A Red Death Short Guide

A Red Death by Walter Mosley

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

A Red Death has as the main character and narrator Easy Rawlins, who circulates among many other characters. In 1953 Easy has become the owner of a number of rental properties, in which he does maintenance work.

His detective favors for people are major sidelines, embroiling him in situations which provide the opportunity for significant social commentary.

"I had a reputation for fairness and the strength of my convictions among the poor," he explains. "Ninety-nine out of a hundred black folk were poor back then, so my reputation went quite a way."

By 1953 Easy has completed two part-time years at Los Angeles City college. He is articulate, able to shift into "proper English" speech but comfortable only in the dialect common to the neighborhoods he has known. He is perceptive, kind to children, practical and basically honest, but held back by racism. The tax problem Easy faces is brought on by stolen money he came by in 1948, could not legally declare, and used to buy rental properties he then deeded to a dummy corporation.

As the layers of the tax problem are peeled back, the theme of alienation between the African American community and white racist officialdom is exposed.

Easy's hired business front and advisor is fat, cigar-puffing Mofass, who exemplifies a type of money-grubber and back-stabber. Mofass qualifies to be Easy's rent collector because he "didn't trust his own mother." He betrays Easy and Easy's tenant, Poinsettia Jackson, because he worships nothing but business. "On'y right is what you get away wit', Mr. Rawlins."

Easy's sidekick Raymond Alexander, nicknamed Mouse, again displays behavior so alienated that he functions by a code of his own. "Mouse was the truest friend I ever had. And if there is such a thing as true evil, he was that too." Mouse believes in himself "without question," feels no guilt or remorse, and kills people readily, with a smile. "What he did, he did because of a set of rules that only applied to him."

Mouse "rarely turned on friends," and Easy's help in dealing with Mouse's small son LaMarque cements a relationship that might have ended badly.

Easy loves Mouse's wife EttaMae and they have an affair. Trouble is averted only because EttaMae ends up choosing Mouse.

The fearsome Mouse represents justice taken into one's own hands in the showdown between Easy and the Internal Revenue Service. White IRS agent Reginald Lawrence exemplifies the kind of twisted mentality to which debasement of others is integral. He is a woman beater, a child abuser, and a criminal. He employs the term "son" to address Easy, and hates African Americans and Jews.

White man Darryl Craxton of the FBI, too, exemplifies government wrong-headedness. In the guise of Easy's deliverer from tax trouble, Darryl embodies the ignorance that underlies racism by linking communists, African Americans and Jews. Marx was a Jew and "grandfather to all the Reds," according to Darryl, and "Reds" want to enslave the world. Hence Darryl is dedicated to spying on unions as well as the NAACP, which he calls one of "the so-called civil rights organizations that are full of Reds and people who will one day be Reds."

Chaim Wenzler, Easy's target for surveillance, is likable and intelligent, with eyes that reveal "a deep pain." He works at the church because, as he says: "Negroes in America have the same life as the Jew in Poland. Ridiculed, segregated. We were hung and burned for just being alive." Easy's relationships with Chaim and Chaim's daughter Shirley are caring, plunging Easy into crises of conscience. "Chaim and I were partners working for the poor and elderly. Of course, I was trying to hang him, too."

As a result of the deaths of his tenant Poinsettia and Chaim, among others, Easy draws police attention. Officer Andrew Reedy displays the racist lack of enthusiasm in investigating the death of an African American woman.

His partner Quinten Naylor, who does show interest, is a rarity, an African American plainclothesman whom Easy can talk to. "I'd been beaten, robbed, shot at, and generally mistreated by more colored brothers than I'd ever been by whites," Easy comments, "but I trusted a black man before I'd even think about a white one." Quinten is nonetheless a problematical "brother," a case of lost cultural identity with "an educated way of talking" Easy is capable of, but rejects. "If you were to talk like a white man you might forget who you were." Yet despite Quinten's being on the case, Easy is taken in and subjected to police brutality, being chained, slapped, kicked, beaten by white cops.

The list of notable minor characters among Easy's acquaintances includes Andre Lavender, shop steward at Champion Aircraft where Chaim was organizing workers. Andre hides the secret plans that Easy doubts are important to the American defense effort, but are fanatically sought by the FBI.

Mercedes Bark, as a Bell Street snob, and Sonja Achebe, as the head of African Migration, underscore the concept of a divided African American community. So too do Reverend Towne, Jackie Orr, Melvin Pride, Winona Fitzpatrick, all pillars of the church with their hands in the collection plate.

Social Concerns

A Red Death, Mosley addresses Inanti-African American and anti-Semitic attitudes by means of the actions of detective character Easy Rawlins.

The year is 1953 in the McCarthy era, when the United States government is anxious to root out communists. As the story opens, Easy has received a letter from the Internal Revenue Service informing him that his tax history is under investigation. Since his past financial dealings are indeed suspect, Easy reluctantly acquiesces in the request of FBI Special Agent Darryl Craxton to do undercover work for the agency in exchange for a harmonious resolution of the tax matter. Easy is put on the trail of Chaim Wenzler, a Jewish communist whom the FBI claims is a threat to America.

