School Days = Chemin-d'ecole Study Guide

School Days = Chemin-d'ecole by Patrick Chamoiseau

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

School Days is the story of the author's first year at school on the Caribbean island of Martinique. The little boy longs for school, but when he finally gets to go he finds that it is not what he hoped. At school he is expected to cast off everything Creole to embrace the French language and culture, which is supposedly the culture of his "betters." He is made to feel ashamed of Creole. Eventually, his teacher gives up on all but his favorite students, treating the others with undisguised racism. The little boy only manages to survive his school years by discovering his passion for books and literature.

The little black boy longs to go to school so that he will not be left out. He has seen his older siblings go and wants to join them. His mother buys him a satchel to quiet him down, and he uses the chalk inside it to draw all over the communal hallway in the apartment building. When he finally does get to go to nursery, the little boy is thrilled. He soon finds that he loves learning, singing songs and reciting the alphabet. He loves pleasing his nursery teacher, Mam Salinière, by impressing her with the things he has learned.

However, one day his older brother lets slip that he does not actually go to a proper school. Suddenly the little boy feels left out again, and so, to his mother's consternation, he begins to beg for school once more.

Eventually the boy's wish comes true, but he soon finds that school is not what he thought it would be. The teachers are cold and unsupportive, and he is expected to speak French. He is told that the Creole culture is barbaric and that he needs to leave it behind to embrace French culture instead. The Teacher shouts at and whips any boys who make mistakes in their French, and soon the pupils are too frightened to use either French or Creole. They remain silent in class whenever possible. It soon becomes apparent that the Teacher has his favorites and that he is unashamedly racist in choosing them.

There is one boy in his class who the little boy admires. Big Bellybutton has a defiant spirit that is never broken, even by the school bullies. One day Big Bellybutton brings a snake's head to school to frighten the bullies. The teachers are appalled and Big Bellybutton is beaten in front of the class by his father. When the bully attacks again, Big Bellybutton fights back, and the two have it out after school. The little boy admires Big Bellybutton's bravery and tells his mother that he is old enough to walk to and from school on his own now. As the little boy explores more of the town on his walks, he becomes aware of the craze for marbles that has gripped the other children. He enjoys joining in, even if it means being punished by his mother when he comes home late.

As the teachers try to tell the children about European fairy tales and French culture, in the playground Big Bellybutton tells them about Creole magic and zombies. When the teachers introduce powdered milk from France in an attempt to combat "malnutrition," the children throw their milk into nearby streams as they tell each other stories about the magical Creole ingredients the adults must be putting in it. The children try to use

Creole sorcery to curse their Teacher and believe that they have managed it when he takes time off ill. A substitute teacher comes in, who tries to tell them about their African roots and make them proud to be black. The children do not understand his world view any more than they do their normal teacher's.

Eventually, the Teacher gives up on all but his favorite pupils. Big Bellybutton has also given up, and so would the little boy, if he hadn't discovered his love of books and literature. This gives him the drive he needs to keep paying attention in school. He is motivated by the desire to read and write books one day. This drive is what helps him to survive his school days.

Longing, pages 11-21

Longing, pages 11-21 Summary

This story follows the early school days of the author and narrator, Patrick Chamoiseau, when he was a little boy living in Fort-de-France on Martinique. The little boy longs for school, but when he eventually gets there he finds that it is not at all what he expected. The teachers are determined to stamp out every last hint of Creole culture and language found in the children, and to mould them in the ways of the "more civilized" France and Europe. The little boy encounters racism, bullying and unfairness, as well as the constant conflict between everything that is Creole and everything that is French in his life. The narrator shows how these conflicting but inextricable influences helped shape who he is today.

The narrator is a very young boy still, and watches with envy as his older siblings run around and go new places. He becomes obsessed with the idea of going somewhere new and doing new things. When his siblings all begin to go off to school, he longs to go too. He makes such a fuss that his mother, Mam Ninotte, is forced to buy him his own satchel so he can pretend to be a schoolchild. In it there is chalk, a black tablet to write on, and a sponge to wipe it clean with. His brother shows him how to use the spongs, and he excitedly begins to draw pictures with his chalk.

One day he draws on the walls and his mother is angry. From now on, however, the tablet has lost its appeal, so the little boy draws on the walls in the communal hallway of the apartments instead. He soon realizes that the Big Kids can make marks with the chalk that have some king of universal meaning that he cannot decipher but they can. One day his brother Jojo writes the little boy's name on the wall. The little boy is afraid that if it is erased then he will also be erased from the world, so he takes great care in copying out the name as many times as he can. After this, he begs everyone to teach him how to write different names and words. He still longs for school.

Longing, pages 11-21 Analysis

The first ten pages introduce the main character of the story, a little black boy growing up in Fort-de-France on the Caribbean island of Martinique. This is the younger self of the narrator, who is telling a story about himself from the perspective of his adulthood looking back. The little boy of the story is a curious and spirited young boy who longs to do new and exciting things. He wants to visit new places and feels restless staying at home. He relishes every opportunity he gets to leave the house, even if it is just running an errand for his mother. When he sees his older siblings going off to school, he becomes obsessed with the idea of going with them, and he is extremely frustrated every time he is told that he is too young. He sees school as a magical place, somewhere where he will get to go experience new things and learn amazing things such as how to write names and words. He holds the latter in reverence, seeing it

almost as a kind of magic, believing that words have power over the things they represent. His naivety, eagerness and willful energy make him an instantly likeable and appealing character. The author perfectly captures the essence of an adventurous young child, and readers from anywhere in the world will recognize these traits. He is an amusing character because he is so naive. The reader will remember being a young child, and how everything in the world held so much fascination for them. However, they also know that when the little boy does eventually get to go to school, he is probably not going to like it much and will wish that he could stay home instead. This irony is foreshadowed in these first pages when the little boy observes that his older siblings always seem very happy to come home at the end of the day, and are not enthusiastic about school. The narrator concludes that this should have been a warning to him.

The little boy lives on the island of Martinique. This is French territory, but many of the inhabitants speak Antillean Creole. This is based heavily on French, but with influences from various African languages brought to the island by black slaves. These slaves worked on the plantations of the rich French land-owners. They naturally picked up a lot of the French spoken around them, but also incorporated elements of their own tongue into their speech. Many slaves were taken from different tribes and put to work together. They had no common language at first, and so developed Creole as a way of communicating with each other and as a language that was separate from the pure French of their masters. By the time slavery was abolished, Creole had become a language and culture of its own, belonging to all the black people of the island. This Creole became distinct from both the French and the African cultures and ideas that influenced it. In this story, Creole is looked down on as a language and culture that was born from slavery. The teachers try to repress it in favor of French, which they see as a language belonging to civilization and enlightenment. This conflict between the Creole and the French becomes a major theme of this book.

Already, some Creole words have begun to appear in the story, such as "awa," an exclamation indicating disbelief or disappointment. The little black boy and his family speak Creole all the time to each other, though the narrator is using French to tell his story so that his readers can understand him. The French has been translated into English for this version of the text. However, the odd Creole word or phrase still pops up in the narrative, reminding us of the language and culture the little black boy has grown up with. It also shows us how important Creole still is to the mindset of the author, who is now narrating in perfect and very educated French, yet slips in elements of Creole into his descriptions. Throughout the story, the author creates a memorable and distinct style by combining French ideas and language with Creole. Sometimes his descriptions and observations are extremely literary, using sophisticated and complex language. At other points, his writing is very expressive and alive, mimicking the way people might talk to each other in Creole, and sometimes even using actual Creole. This writing style blends the influences that have shaped who the author is, as well as reflecting the central themes and conflict of the story. In the Caribbean world of this story, the French and the Creole are both inextricably mixed as well as at constant war with each other. This is confusing for the boys, just as it can be confusing for the readers. By blending highly educated French with Creole, the author is not rejecting or honoring just one side of himself, but demonstrating how these different elements are just as important as

each other. The different influences of his childhood are what have made him who he is today.

The narrator also introduces his répondeurs in these first pages. These are "back talkers," characters who comment on the things that are happening in the story, often in a lyrical manner. They are not actual characters within the story itself, but separate from it and observing it. They speak directly to the narrator or the reader, and occasionally the narrator will also address them directly. They play a similar role to the chorus of an ancient Greek play, who would comment on the action, often philosophizing or drawing moral messages for the audience. Chamoiseau's répondeurs respond to the action in a similar manner, but they are also called on directly and appealed to by the author in the same way that Classical writers would appeal to the Muses of arts and literature to help them tell a good story. The répondeurs are therefore part chorus, part Muse. This reflects the literature of Classical Greece and Rome. This Classical culture has long been held up as a pinnacle of enlightenment and civilization by the Western world, and so the inclusion of the répondeurs in this novel appears to reflect very European values. Learning the Classics, in particular Greek plays and Greek epics, was for a long time a very important part of upper class education. They are associated with higher learning and scholarship. Again, because of this, the répondeurs in this story appear to reflect a very learned, educated author who has embraced European values and ideals. This represents the side of Chamoiseau that loves literature and that has learned a great deal about writing throughout history. This is the literary, French-educated side of Chamoiseau.

However, his répondeurs are very different from the typical chorus or Muse found in Classical literature. They are cheeky, they talk back defiantly, they speak in a lively, sing-song way that reflects Creole, and sometimes they even speak in Creole. They seem to represent the side of Chamoiseau that is the little black boy of the story. They refuse to speak perfect French, and they sum up what the little boy is feeling at that particular point in the narrative. It is almost like Chamoiseau is calling upon the spirits of his past self to help him remember what it was like to be this little boy so that he can tell his story. The répondeurs are also interesting because they represent a different kind of storytelling. They talk back to the narrator as he tells his story, immediately creating a more interactive experience. It feels as though the story is being told out loud, and members of Chamoiseau's audience are responding to it. This reflects the fact that storytelling in the boy's Creole culture is a more oral tradition; stories are memorized and told out loud rather than written down in a permanent book. Their stories are therefore naturally more fluid and alive, rather than static like European literature. In these ways, the répondeurs symbolize both aspects of the author, and the different influences that have made him who he is. These are the two different cultures that inform his writing style; highly educated and sophisticated French, and lively Creole with roots in African traditions. He shows that they do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can blend together into a new and exciting storytelling style.

Longing, pages 22-31

Longing, pages 22-31 Summary

Eventually the little boy is told that it is time for him to go to school. He is very excited, and feels welcomed by his first teacher, Mam Salinière. When his mother leaves him at the nursery school, he is terrified and devastated, and sits in complete silence not really aware of anything going on around him. However, after lunch at home with his mother and siblings, the little boy is a bit braver. He begins to pay attention during the afternoon and is delighted to join in the songs and games.

He begins to find that school is fun, and delights in learning new things, such as mixing colors, cutting and pasting, reciting the alphabet, writing letters, etc. He also learns fairy stories and rhymes from France. He is so pleased by it all that he boasts to his brother that he has the best school and the best teacher. His brother promptly tells him that he is at nursery school, not a real school at all. The little boy is crestfallen and immediately begins begging to go to real school, driving his mother crazy again.

