Perhaps they even recognize themselves in Eliza Jane. Her resilience in finding her husband (in spite of the challenges posed by slavery and the Civil War) is, in a way, another version of the resilience that they themselves have shown in trying to build a community and establish a dignified life in spite of the hostile society around them.

❝ He came back in a moment, leading by the hand his visitor of the afternoon, who stood startled and trembling at the sudden plunge into this scene of brilliant gayety. She was neatly dressed in gray, and wore the white cap of an elderly woman.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "this is the woman, and I am the man, whose story I have just told you. Permit me to introduce to you the wife of my youth."

Related Characters: Mr. Ryder/Sam Taylor (speaker), Eliza Jane

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This is the climax of the story, when Mr. Ryder reveals both the truth of his identity and his relationship to Eliza Jane, as well as his decision to acknowledge and reunite with her. The description in this passage creates a stark contrast between the "brilliant gayety" of the ball—an indication of an elite social status—and the simplicity of Eliza Jane's dress, which marks her as working-class. The contrast is "startling" to Eliza Jane, who trembles, clearly unsettled by this sudden introduction to an unfamiliar social world.

Because the story ends at this climactic moment, it does not directly show the full implications of Mr. Ryder's choice. For instance, the narrator does not provide direct access into Mr. Ryder's thoughts to show how his worldview has changed since the start. It's also not clear what happens with Mr. Ryder and Eliza Jane's relationship after this point. However, it does seem clear from Mr. Ryder's choice itself that he has abandoned his earlier ethos of "self-preservation," instead embracing a code of honor and commitment to others. In addition, it seems almost certain that he now questions the racism and classism that he had internalized at the outset of the story.

It is also implied (although still left somewhat ambiguous) that Mr. Ryder will honor his marriage to Eliza Jane, and that they will live together as husband and wife again after this point. If this is the case, then both characters have been positively transformed by this encounter. Eliza Jane has finally regained the love that she has been searching for all this time, and Mr. Ryder has grown as a person and learned to accept that his past experiences during slavery are still a part of his identity. He has gained something that he truly needed—unconditional love for another person—even if it came at the expense of giving up his old worldview and desires.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Mr. Ryder is planning a **ball**. He's one of the leading figures of what is colloquially called the "Blue Veins," a society of mostly light-skinned, mixed-race people in a Northern city. The Blue Veins were founded after the American Civil War for the purpose of social advancement. Although the society's only official requirements for membership are "character" and "culture," in practice most of its members are "more white than black."

The fact that Mr. Ryder is planning a ball hints at the relatively refined, elite social world that he belongs to. The "Blue Veins" society in this story is based on a similar society of mostly light-skinned, mixed-race people that the author, Charles Chesnutt, himself belonged to in Cleveland, Ohio. The existence of such societies illustrates the complex nature of racial identity in post-Civil War America. Although the members of the "Blue Veins" society are "more white than black"—much like Chesnutt himself, who had majority-European ancestry and could "pass" for white—American society doesn't consider them white. Racial beliefs such as the "one-drop rule"—which held that any trace of African ancestry made a person not "white"—arose during the time of slavery to justify the enslavement of mixed-race people, even those who appeared white.

Those excluded from the Blue Veins accuse it of colorism, arguing that it only reinforces racial prejudices, but the society's defenders claim that their members are mostly light-skinned only because such people tend to have more opportunities for social advancement. The society's defenders also claim that it serves as a "lifeboat" to guide their people through a "social wilderness."

The existence of societies such as the one Chesnutt belonged to, or the fictional "Blue Veins," suggests how mixed-race Americans in this time period (the late 19th century) sought to band together to work against the racial prejudices they faced. This is why those belonging to the Blue Veins see it as a "lifeboat" in a hostile world. However, these societies could also encourage colorism, the belief that lighter-skinned people were better and more worthy of acceptance into white society than darker-skinned people. These prejudices are what underlie the exclusivity of the Blue Veins society. The claim that the Blue Veins' exclusiveness reinforces racial prejudice suggests that, in distancing themselves from other Black Americans and seeking acceptance into white society, the society's members are only playing into the belief that white people are better than Black people.