Easy's situation subjects him to painful encounters with white racist and anti-Semitic police and federal agents, made worse by guilt he feels at betraying the Jewish man. As a soldier in World War II Easy had participated in the liberation of Nazi death camps. He has great compassion for Jewish suffering, and Chaim is dedicated to the cause of African Americans. Another interest of Chaim is labor unions, and he has worked to organize Champion Aircraft, the company that fired Easy for insubordination in the previous novel, Devil in a Blue Dress (1990).

Chaim is primarily occupied at the First African Baptist Church, located in Watts, a community where the effects of racist discrimination are visible in poverty, moral decay, and crime. At the church, which many of Easy's friends attend, Chaim works at various charitable causes. The FBI agent calls all of it a front to cover Soviet-sponsored subversion, including organizing the lower classes and stealing military secrets. The agent exhibits such racism that Easy does not trust him.

The "Red Scare," seen as hurting not only African Americans but people of all races and cultures, receives most of the novel's emphasis on social concerns. Other areas do come up, however. The African Americans' churches are seen as important service agencies.

Divisions exist within the African American community, not only with regard to pacifism during the Korean War, but due to some snobbish factions who look down upon less sophisticated race members. Also, one scene involves a meeting of the African Migration movement, in which people inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois discuss returning to the continent of their origin. The group, tagged as communist, is under FBI surveillance.

Techniques

Mosley's use of first-person narration enhances the sense of immediacy in his novels. A Red Death demonstrates the care for historical detail and realistic portrayal that mark this mystery series. Mosley describes Watts and its environs with a knowledge that comes partly from childhood memories, partly from the talk of his parents and their friends. Mosley has been praised for his realistic and vivid characterizations, undoubtedly because many of the characters are based upon the people Mosley or his family knew in South-Central Los Angeles after World War II.

Occasionally a character is assigned a quality or occupation known to members of Mosley's own family or childhood community. Mofass's sister Roberta Jefferson and her husband George, for example, work for the Los Angeles Board of Education as Mosley's parents once did. Odell Jones is a school custodian, the occupation once held by Mosley's father, Leroy Mosley.

Easy's ownership of rental properties parallels Leroy Mosley's sideline.

Critics praise Mosley's adept shifts in language, from Watts dialect to "proper" white English. The novel also displays Mosley's talent for reinforcing thematic concepts with imagery. A striking example of symbolism is Easy's ant-poisoning effort in the church school yard. Easy watches the hives, knowing they were full of insects fallen where they stood, and recollecting Dachau and the dead he saw there. The inhuman treatment of Jews in World War II is thus underscored.

Themes

Easy Rawlins's situation develops the theme of alienation between the African American community and the government, especially those employees charged with upholding the law.

Racism, according to the novel's premise, is the fundamental cause for discord. Easy's distaste for the government is apparent in his reaction to the building which houses the Internal Revenue Service. "It almost looked friendly from the outside, not like the government at all." When he is summoned to an interview, the clerical help behave rudely.

The investigating IRS agent, Reginald Lawrence, is a white man whose disrespect for Easy is clear. "The way he called me son instead of my name returned me to southern Texas," Easy remarks, "days when the slightest error in words could hold dire consequences for a black man." The agent's racist approach, which clarifies as the mystery unfolds, is matched by that of white police officers.

Easy's apparent rescue by FBI agent Darryl, who promises to let his back taxes be paid in convenient installments, enhances the thematic conception of alienation from the government.

Easy thinks it "smart" for the man to hire him for undercover work in Watts.

"The colored population at that time wasn't readily willing to tell a white man anything resembling the truth, and the FBI was made up exclusively of white men."

Later Easy realizes the injustice being done to the object of his surveillance, Chaim. The Jewish man is believed to have stolen from Champion the plans for a secret weapon, although no proof exists. The pursuit of Chaim has overtones of prejudice, since the government lumps together communists, Jews, and African Americans.

"He's got a soft spot for Negroes," the FBI agent says of Chaim.

The theme of racist officialdom incorporates the idea that persecuting Jews is evil because, as with African Americans, it harms the innocent. "Police and government officials always have contempt for innocence," Easy observes; "they are, in some way, offended by an innocent man." Easy recalls concentration camps he helped free. He remembers "lynchings and burnings, shootings and stonings" of innocent people in the American South.

Easy deplores not being his "own man" because government agents have immersed him in a "useless confusion of blood and innocence."

Ultimately the theme emerges that a racist society harms everyone, whatever group. This concept emerges partly in the identification Easy often makes between African

Americans and the poor in general. "I had forgotten that a poor man is never safe," he observes, regarding his position with white officialdom.

Adaptations

An abridged, audiocassette tape edition of A Red Death, read by Paul Winfield, was published in 1993. An unabridged, audiocassette tape library edition, read by Stanley B. Clay, was published in 1994 by Audio Renaissance.