Longing, pages 22-31 Analysis

The little boy is at first terrified by school. He never thought his mother would leave him there, and he feels betrayed by this, as well as frightened by all the new things and new faces. However, as he begins to become more familiar with it, he soon realizes that he loves school. He enjoys the games and the songs, and the lessons about how to recite and write the alphabet. He begins to be trusted with a little more independence, and so finds that his world is expanding as he is allowed to go places on his own. He delights in the praise given to him by his teacher, Mam Salinière, and so tries to perfect what he has learnt in class with vigor and enthusiasm. Mam Salinière is a very good teacher, who encourages the children and brings out the best in them. This is an easy and enjoyable time for the little boy, and the reader can see that he is beginning to blossom into a little person; he is growing up. However, he soon learns that this is not really school, but nursery school. His siblings all go to real school, which has difficult lessons and homework. Again, the little boy feels like he is being left out, and he begins to beg to be allowed to go to school. This is extremely ironic. The little boy does not realize how good he has it at nursery school. One day he will go to real school and he will find that it is nowhere near as fun. He will also realize that few teachers are as nurturing and supportive as Mam Salinière.

The little boy is beginning to learn things about French culture. In nursery school they sing French rhymes and lullabies, such as Frère Jacques, and they are told European fairy stories such as Sleeping Beauty. They read tales about wolves and enchanted forests, and about good and bad fairies. The little boy learns about the Seven Dwarfs, mermaids, Pierrot, and the Eiffel Tower. He is taught about the different seasons, which are very different from what the little boy experiences on the Caribbean island of

Martinique. The teacher and the boy's mother do not appear to see anything wrong with these lessons and influences. The children are taught to read and write and to understand the world in terms of French culture, instead of in terms of things that the children are actually familiar with in their own world. They do not know what wolves are, they have never seen snow, and their tropical forests are very different from European forests. In Creole culture, stories about magic are very different from the kind of fairytale magic European stories tell of. None of the adults seem to think that the children should be given lessons that they can relate to. Instead, French culture is seen as preferable and more civilized than Creole culture, and so children are encouraged to embrace everything French while rejecting their own world as some kind of 'lesser' version of reality. The message seems to be that this is not how houses and trees should look, in a proper civilized world.

The little boy does not understand this disparity yet, and instead begins to see the world as it is taught to him in class. He draws pictures of his house, but gives it a pointed roof and chimney with smoke coming out, surrounded by fir and oak trees. This is the archetypal house that European children tend to draw. This is probably the image the little boy was shown when learning the word 'house.' Similarly, the trees shown to him when learning the word 'tree' are trees found in Europe, very different from the trees of Martinique. This is why when he draws his own home, which is very different from this image, he still draws it in these terms. This is what 'house' means to him. Although the little boy does not yet notice how peculiar this is, his father certainly sees. He jokes to Mam Ninotte that the boy is turning their house into a boiler. This emphasizes how ridiculous it is to show smoke coming out of a chimney in such a hot country. Even Mam Ninotte is surprised by her son's drawings, though she likes to encourage his learning. These images only seem to amuse the little boy's parents, rather than concern them. These strange views and influences are the price for education in this world, and the little boy's mother knows that without it they will never be able to 'better themselves.' Their mother just wants what is best for them, so they can live happy lives without poverty. It is the teachers of the story who consider 'bettering themselves' to mean casting off Creole culture to embrace the French. They view Creole as a 'slave culture' that keeps the black people of Martinique in a lowly, servile role, and so they treat it with disgust. This is a recurring theme throughout the story, and the reader begins to see the first hints of it here. Even at nursery, the children are already being taught to abandon their own culture in favor of a 'better' one.

Longing, pages 32-41

Longing, pages 32-41 Summary

One day it is time for the little boy to start proper school. He is walked there by his mother, this time going in the same direction as his brothers. However, school does not seem like the exciting place he thought it would be. The children are lined up in the yard and once again his mother abandons him. His teacher is not nice and encouraging like Mam Salinière, but is strict and cold instead.

The Teacher takes the boys into his classroom and begins to take the register. For most of the frightened boys, simply standing up and saying 'present' is very difficult. To make matters worse, the Teacher mercilessly picks on any boy who does not pronounce 'present' clearly and perfectly, making them repeat it until they get it right. When it is the little boy's turn, the other children laugh, and he realizes for the first time that his name is made up of various words for different animals. Another boy gets the worst of it, however, as he does not answer to his proper name. He only knows his Creole nickname, which horrifies the Teacher. The Teacher takes him out to see the principal.

When the Teacher comes back he begins to walk around, asking them questions. The children are all terrified. When he asks if anyone knows what day, month and year it is, most of them are bewildered, never having looked at the world that way before. One child answers the question, and the Teacher praises him for being a single bright spot in a sea of barbarism. The Teacher then begins to tell them about upstrokes and downstrokes in writing. Finally, the bell rings, and the Teacher tells the children to leave the classroom in orderly rows.

Longing, pages 32-41 Analysis

The little boy has finally got his wish and is attending a proper school, just like his older siblings. However, he very quickly realizes that it is not the magical, exciting place that he imagined it would be. It is actually frightening, daunting, depressing and confusing. He is asked questions that bewilder him, as he is forced to alter how he thinks about the world. He finds no comfort in the cold, strict teacher, who is always referred to in this story as 'the Teacher,' with a capital letter to emphasize his importance and his terrifying presence. The Teacher is nothing like Mam Salinière, who tried to encourage and nurture the children. Instead, the Teacher quickly begins bullying and belittling the children. His tactic appears to be to make them learn through shaming them if they do not know something. Ironically, considering how much the little boy desperately wanted to go, he soon begins to see that school will be hard, daunting and painful.

The narrator describes the weather on this first day of school. It is drizzly, a gray day that reflects the children's moods. The répondeurs repeat the words 'drizzle' and 'gray', saying: 'gray day, mizzle-drizzle' (page 34), and later 'dribble-drizzle' and 'chill wind',

which the narrator repeats again a little later (page 39). This constant repetition concerning the bad weather emphasizes the depressing, cold, unpleasant nature of the little boy's experience, reflecting his feelings as well as foreshadowing the fact that school will not be a pleasant thing for him. The narrator also says that the boy feels like a fish trapped in the bottom of a net, or an animal being herded. These are not positive images. They suggest that the boy is just one among a crowd of boys who have been captured and are now being driven, helpless, towards a terrible fate. Once again, the imagery emphasizes the mood and symbolizes how difficult school will be for the little boy. However, the descriptions are very over-the-top for the situation, and the heavy use of hyperbole also creates humor. It is amusing that the little boy is describing school in such depressing terms, as if it is the end of the world. Every reader has experienced this feeling, and knows what it is like to not want to go to school. Every reader understands how depressing the start of a new term can be. The readers also know that children have a tendency to over-exaggerate, and that in the end, school is actually not that bad. This creates a kind of knowing humor, as the narrator is sharing a joke with the reader, laughing at his over eager and exaggerative younger self.

The Teacher is already trying to get the children to think of Creole culture as something to be ashamed of. He does not approve of Creole nicknames and is horrified when Big Bellybutton will only answer to his Creole name. The répondeurs' comments reveal what people like the Teacher really think of Creole names; a Creole name is a "Backwoods name, Savanna name, Field-nigger name, Darky name!" (page 38). In other words, the Creole name marks the child out as a black boy, descended from slaves. A 'real' French name is a mark of civilization and freedom. The Teacher even tells the children that they should be proud of their French names, as not too long ago their people were slaves and were not allowed names at all. This shows clearly where his thinking and reasoning comes from. For the teacher, clinging on to Creole culture and language is like clinging on to slavery, as it is the culture and language that the slaves used. For him, learning French and trying to mimic their culture will cast off their ties to slavery and make them as free and intellectual as their old masters. Although the Teacher is doing what he thinks is best, and is trying to rid the children of the legacy of slavery, in making them ashamed of who they are and the Creole culture they have grown up with, he is entirely missing the point.

Longing, pages 42-51

Longing, pages 42-51 Summary

The children file outside into the yard for recess. There, some of the other children immediately begin to pick on Big Bellybutton because he only knows his Creole name. He runs around, trying to get away from them, and eventually finds safety by standing near the teachers. The little boy sees his mama at the fence, but she has only come to give him a pain au chocolat as a treat, not to take him home.

When the bell rings again, the children line up and go inside. Back in the classroom, the Teacher begins to talk at them again. The little boy quickly realizes that the Teacher is speaking French, and that he is speaking it in a way that the little boy finds hard to understand, because it is so disconnected from the Creole he is used to.

The Teacher talks to them about the merits of education and how hard they fought to get state schools here. He talks about slavery, and how education can raise the children up from manual labor, the kind of soulless work that he believes would make them more beasts than men.

At lunchtime the boy goes home and is suddenly delighted by everything in the house. He finds he appreciates his home much more now. However, lunch does not last long, and soon he has to traipse back to school again for the afternoon classes.

Longing, pages 42-51 Analysis

The children in the playground begin to pick on Big Bellybutton, and the little boy gets his first look at how cruel children can be to each other. This is another element of school that many readers can relate to: the bullying. Children will always pick on someone, usually someone they can single out as different. Here, the children pick on Big Bellybutton because he only knows his Creole name. They are quickly picking up on the shame attached to Creole, especially with Monsieur le Directeur walking around the yard, telling off children for speaking in Creole. Monsieur le Directeur refers to Creole as barbaric and indicates that the children should try to be more civilized. The children quickly begin to reinforce this attitude by picking on those who show that they are too connected to their Creole life and culture.

After recess, the Teacher begins to hammer in this message a little more. He speaks to the children in perfect French, not the French mixed with Creole that they are used to hearing. He uses examples that they are unfamiliar with and will not permit them to speak any Creole. The children are confused and intimidated by this, especially as the Teacher seems to be taking this as an opportunity to show off his own learning and sophistication.

The Teacher explains to them that slavery is bad and so Creole is bad, because it lowers them to the level of slaves. French is good and education is good, as it raises them up from manual labor, which turns people into beasts rather than men. He is clearly proud of his own learning and of the battle his people fought to secure state education, and it is obvious that he thinks himself above many others, particularly the children. He does not see that he is elevating himself by pretending to be French, and so pretending to be one of the "slave-masters."

Slavery is no longer permitted, but in desperately trying to cast off everything "slavish" about himself, the Teacher has simply enslaved himself to another culture. He casts off everything that made him who he is and wants the children to do the same. This is not the freedom and equality that he should be fighting for, but rather changing people in order to make them acceptable to the French world view. Worse still, it is fellow black Creoles who are doing this to each other, not the French former slave owners. Although the Teacher thinks he is moving things forward and improving the children's lives, he may just be causing more damage in his attempt to obliterate all traces of slavery by obliterating an entire culture.

When the little boy goes home for lunch, he gains a new appreciation for his house and everything in it. For the first time he really notices the paintings on the wall, admiring a mythical scene of a Chinese junk in a beautiful lagoon, with water nymphs bathing and a castle in the distance. He also admires a painting showing an idyll of country people at home on the land, living a quiet, peaceful life. These paintings seem to contrast strongly with what the Teacher was trying to tell them. According to the Teacher, manual work on the land will only make them more like beasts than men.

According to the painting, working on the land is idyllic and beautiful. This is connected to the painting of Christ, who taught that the simple, ordinary hard-working people are the ones who will most easily get to Heaven. This painting reflects a very European idealistic view that working the land can be noble, peaceful and pious. This is the kind of "charming" ideal that caused Marie Antoinette to build a mock farm in her palace grounds so that she could play at being a peasant. In reality, the painting's view is not really correct. Working the land is hard. It can be unpleasant, back-breaking, and desperate. While the rich Europeans enjoyed paintings like this, real manual work was being carried out by slaves on the plantations in places like Martinique, and in appalling conditions.