Moreover, critics accuse the Blue Veins society of only allowing members who were born into freedom rather than slavery. While this is not actually a formal requirement, there are indeed only one or two older members who were formerly enslaved—most of the members were born free in the North. Some Blue Veins members are more conservative than others when it comes to the question of skin color and formerly free or enslaved status, and Mr. Ryder is one of the most conservative members in this regard. Although Mr. Ryder is not one of the founding members of the Blue Veins society, he nonetheless became a leader, protecting its standards and traditions through his "genius for social leadership."

The fact that very few of the Blue Veins members were born into slavery shows that classism is working alongside racism in the society of the story. People who were once enslaved would have had a more difficult path toward gaining wealth, education, and social status compared to free-born people. Therefore, they would have also had more difficulty gaining admission to a society like the Blue Veins, which values its members' "culture" or sophistication. Mr. Ryder's conservatism when it comes to the "quality" of people admitted for membership hints that he may have personal reasons for wanting to distance himself from the legacy of slavery.

Another reason for Mr. Ryder's popularity is his manner and appearance. He nearly "passes" for white, he is always neatly dressed, and his morals are "above suspicion." He came to the Northern city of Groveland as a young man, working as a clerk in a railroad company. Although Mr. Ryder did not have a formal education, he is self-taught and has a passion for poetry. He is thrifty and owns a nice house. Because he is single, he shares his house with a young couple who keep him company.

Mr. Ryder clearly belongs to the upper rungs of this society of mixed-race people. His origins here are entirely obscured—the reader is told only what happened after he arrived in Groveland as a young man, not about his youth. However, there are some hints of his humble origins, like his lack of formal education. But he has clearly overcome these limitations, apparently through sheer force of will, educating himself and working his way up the social ladder. He does, however, seem to lack close intimate relationships, since it's implied that he rents his house to boarders to alleviate his loneliness.

Early on during his involvement with the Blue Veins, the young women of the society saw Mr. Ryder as a good match and flirted with him, but it isn't until a woman named Molly Dixon moves to Groveland from Washington that Mr. Ryder decides to marry. Molly is younger, lighter-skinned, and better educated than he is. She used to teach at a school in Washington D.C., and her husband had been a government clerk who left behind a decent sum of money in life insurance when he died. On a visit to Groveland, she decided to stay permanently, and she and Mr. Ryder struck up a romantic relationship.

Molly Dixon attracts Mr. Ryder not only because she's clever and interested in him, but also because of the opportunities she represents. Molly is even higher up on the social ladder than Mr. Ryder is, owing to her skin color, formal education, and inheritance from her husband. In addition, the fact that Molly is much younger than him is significant, since this likely means that she didn't live through slavery and thus doesn't share Mr. Ryder's view of the past.

Mr. Ryder has finally decided to ask Molly Dixon to marry him. His plan is to give a **ball** in her honor and to propose to her that evening. He's certain that she'll say yes, and he wants the occasion of the proposal to be a suitable one. He wants the ball to be a very socially proper event, with "quality" guests. Mr. Ryder is concerned that the Blue Veins' standards are becoming too "lax," forcing him to meet with people whose social status and skin color lead him to believe they are beneath him.

Mr. Ryder's plans for the ball again demonstrate the refinement of the social world that both he and Molly Dixon inhabit. His exclusionary attitude toward the guests demonstrates his racial and class prejudices, which may—as is the case with his desire for marriage with Molly Dixon—be rooted in a desire to distance himself from his humble origins and work his way up the social ladder.

Mr. Ryder insists that he does not have racial prejudice, but he believes that mixed-race people are ground between upper and lower "millstones," faced either with "absorption" into the white race or "extinction" into the Black race. The white race doesn't want them but might accept them in time. The Black race would welcome them, but for mixed-race people this would be a "backward step." Mr. Ryder believes that mixed-race people should do the best they can for themselves, since "self-preservation is the first law of nature." He hopes that his exclusive **ball** will help to counteract the Blue Veins' more liberal, equalizing tendencies, and that his marriage with Molly Dixon will help him in his quest for "upward absorption" into the white race.

This passage provides the clearest statement of Mr. Ryder's views on race and class. His focus on "self-preservation" demonstrates that he is mostly concerned with how he and other mixed-race people can best conform and succeed within this society, rather than with showing solidarity for all classes of people facing racial oppression. Mr. Ryder's focus on "self-preservation" is understandable in some ways, considering how strongly rooted racist beliefs were in late 19th-century American society. For mixed-race people, "absorption" into the privileges of being considered "white" may have seemed a likelier prospect than eliminating racism entirely. However, Mr. Ryder's belief that "extinction" into the Black race would be a "backward step" reinforces the racism of this society, which ultimately harms even light-skinned, mixed-race people like himself as well. This was one reason why Chesnutt himself chose to identify as Black rather than "pass" for white. Again, Mr. Ryder's motivations for marrying Molly Dixon stem not so much from his love for her as a person, but rather from his beliefs about race and class, and his desire for upward mobility (increased wealth and social status). Mr. Ryder's beliefs here will be challenged considerably in Part 2 of the story.