Key Questions

Mosley's realistic portrayals of both characters and milieus, offered in smooth language, convey an immediacy which can provide a springboard to discussion. Readers might consider whether they feel transported to Los Angeles of 1953, or whether they recognize many current social problems in the novel, be they of African Americans, other minority groups, or certain groups of white people. Members of different political affiliations will have different opinions, but these should provoke lively debates.

Discussion groups interested in history may enjoy researching 1953. The research may or may not be confined to California, for the search for suspected communists, and blacklisting, spread coast to coast. A line of discussion to pursue is "big brother" government, whether it boosts or erodes democratic freedoms, or neither. Readers might consider whether Easy's views are identical to Mosley's, or whether in the novel there is some playing of the devil's advocate.

1. Why does Easy use Mofass as a front? What do Easy's house and other properties represent to their owner?

2. How does Mosley use historical details to give a flavor of the year 1953?

3. Discuss the relationships seen by the novel's bureaucrats between communists, African Americans and Jews.

4. When FBI agent Darryl Craxton threatens the personnel at a restaurant, persuading them to admit an African American, Easy observes that "those white people were just as afraid of the law as any colored man." What does this fact signify to Easy?

5. Mouse and Chaim Wenzler act according to their natures, Easy feels, and thus are "more innocent" than he, and he more "the villain." What does Easy mean?

6. Discuss the different viewpoints within the African American community: the church, Bell Street, the African Migration. Where does Easy stand?

7. The secret papers that the FBI engages Easy to recover turn out in the end to be essentially worthless. The FBI knew it all along. What point is made?

8. Relate each of these characters to a theme: Quinten Naylor, Reginald Lawrence, Reverend Towne.

9. Why does Easy reconcile with Mofass at the end of the novel?

Literary Precedents

A Red Death, as detective fiction, is related to many novels in the genre.

Mosley, however, does not follow early "classic" authors like Arthur Conan Doyle, E. C. Bentley, or Agatha Christie, for whom crime is an intrusion into a decorous social order. Instead Mosley adopts hard-boiled formulas replete with dark urban milieus and corrupt members of the so-called respectable classes. The founders of this type are Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler who, like Mosley, continue a hero's exploits through a series. Mosley, though, centers each mystery in a successive time frame, and suitably ages Easy Rawlins in each new work.

Comparisons of a general sort can be drawn between A Red Death and Hammett's Red Harvest (1929). Hammett's hero, the Continental Op, finds on an assignment that the "powers that be" consist of men who lust after influence and money, and consort with gangsters. The police are as useless as the venal powers they serve, and the Op can only fight crime by seeming to be as corrupt as the inhabitants. Easy Rawlins also functions without legal remedies, against violent people in influential positions. Easy and the Op also face moral problems and fear the loss of basic decency.

Parallels also can be drawn with the characters of Chester Himes, who chose hard-boiled detective fiction as a means to portray the violent, irrational, corrupt social reality of urban African American life. Himes's fictional site is Harlem, filled with migrants from the racist South much as Easy's Watts is peopled with incomers from Texas.

Himes's Cotton Comes to Harlem (1965) involves two African American plainclothes cops and a Back-to-Africa swindle. A Red Death has similar topics of church intrigues and an African Migration movement.

Mosley must be credited with innovation, for beginning his detective series almost forty years in the past and for moving Easy forward through time in short leaps. Essentially Mosley has taken the formula of C. S. Forester, used in the Hornblower seafaring historical series published in the 1930s and 1940s, and adapted it first to the African American experience and, second, to the mystery genre. The Easy Rawlins series is a new twist in detective fiction.

Related Titles

Devil in a Blue Dress, set in 1948, introduces the detective hero Easy Rawlins, an ex-soldier and unemployed aircraft worker. To keep up payments on his house, he accepts an offer of money from a disreputable white man to locate a blond woman who frequents the African American clubs. Soon people start turning up dead. To cope, Easy gets help from his homicidal sidekick, Mouse. Easy comes by the stolen money with which he buys the properties that bring him his tax problems in A Red Death.

In White Butterfly (1992) Mosley retains chronological continuity, setting this novel three years after A Red Death. Easy has a marriage in the process of breaking up, while Watts is plagued with killings of "party girls" employed in local bars. Since one woman is white, the police become very interested, arresting Mouse for the crimes. Cigar-smoking Mofass still serves as Easy's business front and is now plagued with coughing fits.

Black Betty (1994) shows Easy in 1961, his marriage over, but with two adopted children. His real estate ventures are becoming shaky and he faces changes coming in the Kennedy era. He accepts money again, this time to lo cate a missing housekeeper. Also, he tries to prove his friendship to Mouse.

Again in these detective novels, themes center on the alienation and deterioration of African American neighborhoods in white racist society. As the series goes on, darker visions emerge.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Copyright ©, 1994, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing, Inc., 2100 "S" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994