However, the Teacher's limited view does not seem right either. The Creole people clearly feel a connection to the land, which they express through buying pictures such as these. Manual work does not have to be the evil that the Teacher thinks of it as, and uneducated people who work with their hands should not be looked down on by people like the Teacher. The Teacher considers them little more than slaves or animals, which is an appalling attitude, even if the reader can understand where it has come from.

The pictures seem to symbolize the confused, jarring mix of cultures that runs through this story. The paintings are obviously European; they do not show black people, and the imagery comes from Europe; imagery such as castles, nymphs and bales of hay.

However, they perhaps represent something about Creole culture that the people are trying to attach themselves to: a simple honesty and peace, a sense of life and love of their land. Throughout this story, European and Creole are constantly clashing or merging, desperately trying to find a way to co-exist and come together into something that the people of Martinique can be comfortable with.

Survival, pages 55-75

Survival, pages 55-75 Summary

At school, the children are taught that stealing is wrong. To demonstrate this, the teacher tells them a story about a boy who steals apples. When the little boy relates this tale to his father, his father simply questions where he would find an apple tree on Martinique, since all apples have to be imported. The boy is unfazed and begins adding apple trees to his drawings of their house.

At school they are taught to write with ink and are given exercise books to practice in. The Teacher endlessly tries to teach them to pronounce French correctly. The children find it strange to their tongue, having trouble with the letter "r" and often getting vowel sounds wrong. The Teacher rages every time a child makes a mistake. The children pick up on this and begin to bully those who make mistakes, cornering them later in the playground. Soon all the children are terrified to speak and the little boy himself, who would normally have so much to say about the world, is reduced to silence. Meanwhile, the three boys in their class who were brought up speaking French are idealized by the Teacher and treated as his favorites.

Creole becomes the language used for insults and fights. The children are afraid or ashamed to use it elsewhere, so they only use it among themselves when being vulgar or mean. Because of this, Creole becomes even more shameful in their eyes.

The Teacher also attempts to stamp out any phrases or sayings that come from Creole culture, such as "fresh off the boat," or calling a crossroads a "four-way." Instead, he insists on using French examples and sayings that are meaningless to the children. The Teacher begins to bring in different kinds of branches to whip the children with if they make mistakes. He even makes the children find and bring in switches for him. One day Big Bellybutton brings a very strong looking branch that the Teacher is extremely pleased with, but when the Teacher uses it, it breaks like a straw. The Teacher never asks Big Bellybutton to bring a switch in again.

The Teacher takes to punishing boys by making them kneel in front of the door, knocking rocks together over their heads. One day the little boy is enduring this when Monsieur le Directeur passes and sees him. He is furious, knowing that the little boy did something wrong but not knowing what. He takes the little boy to his office and whips him. The little boy never tells his mother about this and does not dare complain about school to her, as he knows she will be disappointed.

Survival, pages 55-75 Analysis

The Teacher desperately tries to get the children to pronounce French correctly and to stamp out any remaining hints of Creole. The children are confused and find it difficult, as they are not used to French being spoken like this. The Teacher makes them feel

ashamed of their Creole tongue and for every mistake they make while trying to speak French. He intimidates, bullies, mocks and even hits them. He does not see that this is making them afraid, forcing them to retreat into themselves. The children are all too scared to even attempt to speak French, but picking up on the Teacher's attitude, they will mercilessly bully each other when someone makes a mistake. This has two disturbing consequences. One is that the children begin to attach feelings of shame to Creole. They stop using it except when they are angry or insulting someone, and so Creole becomes something vulgar and even more shameful. Creole is coming to represent the bad side of them.

The second consequence is that the children are all becoming very quiet and withdrawn. The little boy, who was so talkative and lively at the beginning of the story, has become silent. He does not dare make observations or answer questions. He even finds himself being withdrawn and secretive at home, closing off a part of himself in order to survive, so that he does not get hurt. This makes him feel as though he is losing the closeness he once had with his family. This is very sad, and it is terrible that the teachers and the principal cannot see how their attitudes and behavior are affecting the children for the worse.

The Teacher blames Creole language and culture for the children's difficulties and silence in class, never realizing that much of it is his own fault. Ironically, although the teachers are attempting to give the children greater freedom in life by making them more French and forcing them to drop anything Creole, they are actually taking away the children's freedom. They are silencing their voices, their curiosity and their self-expression. When the children do not obey, they are beaten. This is not far from the very slavery and oppression that the Teacher is fighting so hard to separate them all from.

Survival, pages 76-95

Survival, pages 76-95 Summary

The little boy manages to escape the worst of the Teacher's mockery because he sits next to Big Bellybutton, who draws most of the Teacher's anger. Big Bellybutton takes all this and lets it wash over him, never giving up or losing his smile. This makes the little boy admire him. Big Bellybutton has a lot of energy and is always fiddling with something. He is not as dull-witted as the Teacher believes, and soon proves himself to be very good at mental arithmetic. The Teacher is amazed but not pleased. He attempts to break Big Bellybutton by putting harder questions to him, but he always gets them right. After that the Teacher changes tactics and ignores Big Bellybutton instead, only calling on him when he is teaching French pronunciation, which Big Bellybutton is terrible at.

The little boy becomes aware that the Teacher has favorites, and that they are always the better dressed children with the less obviously black features. They are the children who can speak French better, and so they are taken more seriously when they complain to the teachers. This means that the bullies cannot pick on them in the playground. Big Bellybutton is an easier target, so he gets picked on a lot, particularly by one main boss bully.

One day, Big Bellybutton is being bullied when he draws a snake's head from his pocket to frighten the bullies with. They are terrified, and Big Bellybutton, spurred on by this new-found power, runs around the playground causing hysterics. The teachers come running over, and Monsieur le Directeur shouts for Big Bellybutton to drop the snake. The school caretaker puts a pail over it, and all the children breathe a sigh of relief. The next day Big Bellybutton's father comes in and gives Monsieur le Directeur a present of some fruit. He then thrashes Big Bellybutton in front of the teachers and the children.

After this, nobody picks on Big Bellybutton anymore. The boss bully loses his respect and others begin to tease him. He gets so annoyed that he attacks Big Bellybutton in the playground, but Big Bellybutton fights back instead of running away, until they are separated by the teachers. They decide to have it out after school instead. They each place a rock at the other's feet, which is supposed to represent their mama. They face off for a while, then the boss bully kicks Big Bellybutton's mama stone. They fight furiously, until the caretaker arrives and pulls them apart, screaming at them in Creole.

It is all over by the time Mam Ninotte comes to pick up the little boy. He tells her that he will be able to walk to and from school on his own now, and she agrees. As he gets used to walking on his own, he beings to take detours, exploring new streets. His world opens up a little more, and once again he feels like he is growing up.

Survival, pages 76-95 Analysis

The Teacher begins to exhibit an even more disturbing streak of prejudice than before. The little boy becomes aware that the Teacher has his favorite pupils, and that these are all the children who have more delicate, European features, lighter skin, softer hair and better French accents. These are the children of richer members of the community, and so they have been taught French better and have finer clothes. The Teacher clearly shows a dislike of typically black African features, such as a wider nose, coarser hair and darker skin. The Teacher associates these features with the Creole culture, which he sees as barbaric and uncivilized, and with slavery. He deliberately picks on these children, even though his own features are no different.

It is clear that the Teacher really longs to be a white Frenchman, and that for all his talk about being proud and rising above slavery, what he really means is that they should try to cast off their own culture in order to become as French as possible. In other words, he seems to think that the African culture, and by extension the Creole culture, is low and base, and this is why it was enslaved. In order to escape slavery, therefore, they have to cast off this culture. This is not a positive way to deal with the problem of slavery, and in this attitude the Teacher shows himself to be no better than white slave-owners. Although he might not admit it to himself, he seems to think that black people of African or Creole culture deserve to be slaves.

Even in the math problems the Teacher gives the class, he uses European examples to form the questions. He uses Humpty Dumpty and the Three Little Pigs as characters in his math problems, and insists on talking about apples and strawberries rather than mangoes. At every stage of their education the children are taught to reject their culture, their world and the life they are used to, and to idealize something they have never seen or experienced. It is no wonder that the children feel confused and angry, and that this unleashes itself in the playground in the form of bullying and fights.

When Big Bellybutton gets into trouble for this, his father beats him in front of the teachers, looking to them for approval. It is clear that he shares something of their view, that he reveres and respects them as his betters and is anxious to please. He betrays his son by taking their side. Even the little boy's mama is dedicated to the idea of her children getting a proper education and rising above their current situation. The little boy feels like he cannot complain about the school or the teachers to her, as she would not listen and would only be disappointed in him. The people in this story seem to regard school and teachers as something almost magical, that can raise up their children to the level of the culture that once enslaved them. They do not seem to raise any objection to the teachers' methods or to their insistence on stamping out the Creole culture in favor of everything French and European.

When Big Bellybutton brings in the snake's head and brandishes it in the playground, an interesting thing happens. The children are all terrified of it, and the bullies especially seem to be afflicted as if they think they are being cursed. The teachers are also scared and shocked. The snake's head is a symbol of what their world really is, a tropical island

with creatures on it that would be considered exotic in France. They may like to talk about apple trees and wolves, but this is nothing to do with their life or their home. However much they might like to pretend, they are not living in France. The snake's head is an unsavory reminder of this. It is also a symbol of Creole magic and superstitious beliefs, and some might believe that it has strange properties, or that Big Bellybutton could use it to curse them.

For the Teachers, the snake head is just another example of what they would call barbarism. The snake's head is very distasteful to them, and no one wants to go near it or pick it up. Once a pail has been placed over it, however, everyone goes back to normal. It is as if a spell has been lifted, and now they can go back to pretending they live in a world of apple trees and fields of hay after all. After this, the teachers are more furious than ever and renew their attacks on the Creole culture.

Survival, pages 96-115

Survival, pages 96-115 Summary

The little boy discovers other children playing marbles after school. He watches for a while, and then begins to join in. The children bet their precious marbles, and then play to see who can win them. Big Bellybutton is particularly good at it. However, some children like to steal others' marbles, doing so with a cry of "Bawouf!" first. This causes sudden turmoil as the children all leap to protect their own marbles or to grab someone else's in the confusion. One day, the little boy, Big Bellybutton and some friends set a trap to catch one of the worst Bawoufeurs. They bait him, and then beat him when he reveals himself. He never bothers them again.

The state children's welfare agency decides that the children on the island must be malnourished because they do not get enough milk. They conclude that this must be causing problems learning. Their solution is to make the children drink milk during a special break in lessons made for the purpose. They receive powdered milk from Nestlé, shipped from France, which they then prepare and give to each child in a mug. The children love this at first, but then begin to spread stories among themselves about all the horrible things the adults are adding to the milk. After this, they all throw the milk away when the adults are not looking.

Medical exams are also introduced to the school. The children have to line up, strip naked, and be examined by a doctor. This is horrifying for most of them, as they are embarrassed to be seen naked by all the other children. They also receive injections, which they make up all kinds of horror stories about.

The little boy finds that he likes to listen to the Teacher read, as he is drawn into the story by the Teacher's enthusiasm for it. When the children are asked to read aloud, though, it is a different matter. This is difficult and agonizing, and once again the Teacher's favorites are the only ones who are not shouted at and shamed.

Survival, pages 96-115 Analysis

The children in this story experience many of the same things that the readers will have experienced at school. The reader can relate to some aspects of this, but not to others, as each episode has a uniquely Creole twist. The children play marbles, something many children do, but the experience of the bawouf makes it Creole. In their games, when someone shouts "bawouf" (meaning "to snatch") they will all grab for their own or someone else's marbles. This is how marbles are legitimately stolen. It is considered distasteful but legal. Anyone who steals marbles without shouting bawouf first is simply a common thief and will be ostracized if caught.