PART 2

The house is prepared for the **ball**. Mr. Ryder, sitting on his porch, searches through a Tennyson poetry collection to find good quotations he can use for his marriage proposal. Reading through "A Dream of Fair Women," he takes note of verses that mention "divinely fair," "sweet pale," and "rare pale" women. He decides the passage about a "pale" woman won't be appropriate, because Molly Dixon is the palest woman he expects at the ball, and she still has a "rather ruddy complexion," along with a lively manner. He decides instead on a passage about Queen Guinevere, describing her as "a part of joyous Spring."

Mr. Ryder's love for poetry, as well as the ball, are markers of class status. At the same time, it was not uncommon at this time for formerly enslaved people to place a great emphasis on reading and educating themselves, since these were privileges associated with freedom. Mr. Ryder's love for poetry may be rooted in similar associations and desires. His focus on passages having to do with light-skinned women emphasizes his obsession with "upwards absorption" into the white rice.

While reading through the poetry collection, Mr. Ryder hears his gate open and sees a small, elderly Black woman approaching him. To Mr. Ryder, she looks like a memory of the "old plantation life." He greets her, and she asks him if this is where Mr. Ryder lives. Identifying himself as Mr. Ryder, he asks if she came to see him. She says yes, and tells him she is looking for her husband. She says Mr. Ryder has a reputation for being an important person in this town, and she's wondering whether he's heard anything about a mixed-race man named Sam Taylor looking for his wife, Eliza Jane.

Eliza Jane's appearance, mannerisms, and speech starkly contrast both Mr. Ryder and Molly Dixon. She is older than Mr. Ryder, who is middle-aged, which already associates her more strongly with the past of slavery—unlike Molly Dixon, who is presumably not old enough to have lived through the Civil War. This accounts for Mr. Ryder's association of Eliza Jane with "old plantation life." She is also clearly of a lower class status than Mr. Ryder, a fact that is emphasized through her speech, which is highly deferential and written in a heavy African American English dialect.

Mr. Ryder thinks for a moment, then tells Eliza Jane that, although there used to be many such cases right after the war, it's now been so long that he's forgotten them. But he invites her to tell her story anyway, so that he might remember. Eliza Jane says she was once enslaved to a man named Bob Smith in Missouri. When she was a girl, she married a man named Jim, but after his death she remarried to a free-born, mixed-race man named Sam Taylor. He was an orphan and worked as Bob Smith's apprentice.

Mr. Ryder's comment that there "used to be many such cases right after the war" hints at the dislocation that followed the Civil War. People who had been separated by slavery or the war searched for family, friends, and loved ones during this time. Sam Taylor's background—free-born, but working in conditions that were very similar to slavery—shows the precarious and limited "freedom" that even free Black people faced in pre-Civil War America.

One day, another enslaved woman, Mary Ann, told Eliza Jane that Bob Smith was going to sell Sam. Eliza Jane told her that wasn't possible, because Sam was free. But the woman insisted that she had overheard Mr. Smith saying he needed the money, and so he was going to sell Sam, knowing that no questions would be asked as to whether Sam really belonged to Mr. Smith. When Sam came back from the field that night, she told him that Mr. Smith was going to sell him, and so Sam ran away. Before he left, he promised Eliza Jane that when he was 21, he'd return to help her run away, or save up the money to buy her freedom.

It was not uncommon at this time for free Black people to be sold into slavery, because there were so few legal protections around free status. This is another instance of how slavery limited the freedoms of everyone who was considered "Black" in pre-Civil War America, regardless of skin color or legal status. The chain of events in this passage—Mary Ann warning Eliza Jane, Eliza Jane warning Sam so that he could escape, and finally Sam promising Eliza Jane that he would help her escape too—demonstrates the solidarity that existed among enslaved people.

