The Sellout Study Guide

The Sellout by Paul Beatty

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Sellout, by Paul Beatty, is an African-American novel of satire on race relations in the United States. The book revolves around the unnamed, black narrator who is coming before the Supreme Court on charges of slave holding and re-instituting segregation. The narrator recounts to the Supreme Court the events that brought him to the present time.

The narrator, a resident of Dickens, California, was born to a single father who was a sociology professor. The father saw the narrator as a social experiment rather than a son. For example, he would line the narrator's crib with toy police cars and Richard Nixon campaign buttons while firing a gun and shouting "Nigger, go back to Africa!" Since the narrator's father saw racism all around him, he decided to home school his son rather than have him attend white-run public schools. Despite his father's arguments about racism, the narrator believed that there was no real widespread racism anymore. He also believed that not taking advantage of opportunity was the only thing holding back black people.The narrator himself had only experienced direct racism once. At a white-run gas station, the narrator had asked to use the restroom, but he was told he had to purchase something first. The narrator decided to purchase a Coke. He was charged the "black" price of $1.50 rather than the regular price of seven cents. Instead of giving in, the narrator ran down the block to use the bathroom.

Years later, the narrator's father is shot attempting to run from the police after shouting at them during a bust on the sidewalk. The narrator came to inherit his father's house and two acres of land, which he continued to farm as his father did. The narrator also came to take his father's place in many ways, for his father was sought by members of the surrounding community of Dickens as the "Nigger Whisperer", a man who could talk sense into people and help them make better choices. The narrator disliked this particular role, but filled it. The narrator was later stunned when, to boost property values in the area, the City of Dickens was eliminated from the map. The narrator vowed to bring the City of Dickens back. He decided to announce this plan at the community meetings of his father's old intellectual circle, the Dum Dum Donuts, headed by the fiery Foy Cheshire, who, like the narrator's father, saw racism everywhere. However, the narrator irked Foy by challenging Foy's belief that classic works of literature should have the word "nigger" removed from them, saying that sheltering kids from cruelty is not the right way to go. For this, Foy labeled the narrator a "Sellout."

At the same time, the narrator begins to reconnect with an old college flame, a now-married woman named Marpessa who drives a city bus. The narrator's neighbor, the elderly Hominy Jenkins, is also brokenhearted by the loss of the City of Dickens. Hominy, the sole surviving member of the Little Rascals, decided then that he wanted to become the slave of the narrator. The narrator could not shake Hominy's determination, so he agreed to take Hominy on as a slave. To celebrate Hominy's birthday, a party was set up on Marpessa's bus where Hominy wanted to give his seat up to a white woman. The narrator affixed stickers saying the first third of the bus seats were to be given to whites and hired a white prostitute to complete the illusion. While Marpessa was

enraged by the stickers, arguing they set black people back five-hundred years, she forgot to take them down. As a result, her bus became the safest in the city. Marpessa's best friend, Charisma, the assistant principal of Chaff Middle School, believed this was because the signs reminded local blacks of how far they had come, but how far they still had to go. The narrator then suggested segregating Chaff Middle, which Charisma agreed to do. The result was to orientate black kids to learning and getting ahead.

Meanwhile, the narrator and Hominy set about bringing Dickens back by spray painting the boundaries of the place, seeking a sister city (the matching agency paired them up with Chernobyl, among others), and putting up segregation signs all over the place. When the narrator attempted to integrate white students into Chaff Middle, Foy and Charisma believed the narrator had gone way too far. Charisma blocked white students from entering the school while Foy ended up shooting the narrator. It was during this time that it was discovered that the narrator had a slave, had segregated the city, and had segregated the school. After five years of going through the legal system, the narrator's case ended up at the Supreme Court.

Back in the present, the narrator does not know whether he will go to jail as he waits for the Supreme Court's judgment. He is continuing to sleep with Marpessa, while Hominy has decided to free himself and now seeks to discuss reparations. The narrator attends a black comedy night nearby, at which a black comic angrily chases out the lone white couple in the audience, telling them this is "our thing." The narrator feels bad about remaining silent, not because he wants to defend the white couple or to protest the comic, but to ask the comic what he means by "our thing." At home, watching the weather forecast, the narrator is happy to see Dickens has been listed again. However, he is dismayed to learn that the election of Barack Obama has made Foy believe that America has paid all of its debts.