The school also introduces milk breaks, another thing that many of the readers will be familiar with from their own school days. However, these milk breaks have a difference.

The milk is not from a carton or bottle, but mixed from powdered milk sent to the island from France. It is thinner and has a more chemical aftertaste. The milk is introduced in an effort to prevent malnutrition, whereas most readers will have been forced to drink milk to make their bones grow stronger. The former shows a patronizing attitude to the people of Martinique, whose diets may be different from the typical European diet, but are not necessarily worse.

The children like the milk at first, as drinking it gets them out of lessons, but soon they begin to make up stories about all the horrible ingredients the adults are adding to it. Children all over the world tell each other these kinds of horror stories, just as the frightening tales the children in this story tell each other about the injections will be familiar to any reader who has had shots at school. However, here the horror stories take on a distinctly Creole flavor. The ingredients the children say are added to the milk are all horrors found on the island and in the jungle. They are strange things that are associated with Creole magic and curses. Whereas a European child might tell their friends that she saw spiders being put in the milk, here the children talk about lizards, toads' eggs, tortoise sweat, bamboo hairs, and black curly-tailed chicken's feathers. These are all materials used in sorcery, found in the Creole stories that they have grown up hearing. It seems that no matter how much the teachers try to stamp out the Creole culture, the children always come back to it, as it is incorporated too heavily in their everyday lives. French culture is alien to them, something magical but far-away. Creole culture is the reality of their life and world.

The ridiculousness of supposing that the Martinique children are malnourished is emphasized by the narrator when he lists what they eat: "salt cod and green bananas, plantains, dasheen cooked with a little oil, and green mangoes" (p. 106). He also mentions that his mother purchases thick, creamy milk from a woman in the hills. Previously he has talked about bread and jam, hard sausages, and occasionally lamb or steak. This is the kind of diet that would be considered very healthy today, being rich in fruit and vegetables and deriving most of the protein from fish. If anything, the children might need additional milk for healthy bone growth, but they are not malnourished. The authorities blame the children's lack of ability and inability to concentrate in school on this supposed malnutrition. In fact, it is simply the uninspiring and malicious teachers that contribute to this. The problem is "solved" by importing powdered milk from France. Being from France, this is considered to be intrinsically better than any natural milk that could be found on the island. The powdered milk is described as "chemical" with a lingering aftertaste, emphasizing that it is unnatural and probably unnecessary.

The teachers are thrilled about this new addition to the school day, however, as they see the milk as symbolic of France, European culture, and everything that is good about it. They see it as the children literally drinking civilization and being nourished on European enlightenment. It is therefore very amusing and highly ironic that the children are making up stories about how the milk is created using ingredients found in Creole sorcery. Without knowing it, they are rejecting this symbol of French superiority and turning it into something very Creole. Unknown to the teachers, they are actually throwing the milk into the nearby streams to wash quietly away from their island.

Survival, pages 116-144

Survival, pages 116-144 Summary

The Teacher tries to engage the boys in lessons by asking them to relate the lessons to their own lives. He asks Big Bellybutton to describe what he does at home. Big Bellybutton explains that he sleeps in a one room shack on the floor with all his siblings, that they fight for light around a single lamp to do their homework, that he must do a number of chores before running to school, and that they sleep without blankets. The children laugh and the Teacher is appalled. He is more indulgent of Big Bellybutton after this, but instead of trying to help him, he completely ignores him in class. He never tries to relate the lessons to the children's lives again.

The little boy begins to dream in the classes. He gets caught up in the strange French world of the stories, full of enchanted forests, strange animals and seasons. He begins to think of the Creole world as dull and useless, and is ashamed of it. The Teacher tells them how the world began with the white Europeans, how they brought order and civilization to barbaric lands such as America, Africa, and the Caribbean. The little boy enjoys these lessons.

One day the Teacher is sick, and does not come in again for several days. This shows a vulnerability the children have never seen before. They begin to plan how they might kill the Teacher with Creole curses. Big Bellybutton explains how to do it, and all the children join in. Every time the Teacher is absent, they think they have caused it. Their magic never works against Monsieur le Directeur, however. As the Teacher tells them tales of fairies, magic and dwarfs, Big Bellybutton relates Creole tales of zombies and black magic in the playground. The little boy is fascinated by both.

One day when the Teacher is ill, a substitute teacher takes his place. This man tolerates their Creole while helping them to learn French. He tells them about Négritude and explains that their ancestors are people from Africa, not Europe. However, he also never directly challenges the views on Universal Order that the Teacher told them. He does not question that Europe represents civilization, but instead simply changes some of the French imagery in his lessons to become African imagery instead. This is just as confusing for the children, who condemn him along with all teachers and continue to try to curse him with their magic.

Mam Ninotte gives her son sheep brains and cod-liver oil to attempt to make him smarter. The little boy thinks this is working, but the Teacher never pays him any attention. The Teacher has more or less given up on the rest of the class now, only paying attention to his favorites. Big Bellybutton has given up too, and out of constant boredom he has lost his skill in math. He no longer tries to take interest in lessons, and has lost his defiant streak. He is simply surviving, waiting for the end of school.

The little boy feels a similar lethargy, but his eldest sister helps save him from giving up. She chivvies the others into keeping up with their work and keeping going. The little boy soon discovers that he loves books, and finds a new way to survive. He looks at the books his mother has saved over the years and makes up his own stories to fill the pages. He is now determined to learn to read so that he can read the books, and to write so that he can write his own stories. This is what gets him through the rest of his school days.

Survival, pages 116-144 Analysis

As the Teacher begins to give up on most of his pupils, they also give up on him and on his education. Big Bellybutton has already abandoned school and all his former curiosity. His skills in math have been forgotten and are lost. Now he simply waits, using lethargy as a survival strategy, waiting for school to be over. The other children, like the little boy, are beginning to feel a deep sense of shame and despair concerning their Creole culture and background. This is a huge shame and shows how much the Teacher has completely failed his students. The little boy could easily have gone the same way as Big Bellybutton, giving in to lethargy and giving up on school, but instead he discovers a joy of books. He realizes that he loves stories, making up his own to fill the pages he cannot read. This is not enough for him, however, and he determines to learn to read so that he can know what is really inside these books. He inherits from his teacher a deep reverence for books. It is this determination to learn to read and write that drives the little boy through school and helps him to survive his school days.

In these last pages, the Creole and French worlds begin to clash even more. In the classroom, the Teacher tells them stories about fairies, druids, Merlin, pumpkin-coaches and European fairytale magic. In the playground, Big Bellybutton relates tales of Creole sorcery, zombies, black magic, soucougnans (a kind of vampiric creature that turns into a ball of fire at night), black-hands, evil dogs, and a water sprite called a Manman Dlo. Both cultures fascinate the little boy. He sees magic in the Teacher's world, a kind of beauty and life that speaks to him and gives him a great reverence for stories and literature. In Big Bellybutton's tales he sees power, strength and fascinating legends. He sees a world that is familiar to him take on a new sense of importance and magic. It inspires him. The narrator concludes that he is thankful to both of them for making him who he is today. Both the French and the Creole cultures influenced him deeply. Although they always seem to be conflicting in this story, the two different worlds have combined in the mindset of the author to create a new way of thinking, in which the two cultures are inextricably linked.

It is this combination of influences that explains why the children do not respond to their substitute teacher either. Although he is nicer and more tolerant of their Creole, he does not understand them any better. He twists the French examples to make them African, such as a lean, hungry wolf becoming a lean, hungry hyena. He claims that humanity's roots are in Africa, not Europe, and that they have their own strong ties to Africa. To the children, however, Africa is just as distant and remote as France, and perhaps even more irrelevant to their lives. Their culture is Creole, not African, and just as they cannot

separate the French, so they cannot separate the African. They have no more idea what a hyena is than a wolf. The substitute teacher tells them about Négritude, an ideological movement in the 1930s in which black intellectuals found a common black identity, rejecting French culture. A Martinique poet called Césaire was part of this, and the substitute teacher reads them some of his work. The children are baffled by this; they do not feel any black solidarity, thinking of themselves as Creole, and having been taught that even that is shameful. They do not know what the substitute teacher wants from them, and conclude that he is trying to shape them into a narrow world view in the same way as their other teacher.

The narrator of this story is a writer who belongs to and was one of the first developers of a movement called Créolité, a response to these inadequacies of the Négritude movement. Writers of the Créolité movement write about what it means to be Creole and do not feel that their identity can be seen as entirely one of African descent. There are many cultures and ideas that have influenced Creole, creating a unique culture of its own that its people should be proud of. In this story, the reader can see how the author's school days certainly shaped these views, and how he came to be the person he is today.

Characters

The Narrator, Patrick Chamoiseau, The Little Black Boy

The main character of this story is the author of the book, Patrick Chamoiseau, meaning that it is an autobiographical narrative. The story is told by the author, who acts as the narrator. Rather than referring to himself as "I", he tells the story in third person, referring to his child self as "the little black boy," which is shortened to "the little boy" after its first usage in the book. He describes how the little boy is feeling and what he is doing as if he is another person rather than himself. The little black boy is therefore more like a character in a story than the focus of an autobiography. The narrator does also sometimes address the reader in first person, and even occasionally talks to other characters as if they can hear him.

This is easier to understand if the author is thought of as two different characters in the story. One is the narrator, an omniscient presence who even refers to himself as the Omniscient One. He is describing what is happening and observing the actions of the little boy, relating this to the reader. He is watching the events unfold in his memory, with a little help from his répondeurs. He is viewing events from his adult's perspective, seeing them in a new light and often remarking on what is happening with a great deal of humor or sarcasm. He finds the exploits of his younger self very amusing, but also sometimes a little sad. He has a wry sense of humor and likes to exaggerate some situations for comic effect. He speaks in a highly educated French and literary style, but he also slips in some Creole words and phrases, as well as a more lively and unconventional style that reflects his Creole roots. He is what the little black boy will become, and in this story the reader is invited to see the events that will shape who he is today.

The other version of the author is the little black boy. This is the author's younger self and is the main character of the story. He is very naive about the world, and at first he is eager and excited by every new thing he experiences. He longs to explore, to wander, and to go to school. He is excited by the prospect of growing up, and like many young children, likes to play at being older. He does not like to feel that he is being left out, so he kicks up a fuss when he sees his older siblings going to school without him. Although he can be quite willful and is a bit of a handful, he is a very appealing and likeable character.

When he does finally get to go to proper school, the little boy quickly learns that it is not as he imagined it. He is depressed to learn that the Teacher is cold and unkind, and not at all supportive or nurturing like his nursery teacher was. The little boy finds his lessons difficult, and is confused by the sudden insistence on embracing the French language and culture, and on stamping out everything Creole. He begins to be afraid to speak, as the Teacher will severely punish and ridicule any mistakes. Whereas he was once lively and talkative, he becomes quiet and withdrawn. He feels the need to keep his feelings

about school secret from his mother, as he knows she will be disappointed in him. This makes him feel as though he has lost his closeness with his family. Eventually, the Teacher even manages to make the little boy ashamed of his Creole culture and dissatisfied with his world. The little boy begins to long for the magical and idyllic world of France that he has heard so much about. In the end, the Teacher's constant abuse, obvious racism and inability to connect with his pupils becomes too much. The little boy feels like giving up. Thankfully, he is saved by his desire to learn to read, so that he can better embrace his love of books. This gives him the motivation to keep going, helping him to survive his difficult school days.