Eliza Jane believes that Sam would've kept his promise if he could, but he hadn't been able to find her. Bob Smith had learned that she'd warned Sam about being sold, and he had her whipped and sold away. Then the Civil War began, and after it ended, everyone became scattered. She went back to the Smiths' home, but Sam wasn't there, and she couldn't find out anything about where he was now. But she knew he'd been there to look for her and must've left to look for her in different places. Ever since then, she's been looking for him—she tells Mr. Ryder this as though "twenty-five years were but a couple of weeks."

The difficulties that Eliza Jane faces in finding Sam demonstrate how slavery often broke up families and relationships permanently. Her determination to find him, searching nonstop for 25 years, characterizes her as extremely loving and devoted.

Eliza Jane is sure that Sam Taylor is looking for her, too, because she meant so much to him—unless he's sick or has somehow forgotten his promise. She visited New Orleans, Atlanta, Charleston, Richmond, and many other places in the South, and then she came to the North. She believes she will find him someday, or that he'll find her, and then they'll both be as happy together in freedom as they were before the war. She smiles, a faraway look on her face.

Eliza Jane's certainty that Sam will still love her, and that he's still searching for her after all these years, is another example of her intense love and devotion to him. The fact that her search has been so geographically scattered is also a testament to the havoc that slavery (and its aftermath) wrought on enslaved people's relationships.

Mr. Ryder looks at Eliza Jane curiously after she finishes her story. He asks how she's been living all these years. She tells him she's been working as a cook and asks if he happens to know anyone in need of one. Mr. Ryder asks if Eliza Jane really expects to find her husband—after all, he might be dead. She's sure he isn't dead, because she believes she sees "signs" and "tokens" that he's still alive—only this week, for instance, she dreamed three times in a row that she found him.

Mr. Ryder's curiosity in reaction to Eliza Jane's story foreshadows that her story might mean a great deal more to him than he initially lets on. Eliza Jane's certainty that her husband isn't dead, based only on dreams and other supernatural signs, is another indication of her love for him.

Mr. Ryder points out that Sam Taylor might have married another woman, since marriages made in slavery had no legal standing. But Eliza Jane insists that her husband would've never married another woman, unless he found out she was dead. Something has been telling her all these years that she's going to find Sam before she dies.

Marriages under slavery had no legal status, because sales so often broke up couples and families. Eliza Jane's certainty that Sam would've nonetheless honored his marriage to her all this time, and never would've married another woman, again shows her love and faith in him. Mr. Ryder's objections here seem to hint at a need to convince himself, and not just Eliza Jane, of the argument that her husband might be justified in marrying someone else.

Mr. Ryder objects that Eliza Jane's husband might have "outgrown" her and "climbed up in the world," so that he would no longer want her to find him. Eliza Jane insists that Sam wasn't that kind of man. He was good to her but wasn't much good to anyone else, because he wasn't a hard worker on the plantation. She expects she'll have to support him if she finds him, because he never worked more than he had to. But then again, he was free-born and didn't get paid for his work on the plantation, so she doesn't blame him. Maybe he's done better for himself since running away, but she doesn't expect much.

Again, Mr. Ryder's objection seems to suggest that he may have some kind of personal connection to her story—after all, he himself has "climbed up in the world" since the Civil War. His remark that Sam might not "care to have you find him" hints at the dilemma that Eliza's story confronts him with. There is some dramatic irony in Eliza Jane's claim that she would have to support her husband if she ever found him. She assumes that someone who might not want to work hard under slavery wouldn't be a hard worker in conditions of free labor, either, although she immediately qualifies her statement by saying that Sam's apparent idleness may have simply been because he was free-born and not paid for his work.

Mr. Ryder observes that Eliza Jane might have passed by her husband on the street a hundred times in the past 25 years. Eliza Jane doesn't believe this, saying there is no one else like her Sam. She tells him she's carried his picture with her all these 25 years. Mr. Ryder asks to see the **photograph**, saying it might help him remember if he's ever seen the man before. She pulls out a parcel that's fastened to a string around her neck and shows him a daguerreotype of a man. Mr. Ryder stares at it for a long time. It's faded with age, but the man's features are still clear. Mr. Ryder slowly hands the photograph back to Eliza Jane.

A daguerreotype was a type of early photograph that was popular in the mid-19th century. The photo is, by nature, a symbol of identity—some aspects of one's identity stay the same over time, while others alter, just as the photograph has faded even as the features remain clear. Mr. Ryder's close attention to the photograph again suggests some kind of personal connection to Eliza Jane's story.

Mr. Ryder tells Eliza Jane that he doesn't know any man in the town going by the name of Sam Taylor, but if she leaves him her address, he promises to give the matter some attention. If he finds out anything, he'll let her know. Eliza Jane gives him her address, thanks him warmly, and goes away.

The fact that Mr. Ryder asks Eliza Jane for her address so that he can get in touch with her later again suggests that he feels some sort of connection to her and her story, though he doesn't yet reveal what the connection is. It may be that he's simply moved by her devotion to Sam, or it may be that he's hiding something more important from her.

Mr. Ryder writes Eliza Jane's address down in the poetry collection he was reading earlier and stands up to watch her curiously as she walks down the street. When he loses sight of her, he goes up to his bedroom and stands for a long time in front of his mirror, looking thoughtfully at his own reflection.

Mr. Ryder's curiosity toward Eliza Jane again hints at his personal connection to her story. Standing in front of the mirror suggests that he is comparing himself to the young man he'd just seen in the photograph, and it heavily foreshadows that Mr. Ryder himself might be Eliza Jane's long-lost husband.

PART 3

The **ball** begins later that night. The guests are mostly professional-class people who could easily "pass" for white. The toast-master gives a speech about the importance of women and invites Mr. Ryder to speak. Mr. Ryder gives a speech on women as "the gift of Heaven to man" and says that women's most distinctive quality is their fidelity and devotion to those they love. History is full of examples of such faithfulness, but none of them as striking as the example that has only come to his notice today.

The description of the ball is meant to emphasize the guests' relatively high social class—indeed, many of the details recall the pre-Civil War balls of the Southern white elite. This description emphasizes that many of the members of the Blue Veins society want—as Mr. Ryder did at the outset of the story—to enter into white elite society. It also forms a stark contrast to the story of slavery and war that Mr. Ryder has just heard from Eliza Jane and is about to tell his guests. Mr. Ryder's toast to the value of women's fidelity hints at the profound effect that Eliza Jane's example of love and devotion has had on him.

Mr. Ryder then retells the story that Eliza Jane told him earlier that day. The story evokes a sympathetic response in the audience, many of whom lived through the years of slavery and the Civil War. Others have heard stories of it from parents and grandparents, and they all sometimes feel the shadow of that time hanging over them. Mr. Ryder remarks that very few women would ever show such devotion and confidence to retain her affection and faith in a man she has not seen or heard of in 25 years.

Even though the members of the Blue Veins society are a relatively elite group within the Black American community of this period, they nonetheless experienced many of the same traumas that the rest of this community experienced in the past. They are, after all, still subject to the racism and oppression of this society. Therefore, the audience at the ball is quite receptive to Eliza Jane's story, even though it forms such a stark contrast with their present sophisticated surroundings. Even as these guests, like Mr. Ryder, have tried to work their way up on the social ladder, they haven't entirely lost their sense of connection with a troubled past.

Mr. Ryder tells the audience that after Eliza Jane left, he imagined the following scenario: that this husband, soon after escaping, learned that his wife had been sold away, and that he could not find out anything about where she was now. He was much younger and lighter-skinned than her, and their marriage had no legal standing due to her enslaved status. He went North to improve his social standing and grew to be quite a different person than that "ignorant boy" who had fled from slavery. He worked hard enough to earn the respect of such people as he, Mr. Ryder, sees around him now—a sight that fills him with joy, because he remembers a time when it would not have been possible in this country.

The detail with which Mr. Ryder describes this scenario to his audience suggests that it might not simply be an imagined scenario. Rather, he may have a personal connection to Eliza Jane's story—he may, in fact, be the man formerly known as Sam Taylor. His story emphasizes that Sam, like Eliza Jane, had a strong sense of honor and devotion and did try to keep his promise to his wife. But unlike her, he did not keep searching for her once it seemed like it would be impossible to find her—instead, he sought to improve his own standing. Mr. Ryder's story emphasizes the differences between Eliza Jane and Sam Taylor: their different statuses (enslaved versus free-born), skin colors, and education levels. This again emphasizes the internal divisions of class and race within the Black American community of this period. Mr. Ryder also hints at the importance of community when he reflects fondly on the group of people around him, which is valuable to him precisely because it wouldn't have been possible for it to exist under slavery.