Although much of the little boy's eagerness and naivety are stamped out at school, he still retains his adventurous spirit, experiencing new things, playing marbles and trying to learn Creole magic. He shows himself to be brave, but also more kind and thoughtful than many of his classmates, as he recognizes a spirit in Big Bellybutton that he admires. He never seems to join in any of the playground bullying.

The Répondeurs

The répondeurs are like a mix between the Muses of Greek epic and a Greek chorus. They comment on what is happening in the story in little lyrical asides. Their responses are often cheeky and lively; they speak in a sing-song, expressive Creole style, and sometimes even speak in Creole. They seem to represent the side of the author that is still the little black boy, his adventurous and fun-loving Creole side. Sometimes the narrator will address them directly, appealing to them to help him remember something, or to liven up his story by commenting on things. When they have been quiet for a while, he will ask where they are. This tends to be at parts of the story where the little boy is feeling silenced, dejected or afraid to talk.

The répondeurs play a similar role to the chorus in an ancient Greek play, as they comment on the action. When the narrator calls on the répondeurs to help him remember or to help him tell his story, they take on a similar role to Muses in ancient Greek epic. Both of these reflect Chamoiseau's highly educated side. He has obviously learned a lot about the history of literature and has read the Classics. Greek and Roman literature is held up as being extremely important in Europe, as it has influenced most of Western literature and storytelling. In this way, the répondeurs could be seen to represent Chamoiseau's learned, sophisticated side, the side that has embraced his French education. This is the side that writes in polished French with a very literary style.

However, the répondeurs also seem to represent Chamoiseau's Creole side. They answer back cheekily, speak in a very expressive, lyrical and lively manner, and sometimes use Creole words and phrases. By talking back to Chamoiseau, they conjure up the feeling that this story is being told out loud to an audience. This represents the Creole tradition of oral storytelling. Even their similarity to the Muses of Greek epic links the répondeurs to this oral tradition, as ancient Greek epic was passed down orally. In these ways, the répondeurs can be said to symbolize the bridge between two worlds.

They link Chamoiseau's educated, French and literary side to his Creole, lyrical and oral side. They represent the fact that these two very different cultures have joined to create the man that the author became, and that they are forever linked in his mindset. Along with Chamoiseau's unconventional writing style, the répondeurs represent how the two different cultures can merge to create something new and exciting. They do not always have to be conflicting.

Mam Ninotte, Mama

Mam Ninotte is the little boy's mother. She is a caring and kind woman who seems to have endless patience when dealing with her energetic and headstrong son. She is determined that all her children receive a proper education, and she tries to nurture their learning with as much encouragement as possible. She places a lot of value in education because she sees it as the route to a life away from manual labor, with more luxuries. She wants what she believes will make her children happier. When her son begins drawing their house with a smoking chimney and oak trees outside, she reacts with surprise and amusement, but does not seem bothered that her son is being taught to see the world in terms of European imagery. The most important thing to her is giving her children the best chance, and if this involves stamping out her children's Creole to embrace French, then this is the price she will accept for education. Many of the other parents feel the same way, and most seem to agree with the teachers' assessment that the only way to "raise up" the children is to make them more like their French "betters." It seems unlikely, however, that Mam Ninotte is aware of quite how abusive and racist the teachers in the school can be.

Mam Ninotte shows herself to be a caring mother when she walks her son to nursery every day, and then to school each day. She only stops this when he tells her that he is ready to walk on his own. She regularly brings him a pain au chocolat at recess, and she does everything she can to make him feel supported and loved at home. The little boy adores her, but as he experiences more of school, he begins to feel distanced from her. He cannot tell her how he is feeling anymore, as he knows she will be disappointed if he complains about school. He becomes more secretive and closed off, and as a result he is no longer as close to his mother.

The Baroness

The Baroness is the nickname of the little boy's oldest sister. She is the oldest of Mam Ninotte's children, and she sees it as her responsibility to keep the rest of them in line. She is called "the Baroness" because she is strong-willed and bossy. The narrator remembers her fondly as a caring sister who is always determined to get the best out of her brothers and sisters and to make them realize their own potential. She also has a knack for cheering them up and for making the best out of any situation.

Marielle

Marielle is the little boy's second sister.

Jojo the Math Whiz

Jojo is the little boy's oldest brother. As his nickname suggests, he is very good at math. He often likes to boast about how difficult school is and to tease his youngest brother about not going to a real school. At one point in the story he teases the little boy by writing his name on the wall and telling him that if he rubs it off, he will disappear. This is what sparks the little boy's interest in words.

Paul the Musician

Paul is the little boy's second brother. He is more sensible and grounded than his brothers and is never purposefully mean to the little boy.

Papa

The little boy's papa is referred to in the story as "the Papa." He seems to be more respected than loved by the children and does not appear to have much to do with their upbringing. The children always try to speak to him in French rather than Creole, as a mark of respect. Unlike Mam Ninotte, he does not seem to place much importance on education, wondering what worth it really has for his children. He sees nothing wrong with manual work and a simple life. He is bewildered by the strange things his son draws after coming home from school, such as apple trees and houses with smoking chimneys. He jokes about it, but it seems to be just more proof for him that school is a waste of time.

Mam Salinière

Mam Salinière is the little boy's nursery teacher. She is a kind and nurturing woman who gets the best out of the children under her care by encouraging and supporting them. She has a very different attitude to teaching than the little boy's First Grade teacher. Mam Salinière is loved by all her pupils, and the little boy likes to reflect that he is really her favorite. He is inspired to learn more and push himself further because he wants to earn her praise. Even after so many years, the narrator also remembers her fondly.

The Teacher

The little boy's First Grade teacher at his new school is always referred to as "the Teacher" with a capital T. This sums up his sense of importance and magnitude in their lives. He is the ultimate authority in their classroom, and everyone is afraid of him. He is

nothing like Mam Salinière, but instead drives his pupils with harsh words, humiliation, mockery and anger. He even beats them when they make mistakes. He blames their lack of ability and misbehavior on their Creole upbringing, and he seems to detest everything about the Creole culture. He spends most of his time extolling the virtues of education and trying to get the children to speak in perfect French. This is something of an impossible battle, as the children are too used to speaking Creole. When they try to learn, the Teacher shouts at them and mocks them until they are too afraid to try anymore. The Teacher sees himself as a lone fighter trying to bring civilization to the children, but he does not realize that his own attitude is actually making it all so much harder for them.

The Teacher idolizes everything French and hates everything Creole. He thinks of Creole as a culture that is inextricably tied to slavery, and so it is something base and distasteful that should be stamped out. French, as the language of the slave masters and the civilized world, is the only language and culture that can truly pull the black people out of slavery and onto the same level as the white people. The Teacher does not seem to realize that this is a bad attitude. He wants to obliterate the children's culture in order to make them more French, and so more acceptable. He wants to break away from slavery by denying what he is and mimicking the former slave owners. He will often tell the children that their culture is barbaric, and soon he manages to make them feel ashamed of their language and beliefs. He insists on only speaking French, and uses stories and examples drawn from European imagery and fairytales, which are meaningless to the children. He teaches them about stealing by talking about apple trees, which do not grow on Martinique. He tells them stories about snow, seasons, fields of hay, wolves, windmills, fairies, dwarfs, Frère Jacques and the Eiffel Tower. The little boy finds this magical, but he does not really understand any of it. All this manages to make the little boy feel ashamed of Creole and view his own world with distaste because it is not like the stories he is told at school. The Teacher does not seem to realize how much he is damaging the children's childhood and their view of themselves, their families and their world.

Worse than this, the Teacher demonstrates some blatant racism in class. His favorite students are all the ones with lighter skin, softer hair, more delicate European-looking features, better French accents and more expensive clothes. He looks down on the children with obvious black features, such as those with darker skin and wider noses. He especially looks down on Big Bellybutton, a boy who only answers to his Creole nickname, comes from a poor family, and seems to encapsulate everything that the Teacher feels still connects them to slavery. The Teacher will fawn on his favorites and forgive their mistakes, but will treat the others with scorn and anger. Eventually, he stops giving anyone but his favorites a chance, giving up on the others as a lost cause. In turn, they give up on him, no longer caring about their education. The Teacher does not even seem to care that he has failed his pupils.

However, there is one redeeming feature to the Teacher that the little boy is grateful for. The Teacher reveres books, and manages to convey a sense of wonder and awe when he is reading out loud because of his own great enthusiasm for literature. This inspires similar feelings in the little boy, who finds a new determination to learn to read and write.

This is what helps him get through school, and what has spurred him on to become a writer. It is unfortunate that the Teacher never even sees this passion, and it seems unlikely that he would have bothered to encourage it if he had.

Monsieur le Directeur

Monsieur le Directeur is the principal of the school. He is quite a fearsome man who commands a lot of respect in the community. The children are all terrified of him and hate him with a secret passion. He is fierce and unkind with the children in his school, always on the lookout for trouble and quick to punish anything that he sees as being out of line. When the little boy is made to kneel at the classroom door, the Directeur sees him and whips him without even knowing why the boy is being punished.

Many of the children's parents will talk with the Directeur, and sometimes they bring him gifts to win his favor. When Big Bellybutton misbehaves, his father brings the Directeur a present and then beats his son in front of him, looking to the principal for approval. It seems that all the parents show him this deference partly because he is the means by which their child will become educated, and partly because, as an educated man, they see him as one of their "betters." Monsieur le Directeur laps this up and seems to love all the attention and respect he gets. It is clear that he thinks himself very important and above most of the other islanders.

The Substitute Teacher

When the Teacher is ill, the children get a substitute teacher in his place for a while. This new teacher is very different and takes a different approach to their lessons. Instead of using French imagery and examples, he uses African ones, changing a hungry wolf into a hungry hyena, for example. He tries to encourage the children to learn French by allowing them to use their Creole if they are stuck. He tells them about Négritude and reads them poems by Césaire, a Martinican poet who was part of the Négritude movement in the '30s. The substitute teacher, sympathizing with the Négritude movement, tries to make the children feel something about their African roots. However, he never directly questions the idea of Europe as the great civilizing influence in the world. The children are confused by this. They are not sure what the substitute teacher wants from them, or what he is trying to tell them. They do not feel a deep connection with their African roots; they are Creole, not African. To them, the substitute teacher is just as bad as their normal teacher; he is trying to force them into one way of thinking and confusing them in the process. The substitute teacher represents the failings of the Négritude movement that caused writes like the author of this story to develop their own distinctly Creole style.

Big Bellybutton

Big Bellybutton is a child in the little boy's class at school. He comes from a very poor family, and he is given the responsibility of many chores along with his schoolwork. For

this reason, he is often late to school. He only answers to his Creole name, not knowing his proper French name. The Teacher is horrified by this, seeing in Big Bellybutton everything that he thinks is bad about Creole culture. To the Teacher, Big Bellybutton is a reminder of the slaves his people once were, and the Teacher finds this uncomfortable. He treats Big Bellybutton badly, often mocking him and beating him when he makes mistakes. Later, when he finds out how poor Big Bellybutton's family are, he feels a little sorry for him and is more indulgent of his lateness. However, rather than reaching out to or helping Big Bellybutton, he simply ignores him, giving up on him completely. He no longer shouts at him, but he also does not try to teach him anymore. The message seems to be that Big Bellybutton is simply too "black" for his help.