Mr. Ryder tells the audience to imagine that this man's memory of the past grew indistinct, until he rarely thought about it except in dreams. Then, a chance encounter causes him to realize that the wife of his youth—the wife he had left behind, who had not joined him on his upward struggle to a higher social position, but rather lived a laborious life that aged her prematurely—was alive and searching for him. But she would not recognize him, unless he chose to reveal himself.

Mr. Ryder all but confirms here that he is indeed Sam Taylor, which is how he's able to narrate Sam's thoughts and experiences. He hints at how he's tried to forget the legacy of the past—to put aside his youth, spent in a state of near-slavery, as easily as one might forget a dream—but how it has nonetheless unexpectedly confronted him. Again, Mr. Ryder emphasizes the class differences between Sam Taylor and Eliza Jane—how Sam Taylor has climbed the social ladder, while Eliza Jane has remained near the lowest rungs. Mr. Ryder also emphasizes the contrast between Eliza Jane's unhesitating devotion and Sam Taylor's hesitation upon meeting her as to whether he should reveal his identity or not.

Mr. Ryder asks the audience: what would that man do? He tells them to assume that this is a man who tries to act with honor and justice toward all, and to imagine that he had planned to marry another. He asks his audience again: what should this man do, in such a "crisis of a lifetime"? Mr. Ryder says he imagined the man might hesitate, and he imagined he was a friend of the man, arguing about the matter with him impartially. After looking at the situation from every point of view, he quoted a line of Shakespeare: "to thine own self be true […] [and] thou canst not then be false to any man."

Mr. Ryder's emphasis on Sam Taylor's sense of honor parallels Eliza Jane's sense of honor in searching for her husband. However, his hesitation shows that he is not quite capable of the same selfless devotion as she is. In the end, however, the Sam Taylor of Mr. Ryder's imagined story decides to "be true" to himself—therefore, to reveal his identity to his former wife. Symbolically, this is also an acceptance of his former self as part of who he is, rather than continue trying to forget this part of his past.

Mr. Ryder tells the audience that, in his imagined conversation, he posed this question to the man: "Shall you acknowledge her?" Mr. Ryder then poses the question to the audience: "What should he have done?" Mr. Ryder's speech deeply moves the audience—they realize it is not simply an imaginary situation but a "personal appeal." Mr. Ryder looks at Molly Dixon with an expression of "renunciation and inquiry." Molly Dixon, who had cried while listening to Mr. Ryder's story, is the first to say, "He should have acknowledged her." The rest of the audience says the same.

Mr. Ryder poses the key dilemma that Eliza Jane's visit confronted him with—the question of whether to acknowledge her as his former wife, even though doing so would mean completely reordering his identity and life plans. This is the point where the audience realizes, beyond doubt, that Mr. Ryder is, in fact, the same person as Sam Taylor. His imagined scenario was not imaginary at all, but rather his own personal history. In asking what they would have done before revealing his decision, Mr. Ryder in a sense poses the same dilemma to them: whether to embrace solidarity over self-advancement, and whether to confront the past or ignore it. The interaction between Mr. Ryder and Molly Dixon hints that Mr. Ryder is giving up his plans for marriage to Molly in order to honor his commitment to Eliza Jane. The fact that the rest of the audience agrees that he should have acknowledged his former wife shows that they, too, understand the importance of honor and solidarity with others, rather than simply pursuing their own advancement.

Mr. Ryder thanks his audience and says this is the answer he expected them to give, because he knows their hearts. He opens the door of an adjoining room and leads out Eliza Jane, who is startled by the **ball**'s brilliance. Mr. Ryder tells the audience: "this is the woman, and I am the man, whose story I have just told you. Permit me to introduce to you the wife of my youth."

Mr. Ryder's remark that he understands his guests' hearts, when they tell them he should have acknowledged his former wife, hints at the deep sense of community that he feels toward them. Eliza Jane's appearance at the ball heightens the contrast between her humble appearance and the sophistication of her surroundings, again emphasizing the class divisions within the Black American community that lay at the heart of Mr. Ryder's dilemma. Mr. Ryder's ultimate act of loyalty in acknowledging Eliza Jane as his former wife, despite its social cost to him, parallels her loyalty in searching for him all these years. Although the reader is not given a clear indication of how Mr. Ryder's beliefs regarding race and class have changed since the start of the story, this ending suggests that his encounter with Eliza Jane has transformed him. He comes to understand that love is more important than social status, and that honoring one's commitments to others is more important than mere "self-preservation."

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