Big Bellybutton is a brave, proud and determined boy. He has a fighting spirit that he never gives up, remaining defiant even when his own father beats him in front of the principal and the other children. It is this defiant attitude that the little boy admires in him. Unfortunately for Big Bellybutton, he is an easy target for the school bullies. At first, he attempts to avoid them, but then he decides to tackle them head on. He brings a snake head into school and brandishes it at the bullies. The whole school is horrified by this, and after this incident Big Bellybutton is left pretty much alone. Later, when the boss bully once again tries to pick on Big Bellybutton, he fights back, showing that he will not tolerate being a victim anymore. Big Bellybutton retains this defiant attitude until the end of the story, when the Teacher's constant abuse finally takes its toll on him. Big Bellybutton could take being shouted at and beaten, but being ignored as if he does not matter is worse. The Teacher will not even acknowledge that Big Bellybutton is good at math. Because of this, Big Bellybutton no longer cares about education. He simply sits in class, waiting for time to pass so that he can leave school and start life. The little boy is saddened by this, and reflects that the same thing might have happened to him if he had not found a way to survive.

Big Bellybutton is the children's link to everything Creole. He knows about Creole stories, about magic and curses, and about strange jungle creatures. He tells these things to the children in the playground, countering the French stories and fairytales that the Teacher tells them in class. It is thanks to Big Bellybutton that the little boy sees that the Creole culture can be magical too, and his continued fascination and respect for it is partly because of Big Bellybutton.

The Boss Bully

The boss bully is the main bully who picks on Big Bellybutton. When Big Bellybutton scares him with a snake's head, the rest of the school loses their respect for the boss bully and begin to mock him. He retaliates by attacking Big Bellybutton, but Big Bellybutton fights back. Eventually, the two come to a showdown after school. They fight over "mama stones" that represent their mothers. They are fighting fiercely when the angry caretaker pulls them apart and shouts at them. This seems to be the end of their great conflict.

Objects/Places

Mam Ninotte's House

Mam Ninotte's house is where the little boy and his siblings live with their mother and father. It appears to be part of an apartment building with a communal corridor. This corridor is where the little boy scribbles with his first pieces of chalk, before he goes off to nursery school. The house itself is never described, but it is clearly not the one-room shack that Big Bellybutton describes as his own home. It is also nothing like the archetypal house-image that European children draw, which the little boy begins to draw when he comes home from nursery. Unlike his drawings, his real house does not have a smoking chimney or oak, fir and apple trees growing outside.

Nursery School (Mam Salinière's House)

The little boy goes to nursery at Mam Salinière's house. Mam Salinière is the nursery teacher. The room where she teaches the young children is filled with desks, which initially fill the little boy with a sense of wonder.

School

The little boy and his two brothers appear to go to the same school. It is a school for boys only, with a nearby girls' school. This is where the little boy learns French and is taught about the importance of education and the French culture. The teachers here are strict and cold, unlike the nurturing Mam Salinière. This is where the little boy meets Big Bellybutton, and where his love of stories and literature is born.

The Satchel

Before the little boy is old enough to go to school, he longs to go with his brothers and sisters and does not like being left out. He whines about it so much that his mother buys him a satchel so he can play at being a school-child. In it there is a small tablet for writing on, some chalk, and a sponge for wiping the tablet clean. The little boy is fascinated by this and it keeps him quiet for a while.

Exercise Books

When the little boy first gets to use exercise books at school, he is amazed and delighted by their bright colors and fresh-plastic smell. He loves the possibilities of the empty exercise book and the idea of filling it up. Unfortunately, the actual lessons at school never live up to the boy's imagination and his desire to learn exciting new things.

Chalk

When the little boy first finds the chalk in his satchel, he begins to draw on his tablet with elation. Later, he moves on to the walls, and when he is yelled at by his mother, he draws in the communal hallway instead. He draws pictures, then learns about words and begs everyone to tell him as many as possible. He seems captivated by the idea of making his mark on things, and of having power over things by writing them down.

The Petroglyphs

The narrator refers to the chalk drawings on the wall of the communal hallway as "petroglyphs." Petroglyphs are cave drawings by pre-historic peoples. This word gives the little boy's scribbles a sense of immense importance and history. This was the moment when he first became interested in words and images. From a young age he has always been fascinated with marking things down and telling stories. The word "petroglyphs" also injects a lot of humor into this scene as it suggests a wall full of primitive, bizarre and indecipherable pictures, as well as the confusion of the people who find them.

The Switches

The Teacher brings in a branch one day and strips its leaves to make it into a switch. He punishes any mistakes by beating the offending children with the switch. He begins to bring in all kinds of different branches to use as switches, building up quite a collection. One day he asks Big Bellybutton to bring one in, and is initially pleased with it. However, when he uses it, it breaks apart like a straw. He never asks Big Bellybutton to bring a switch in again.

Apple Trees

The Teacher first mentions apple trees when he tries to demonstrate to the boys that stealing is wrong. Apple trees are not native to Martinique, and so this imagery is confusing for the boys. Big Bellybutton misunderstands the lesson, assuming that apple-stealing is wrong but that if it were mangoes it would not be as bad. Apple trees are mentioned several times in the story after this, and they become a symbol of the French world. They represent everything that the Teacher wants his world to be. They represent order and the beauty of the European world and culture. The little boy begins to draw apple trees, treating them with a similar sense of reverence.

Milk

When the authorities are worried that the children of the island may be malnourished, they decide that milk is the answer. Powdered milk is shipped in from France by Nestlé,

and this is made into liquid and given to the boys at school. The narrator describes it as having a bit of a chemical taste. The teachers treat the milk as a wonderful thing, as anything from France must be intrinsically good. They see it as representing civilization and enlightenment, which the children are now literally drinking. The milk becomes a symbol of everything they want to achieve. Unfortunately, unknown to the teachers, the children are throwing their milk into the nearby streams. They have told each other stories about all the horrible materials for Creole sorcery that are being added to the milk by the adults, and so they no longer want to drink it. It is ironic how the children have taken a symbol of European civilization and culture, and injected it with something very Creole. This demonstrates how the two influences cannot so easily be separated, and how Creole cannot be stamped out because it is part of who they are.

The Snake's Head

When Big Bellybutton is being bullied, he brings a snake's head into school and brandishes it at the boss bully. This horrifies the whole school, and after this everyone leaves Big Bellybutton alone. It is not just the children who are scared of the snake's head. The teachers are disgusted by it and refuse to go near it. Just as the milk and apple trees are symbols of French culture in this story, the snake's head becomes a symbol of everything the teachers hate about Creole. It reminds them that they are living on a Caribbean island with tropical rainforest and animals that would be considered exotic in Europe. They cannot pretend that they are French when there is a snake's head staring at them.

Marbles

Marbles becomes a popular pastime with the children in this story. They collect the marbles and then play with them, betting some of their best ones to see if they can win more. The best marbles are the clear ones, then the 'steelheads,' which are actually polished ball-bearings. The third most popular ones are the bôlôfs, the marbles with the swirling colors in the middle. The worst ones are the ordinary clay marbles. Big Bellybutton is particularly good at playing marbles, and the little boy learns by watching him.

Bawoufeur

A Bawoufeur is a marble thief who shouts 'Bawouf!' before he takes them. The cry of bawouf sends the children into a frenzy as everyone dives to protect their marbles, or tries to take someone else's. These bawoufs are considered bad taste but acceptable. If anyone steals a marble without shouting bawouf then they are a common thief who will be ostracized if caught. This practice of bawouffing turns a familiar European game into something uniquely Creole.

Petit-Pierre

Petit-Pierre is the example the Teacher likes to use when talking to his pupils. For example, if he is teaching the children how to describe things in French, he will first read a short passage about Petit-Pierre describing something. Petit-Pierre is obviously a commonly used teaching device in France, but he is somewhat irrelevant to the children of Martinique. He lives in France, experiences snow, and likes apples. His life is nothing like the lives of the children in this story, and they cannot relate to him. This is just one example of how inappropriate many of the Teacher's lessons are.

Mama Stone

When the Creole children fight, it is tradition to put a rock at each other's feet and declare it their mama. One boy's mama will be at the other boy's feet, and his mama will be in front of the first boy. Their mamas are therefore vulnerable, and the children feel the need to protect them. When one mama stone is kicked, the other one is also viciously attacked, and then the fight begins for real. This is how Big Bellybutton and the boss bully fight one day after school.

Themes

Creoleversus French

The main theme running throughout the story is the conflict between the Creole and the French culture and language. This is the focus of Chamoiseau's school days, and is the main point of this story. It is therefore very important to understand this theme. The little boy and the other inhabitants of Fort-de-France speak Creole and associate themselves with the Creole culture. This is a culture and language born out of slavery. It is a mix of the French that the slaves heard their white masters using and various African languages brought with the slaves from different tribes and areas. French is therefore familiar to the Creole children, more so than an African dialect would be, but at the same time it is very different. French is used for formal occasions and as a mark of respect, but is often spoken in a distinctly Creole way. When the children are asked to speak French instead of Creole at school, they find it very hard to separate the two and to get their heads around the pure French that the Teacher wants them to speak. For the children, it has never occurred to them that French and Creole should conflict, or that they should be different. The little boy did not even know that French has a name. The children are only used to what they have always known and lived with.

The little boy begins to bring the French world home with him when he attends nursery school. He learns about the world, as well as words and letters, based on French examples. He hears about wolves and temperate forests, oak trees and fir trees, and he draws their home as a square house with a smoking chimney. At nursery he is told European fairy stories and nursery rhymes, and he sings songs like Frére Jacques. This is partly because the main teaching materials the teacher has are French, but also partly because the French culture is held as so important on Martinique. It is the culture of the privileged white slave owners, who are associated with power, education and civilization. These are the influences that the black people of Martinique want on their own children. The little boy's mama thinks it is a little strange that he draws their house in this European style when it is clearly not correct, but she never questions the education he is receiving. For her, education is too important. If the championing of another culture over their own is what it takes to educate her children, then she is fine with it. At the moment, however, the little boy is able to embrace both cultures equally. He can learn about French things, such as the Eiffel Tower, but he speaks in Creole and lives in a Creole world. The two have not come into direct conflict yet.

It is when the little boy goes to real school that the conflict becomes obvious. The Teacher makes it very clear that Creole will not be tolerated in the classroom. He shows them that they should look down on their Creole names and not consider them real names at all. When Big Bellybutton only answers to his Creole name, the Teacher is appalled. When the children speak in Creole they are told off harshly by the Teacher, and they are even reprimanded by Monsieur le Directeur for doing so in the playground. When he is teaching them to speak French, the Teacher will not tolerate the children pronouncing it wrong, and gets angry when any Creole pronunciations, sayings, or

words come out. Both the Teacher and Monsieur le Directeur tell the children that the Creole culture is base, useless, barbaric and harmful because it keeps them at the same level as slaves. It is a mark that they were once slaves, and so they should cast it off in favor of the more civilized and sophisticated French. The Teacher speaks French all the time, and it quickly becomes apparent to the children that they will be punished severely if they do not do the same. The Teacher even beats them when they make mistakes. This attitude quickly makes the children begin to feel ashamed of Creole. They do not dare to speak it anymore except to insult or pick on others. Creole becomes a language used to say nasty things, making it seem dirty and crude.

It soon becomes clear that it is not just the Creole language the teachers despise, but the culture too. They hate the dancing and the drums, the food, the manual labor, and the way people live. They long for a Martinique that embraces everything French. They want to live in European styled houses, to be educated and speak French, and to get away from the manual labor that they associate too heavily with slavery. For the teachers, everything about the Creole culture reminds them that their people were once slaves. When the children mention Creole stories or magic, use a Creole phrase or talk about their lives and homes, the teachers show their disgust, mock the children and deride them. In trying to make the children more French, they are teaching them to feel ashamed of who they are. When Big Bellybutton brings in a snake's head to school one day, there is uproar in the playground. The teachers are horrified and refuse to go anywhere near the snake's head. For them, it is a reminder of what their world really is. It is a Caribbean island with jungle and animals that would never be found in Europe. They are far away from the idyllic French world that all the teachers seem to crave.

As the teachers attempt to stamp out Creole, they also try to elevate everything French. Anything French is automatically treated as though it is intrinsically good, such as the powdered milk sent by Nestlé to ensure that the boys do not grow up malnourished. The milk becomes a symbol of France's civilizing power, and when the children drink it, the teachers see them as literally drinking sophistication and civilization. When the Teacher tells his class anything, even just math problems, he will use examples heavily based in European imagery. He mentions wolves, forests, snow, seasons, fields of hay, windmills and apple trees. Just as the snake was a symbol of everything the teachers hate about Creole, the apple tree becomes a symbol of Europe and of civilization. The apple tree is idealized and brought up again and again. The teachers and children soon forget that apple trees are not native to Martinique. By conjuring up the image of the apple tree, they can all pretend that they are really in France. The Teacher also floods the children with European stories and fairytales. They hear about Sleeping Beauty, the Seven Dwarfs, Pierrot, magical witches and fairies, and many more. The teachers seem to hope that if they bombard the children with this much French culture and influence, they will soon forget their Creole ways.

This is not what happens. Instead, the Creole world becomes an underground world of secret stories and magical rituals. Big Bellybutton tells them furtive tales on the playground, countering the French stories with Creole magic, curses, zombies, vampiric spirits and jungle monsters. The children take all this in with fascination. They drink the "civilizing" French milk, but soon tell each other stories of all the materials used for

Creole sorcery that have been added to the milk. Scared to drink it, they throw it into the streams instead. Even concerning this symbol (the milk) of European enlightenment and civilization, the children find a way to bring in their Creole ties. The interesting thing is that for the children, the conflict itself has no meaning. They are equally interested in the French fairy stories and the Creole magic. They use both the French and Creole language when it suits them. They dream about apple trees, but they understand mangoes better. For them, the French cannot dominate the Creole because Creole is who they are. They would rather accept the French and draw it in to find its own place in their culture. This is what the author has done. He is obviously highly educated and he writes in polished French, but the Creole influences on his writing are clear. He writes in an unconventional, lively and lyrical style. His cheeky back-talkers, the répondeurs, comment on what is happening. He is unwilling to continue this pointless fight between the French and the Creole. He recognizes that his life is a mix of influences, and that they are all important in forming the person that he has become. He will embrace and be grateful for all of them.

Growing Up

The little boy grows up a lot in this story, and his transition from naivety to a curious child then to a jaded boy who is older than his years, can be seen unfolding before the reader's eyes. At first, the little boy is full of energy and longing. He wants to go places, to explore, to learn new things and have adventures. He sees his older siblings leaving for school and does not want to be left out. He begs his mother to be allowed to join them and causes a huge fuss. He is a talkative and willful child, and can be a bit of a handful. He is a very likeable character and many of the readers will recognize typical childhood traits in him that they are familiar with. Like every child his age, he likes to pretend to be older, and he takes delight in the satchel his mother buys him. Then the little boy discovers the joy of chalk. He draws on all the walls in the communal corridors of their apartment building, taking delight in the doodles and scribbles. When his older brother writes his name, he is fascinated, and he drives everyone mad by begging them to teach him new words and names.

When he eventually gets to go to nursery, however, he is very nervous. He did not expect his mother to leave him there, and at first he is quiet and terrified. Soon enough, though, he settles in. He realizes how fun learning is, and he takes delight in cutting and pasting things, writing, singing and learning the alphabet. He enjoys making his mother, and especially his nursery teacher, proud. He feels as though he is improving himself and becoming more important. As he succeeds at new things, his confidence grows. However, this is deflated when his older brother tells him that he is not at proper school, only nursery school. The little boy immediately goes back to begging to be allowed to attend school. He pretends to be doing homework, and imitates his siblings' concentration while they sit hunched over their exercise books. He wants to be a big kid, to be important and to learn important things. He is tired of being a naive little boy.

Of course, when he finally does attend real school, the little boy is in for a shock. He discovers that school can be frightening, depressing and demoralizing. The Teacher

expects a lot from them, and the little boy finds speaking French very hard. He begins to withdraw into himself, and the once talkative boy becomes silent. He is afraid to speak in case he makes a mistake. The Teacher here is not encouraging and nurturing like his nursery school teacher was, and he quickly loses any confidence he once had. However, as school progresses, he begins to see and understand things about the world and about other people. He admires Big Bellybutton's defiant spirit, recognizing that his attitude is something special in the face of all the abuse he suffers. Here, the little boy learns about determination and self-respect. When he sees Big Bellybutton stick up for himself against the bullies, he is elated. He has learned about standing up for himself. He soon begins to grow a lot braver. He tells his mama that he can walk to and from school on his own, and after a while he begins to explore more of his town. He plays marbles with the other children and enjoys this interaction. He is no longer a frightened, naive little boy.

At school, the little boy also learns about keeping secrets inside his heart. He shuts himself off from the rest of his family in a way he never has before. He no longer tells his mama everything as he knows she will be disappointed in him if he complains about school. He feels this creating a new distance between them. He is no longer his mother's little baby but has separated himself from her and keeps his thoughts and feelings to himself. This is not necessarily a positive aspect of growing up, but it is something that every person goes through.

The little boy becomes more contemplative. The Teacher has managed to make him feel ashamed about his Creole world, feeling that it is dull and inadequate compared to the wonderful stories about France. He sees that the Teacher has his favorites in class, and that the children like him and Big Bellybutton will always be ignored. His eyes are now opened to some of the unfairness of the world. He has become a little jaded, and looks at Big Bellybutton with sadness as he sees his fighting spirit begin to fade. At school, the little boy begins to daydream about the stories the Teacher tells him. When he realizes his deep love for books, he decides he needs to do something about this. He wants to be able to read his books properly, and to write his own stories one day. To do this, he will need to pay more attention in lessons. This new determination gives him the drive he needs to survive his difficult school years. He finds the strength to ignore the Teacher's bad attitude and blatant racism in order to pursue a goal he feels strongly about. He shows a great strength of character in doing so. The little boy grows up a little more every day.

Slavery, Racism, and Freedom

In this story, the Teacher makes constant references to the fact that his people were once slaves. Black slaves were brought to Martinique from Africa during the colonial period, when the French began to colonize the island and used slaves to work in the sugar cane fields. Slavery was abolished in 1848.

The teachers in this story are clearly disgusted by this past, and try to separate themselves from it as much as they can. They hate everything that reminds them of

slavery, and constantly extol the virtues of education, which they say can raise a person up from slave-like manual labor. The teachers are horrified by any remaining vestiges of 'slave culture.' They see Creole as being a slave culture, as it is a language and culture formed from slavery. This is why they try to stamp out the Creole language, as well as any Creole traditions or stories they come across. They will punish any children who speak Creole at school. The Teacher is particularly upset with Big Bellybutton. Big Bellybutton only answers to his Creole name, which the Teacher sees as a slave-name, recalling their time in the cane fields. Big Bellybutton lives in a small house with a large family, and is expected to carry out manual chores in the morning before school. This makes the Teacher think of the poverty and hardship of the shacks on the sugar plantations, and the manual work that the slaves were forced to do. He cannot stand this indication that his people have not yet risen above the legacy of slavery.

However, instead of trying to help Big Bellybutton, he ignores him instead. It seems that for the Teacher, Big Bellybutton is too far gone, beyond help. He no longer shouts at Big Bellybutton after hearing about his life, but he also no longer attempts to teach him. Big Bellybutton, in his 'Creole-ness' and resemblance to the Teacher's idea of a black slave, seems not to be worthy of education. This seems like an odd attitude, but it is one that the Teacher consistently displays. His favorites in class are the children with more European traits, such as delicate facial features, softer hair, lighter skin and better French accents. He particularly likes the sons of wealthy 'mulattos' (children of a black parent and a white parent) who have kept their children in relative isolation and have taught them to be more French than Creole. The Teacher particularly dislikes the children with more obvious black features, such as darker skin and wider noses. This is ironic, as the Teacher himself has very black features.

The reader might wonder why a man who claims to hate the slavery of his people so much, would display such a racist attitude. In trying to separate himself from the idea of slavery, it seems, the Teacher has gone too far the other way. He has embraced French culture as the ideal, and now desperately pretends that he is one of them, rather than one of the former slave Creoles. He seems to think that the French, because they were the masters and slave-owners, are somehow better than the blacks who were enslaved. He seems to look at the Creole culture and see only the barbarism that the French slave-owners saw. Although he would not admit it, his attitude suggests that he thinks the base Creole culture deserves to be enslaved. In order to break out of slavery and its legacy then, the Creole people must become French. They must embrace European civilization and enlightenment so that they will never be slaves to anyone again. He looks at the Creole people and sees people who have been given their freedom but refuse to accept it. For him, freedom goes hand-in-hand with the French culture. If the Creole people reject the French culture, then they are still no better than slaves, working the land and living in uneducated poverty. Although the reader can see how the Teacher has convinced himself of this, it is clearly a very wrong-headed way to approach this issue. Monsieur le Directeur, unfortunately, is no better. The author observes how he ran away from himself, desperately trying to become something he perceived as better, because he could not accept or embrace what he was.

Together, the teachers' influence begins to convince the children that Creole is something wrong and dirty. They become ashamed of it and of themselves, and begin to see Creole as something to use only when they have something nasty to say. However, they are also too scared to speak French, as they are punished if they make a mistake. Instead, they become quiet and afraid. Their voices and their self-expression are silenced. In trying to make the children 'embrace their freedom' the teachers do not see that they are actually repressing it. They are telling the children that they cannot be who they are, but must pretend to be something different. They cannot be proud of their lives and their background, of their culture and their homes. Instead they must make themselves like the white slave-owners in order to be accepted. This is not freedom at all. In forcing the children down this path, the teachers are only introducing a new kind of slavery, a slavery to the culture and ideals of a far-away land that has nothing to do with their lives here.

Style

Point of View

The story is told by a narrator who is also the author, making the story an autobiographical narrative. The narrator is telling events from his memory, describing what life was like for him as a little boy. Instead of using the word "I," he talks about himself in the third person, as 'the little black boy.' The little black boy is treated more like a character in a story than the narrator's younger self. The narrator also sometimes addresses the reader directly, as well as talking directly to characters and to his répondeurs. It is easier to think of the main character as two different people. One is the adult version, the narrator who is telling us the story. The other is the little black boy, the narrator's younger self who is still naive and learning about the world, and who is unaware that his story is being told.

The narrator, because he is telling events that happened in his past, has an authoritative perspective. He can tell the reader exactly what the little boy was feeling and thinking at any moment. He can also tell the reader how events affected him later, and what he now thinks about these people, places and objects. He even refers to himself as "the Omniscient One," which is a joke about how he is the "voice of God" in this story. He tells the story with a style that is often full of humor as well as a lot of sarcasm. He makes fun of his younger self, and the distance obtained by referring to him in the third person allows him to see the child's plight with an amused adult's eye. At the same time, however, he often sympathizes with the little black boy and remembers what it was like to feel that way. Sometimes these feelings are so strong that the narrator appears to get caught up in the moment and actually relives the past, exclaiming in shock or joy. This is a very unusual way to tell a story, and suits the author's unique writing style perfectly. The reader feels as though they know the little black boy intimately because of the narrator's account.

The narrator's omniscience can be strongly contrasted with the little black boy's naivety and humorous exuberance. The reader sees events through the eyes of the narrator watching the little black boy, and so sees both the innocence and the knowing, slightly self-mocking humor. This allows the reader to sympathize with the little boy, but also to see him from an adult's perspective. Both the little black boy and the narrator are extremely likeable. The little boy is a typical child in many ways, and the reader will often see a little bit of their own childhood reflected in him.

Setting

The story is set in Fort-de-France on the Caribbean island of Martinique. This was colonized by the French, who brought black slaves from Africa to work on their sugar cane plantations. In 1848, slavery was abolished. Martinique is now an Overseas Region of France and so part of the European Union. It has a varied mix of people living

on it. Most of the population is descended from the freed African slaves, but there are also some French, Indians, Syrians and Chinese. The term Béké is a Creole word used to describe the descendents of the white slave-owners who also still live on the island. In this mix, the main language spoken is Antillean Creole, a mix of French and various African languages brought to Martinique with the slaves. Martinique's culture is a mix of many different influences, mainly Creole and French. In this story, the main theme explored is the conflict that arises between the Creole and the French, and how the two are too entwined to be separated in the minds of the Martinican people.

For the teachers in the little boy's school, Martinique is a place that is fighting between two influences, the civilized and wonderful French, and the base slave-culture Creole. The teachers do not like anything that reminds them of the "barbaric" place in which they are living, which is why they respond with such horror to the snake's head Big Bellybutton brings into school. They like to pretend that they are part of the glorious and enlightened French culture, which means pretending that French plants, animals and imagery are familiar to them. They teach about wolves, fairies and apple trees in their classes, ignoring the fact that mangoes and bananas are more familiar in their home. They seem to be in constant denial about where they are and what kind of life they are living.

The little boy's home seems to be part of an apartment building with a communal hallway. It is not described in detail, but the reader is given the impression that it is not a large home. Big Bellybutton's house is even smaller, being little more than a one-room shack. This reminds the Teacher too much of the poverty of slavery and the misery of the cane fields. The Teacher much prefers the students from the larger houses of the richer families, where the Creole culture has been shut out in favor of the French. This creates an impression of a strong divide between rich and poor in Martinique, related to the divide between educated and uneducated, French and Creole, non-manual work and manual labor. This is why the little boy's mother seems so anxious for her children to do well at school. She wants them to use their education to rise out of the poorer lifestyle.

Despite this gap between rich and poor, the world described in the book has a very laid-back and happy feel. The people seem generally content and the town is an easy-going, friendly place. The children play with each other on the streets and are safe to walk home on their own.

Language and Meaning

Chamoiseau's language and writing style is extremely unconventional. He writes in polished French (translated into English in this book), using long complicated words and an intellectual, literary style. However, at the same time he injects a lively, lyrical feel into the story. At times he uses very vivid and expressive language, making the story come alive and jump out of the page because it is so vibrant. He also sometimes includes words and phrases of Creole, or else imitates the Creole way of talking. This creates an eclectic and sometimes bizarre narrative that really gives the reader a sense

of the different influences in Chamoiseau's life. He makes it clear that his educated French side is important to him, but that he also respects and loves his fun, evocative Creole side. The inclusion of the French and the Creole influences in his language and style also reflects the main theme of the story: the conflict between the two cultures that runs throughout the book.

The répondeurs also represent both sides of Chamoiseau and the different influences that have informed his writing. They are part Muse, part Greek chorus, filling the role of "back-talkers" who comment on the action. This reflects the learned, intellectual European world in which the Classics are held in extreme importance as the foundation of all Western literature. However, Chamoiseau's répondeurs are much cheekier than a Greek chorus or Muse. They speak in a less literary and more expressive manner, and sometimes even speak in Creole. They seem to represent the Creole side of the narrator, which is required to help him tell the story. They remind him of what it was like to be the little black boy. They also help to create a feeling of an oral tale, as they give the impression that the narrator is telling it out loud and people are responding. This reflects the fact that Creole storytelling is based on an oral tradition. Even the répondeurs' similarity to the Muses of Greek epic also reflects this idea of oral tradition. This demonstrates how the European and Creole influences in Chamoiseau's life can combine to create something new, unique and exciting.

Chamoiseau's language and writing style does not just symbolize the different influences that make him who he is, but they also reflect the setting of the story. Chamoiseau uses beautiful literary descriptions to evoke the lush world around him, but also captures the life and vigor of the place by imitating the way people speak there. His intellectual language allows him to sarcastically mock the teachers or to laugh at his younger self, while bits of Creole or expressive, lyrical asides allow him to keep the story fun and energetic. Chamoiseau's language is clever and expressive, never allowing the story to become too dry or static.

Structure

School Days is separated into two sections, one entitled "Longing" and the other "Survival." These separate the two stages of Chamoiseau's childhood. The former is the period in which he was still hopeful, naive and enthusiastic. He is desperate to learn and to grow up, to gain a feeling of importance and a sense of who he is.

The latter section is the period when the little boy goes to school and discovers that it is not the magical place he thought it would be. He has entered a strange new world in which he is expected to reject everything that has made him who he is. He is expected to let go of everything Creole about him in order to embrace only French culture. The little boy, like most of the other children, finds this too difficult. He is abused and ignored by the Teacher, and made to feel ashamed. Ultimately, this is too much for him, and all his childhood enthusiasm and innocence is robbed from him. In the end, everything becomes about surviving. The little boy achieves this by finding something to motivate him. He realizes he loves books, and is driven on by the desire to be able to read and

write them. This forces him to concentrate in class and gives him a reason to carry on and appreciate school even in the face of his racist and unsupportive teacher. This is why this section is called "Survival."

Quotes

"Mam Ninotte was enraptured by his immense learning, even if she did frown on discovering he was drawing their home surrounded by oaks and fir trees and crowned with a smoking chimney. 'Scuse me?!"
Longing, p. 30

"The Papa to Mam Ninotte: Whoa, this kid is drawing apples in the middle of mango season! He needs a soothing mint bath!"
Longing, p. 33

"You should be proud to have a name, you thoughtless boy, you should shout it out loud, because not too long ago, let me tell you, we were slaves and had no names at all!"
The Teacher talking to Big Bellybutton at roll call. Longing, p. 37

"What do I hear? - you're speaking Creole? And what do I see? - shameless monkeyshines? Just where do you think you are?! Speak properly and behave in a civilized manner"
Monsieur le Directeur speaking. Longing, p. 45

"This division of speech had never struck the little boy before. French (to which he didn't even attach a name) was some object fetched when needed from a kind of shelf, outside oneself, but which sounded natural in the mouth, close to Creole."
Longing, p. 47

"And this French road became strangely foreign. The articulation changed. The rhythm changed. The intonation changed. Words that were more or less familiar began to sound different. They seemed to come from a distant horizon and no longer had any affinity with Creole."
Longing, p. 47

"The Teacher's images, examples, references did not spring from their native country anymore. The Teacher spoke French like the people on the radio or the sailors of the French line. And he deliberately spoke nothing else."
Longing, p. 47

"Or worse: winding up in the streets, fettered by ignorance and stupidity. The bestial darkness in which one lost forever the idea of Man."
The narrator explaining what the Teacher thought would happen to them without education. Longing, p. 49

"What I'm saying is, speech became a heroic feat. You were chancing not only a tongue-lashing from the Teacher but also hot pursuit on the playground by a pack of fiends, even though they weren't any better at French than the rest of us."
Survival, p. 63

"His flickering language would grow even more painstaking, guarded, distrustful of itself, threading its way among sounds while anticipating hazardous pitfalls where the dreaded Creole lurked near at hand. In his desperate desire to be articulate, he embellished his speech by slathering on the France-white accent."

Referring to the Teacher's pronunciation of French. Survival, p. 63

"He called upon our parents to protect their progeny from the contamination of this cane-fields pidgin by demanding that we speak French, the language of wisdom, wit, and intelligence."
Survival, p. 64

"His tongue soon seemed heavy to him, his speech too slurred, his accent hateful. His little inner voice grew ashamed; his natural chattiness deteriorated into an illicit activity to be stifled."
Survival, p. 65

"As for Creole, it circulated easily but in a dilapidated state. Degraded to contraband, it grew callous from its freight of insults, dirty words, hatreds, violence, and tales of catastrophe. Creole wasn't used anymore to say nice things."
Survival, p. 66

"Nigger, you fled from yourself and, with stubborn determination, held your head up high - above the cane fields, the sugar, the watermelon grins, the békés, the dancing, the drums, the torrents of rum, that life directed entirely toward sticking us forever in the mud."
Narrator addressing Monsieur le Directeur. Survival, p. 72

"Whether he was aware of it or not, the Teacher associated dark skin and Negroid features (even though he had them) with the same no-account world that had produced the Creole culture: each barbarous element implied the other."
Survival, p. 79

"Some bright light in the state children's welfare agency decided that the island's youngsters - stuffed with salt cod and green bananas, plantains, dasheen cooked with a little oil, and green mangoes - were suffering from malnutrition. This deficiency, in the experts' opinion, was the root cause of a cartload of learning problems, incorrigible drowsiness, and the Creole crust that encumbered our minds."
Survival, pp. 106-107

"His mind - skilled in wandering, adept at spinning gold from the slightest straw of reality, a powerhouse of dreams - began to roam this universe that was becoming his true life. He drew in it. Dreamed in it. Thought in it. As for his body, that was drifting around in his frayed, shoddy, useless Creole world."
Survival, p. 119

"We went to school to shed bad manners: rowdy manners, nigger manners, Creole manners - all the same thing."
Survival, p. 120

"He saw himself as embarked upon a mission of civilization, something like those missionaries who bury themselves in savage lands."
Describing the Teacher. Survival, p. 121

"The superior races - this must be said openly, following the example of Jules Ferry - have, with regard to the primitive races, the right and the duty of ci-vi-li-za-tion!"
The Teacher speaking. Survival, p. 122

"He would have needed the ancient gift of second sight to divine that - in this sacking of their native world, in this crippling inner ruination - the little black boy bent over his notebook was tracing, without fully realizing it, an inky lifeline of survival..."
Survival, p. 144

Topics for Discussion

How does the little black boy change throughout the course of the story? What causes these changes?

In what ways do the Creole and French cultures clash in this story? Why? Which one, if any, wins out?

Why are the teachers at the school intent on stamping out all traces of Creole from their children? What does the Creole culture represent to them?

Discuss the character of Big Bellybutton. Why does the little boy find him so fascinating? What does he admire about him? How has Big Bellybutton influenced the person the narrator has become?

What is the purpose of the répondeurs? What do they add to the story? Do they symbolize or stand for anything?

Discuss the theme of racism in this story. Who is racist and why?

How does the Teacher attempt to educate his pupils? What effect do his methods have on the children?

What is the symbolism of the apple trees, the milk, and the snake's head? How does the author use these to reinforce the main theme of the story?

Discuss the theme of slavery and freedom in this story. What do these concepts mean for different characters?

How does the author use language to reflect the main ideas and themes of his story? Do you think he is successful in this?