Prologue – The Shit You Shovel: Chapter 5

Summary

Prologue – The never-named narrator of the novel, a black man, explains it may be difficult to believe but he has never stolen or cheated. Having come to Washington D.C. to have his case heard by the Supreme Court, the narrator spends the day before visiting the sights and sounds of the nation's capital, and overhears a woman calling Baraka the Gorilla "presidential" at the National Zoo. The narrator believes that in America, people are one or the other –citizen or slave, guilty or innocent, and so on. He also reflects on how every race seems to have a motto, and that black people may not need one since all black men seem to have their own individual mottos. The narrator heads to the Supreme Court where he takes a hit of weed and shouts for equal justice under the law. His lawyer and friend, Hampton Fiske, tells the narrator to cut it out and sprays him with air freshener. Fiske, a criminal defense lawyer, has never argued before the Supreme Court before.

Waiting for the court case to begin, an angry black woman lectures the narrator about the history of racism, but the narrator pays little attention. The woman slaps him. The narrator feels distant from his fellow blacks, and tries to imagine himself among them and accepted once more by them. The judges enter, and the case -09-2606, Me v. The United States of America, begins. The lone black judge especially looks angry with the narrator, and is quick to begin. The black judge demands to know how, in the present day and age, a black man can own a slave, violating American rights, the Constitution, and simple morality. Still high, the narrator speaks without thinking, saying he did what he did and since when did a little segregation and slavery every hurt anyone. The room of people is stunned. The black judge jumps up, prepared to fight.

The Shit You Shovel

Chapter 1 – The narrator explains to the court that much of his problem comes from the fact that he was not raised any better. His father was a social scientist in Dickens, the southern outskirts of Los Angeles, who practiced Liberation Psychology, homeschooled the narrator, and the narrator not as a son to a father but conditioned as a social experiment. For example, his father would place things in his crib as a baby –such as toy police cars and Richard Nixon campaign buttons while firing a gun and shouting "Nigger, go back to Africa!" to condition his son. Another such experiment involved the narrator's father believing blacks were community-minded as a race to protect the vulnerable, which included loading the narrator down with quality goods and beating him up on a street corner to see if the other blacks of the neighborhood would let this happen. The narrator recounts that not only did they let this happen, they helped beat up the narrator and rob him. The narrator's father, the interim dean of psychology at West Riverside Community College, ultimately declared his son a failure.

Despite this, the narrator recounts how his father had a good reputation in the area, for he was nicknamed the “Nigger Whisperer” because he could even talk down black drug addicts from doing stupid things. The narrator remembers his father telling him what he told everyone he spoke to, about someone asking himself or herself who they are, and how they may become themselves. But when his hometown and father disappeared, the narrator remembers having no way to answer the questions.

Chapter 2 – The second chapter consists of three words: “Westside, nigger! What?”

Chapter 3 – The narrator says to the court that there are three basic laws in the ghetto. First, a black person in one’s face stays in one’s face; no matter what time it is, the time is always the same; and the last is that one’s father will be killed when he is home for winter break from college his junior year. It feels to the narrator as if his father had been cheated out of life, just as his father’s colleague, Foy Cheshire, a member of the group of friends and community leaders called the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, stole a Saturday morning cartoon idea from him.

The narrator recalls later learning that his father pulled around a police car at an intersection, shouted at the police, and then ran when the police ordered him to stop, shooting after him. The narrator goes on to talk about the two-acre property on which he and his father lived, 205 Bernard Avenue. The narrator recalls harvesting crops ranging from peas to cotton, and his father always saying that people eat the shit they are shoveled. The narrator also recalls feeling relieved at his father’s death, for he would not have to deal with his father always tying one hand behind his back. The narrator likens his personal experience with his father to the black experience at large.

Chapter 4 – The narrator remembers how, in order to keep property values up, the City of Dickens was officially deleted, while surrounding wealthier areas had their names changed for better appeal. The narrator recounts going on to become the “Nigger-Whisperer” in his father’s place, helping people to get over their problems. The narrator explains, however, that he had no interest in doing so, or giving back to the community after graduating from college where he studied crop sciences and management. His primary focus was growing oddly-shaped watermelons, and weed.

Chapter 5 – The narrator explains to the court his services were most often needed by old man Hominy Jenkins, the last surviving member of the Little Rascals. He remembers visiting Hominy to hear his stories along with a beautiful fifteen year-old girl named Marpessa, but that in later years, Hominy became suicidal, especially with the losing of Dickens. The narrator recalls having to stop Hominy from lighting himself on fire once, and that Hominy eventually began to lose heart, goading the narrator into treating him like a slave and calling him “massa” and “master.”

Analysis

The Sellout is a satirical, African-American novel by Paul Beatty. The book revolves around an unnamed, black narrator who is brought before the United States Supreme

Court on charges of owning slaves and re-implementing segregation. The vast majority of the novel is the recollection of the never named narrator of the past several years, particularly, the events which directly led to the present. The narrator is a brilliant, college-educated man whose experiences and thoughts often lead to more considerations and ideas. Collectively, the satire is a first-person stream of consciousness narrative.

The designation of the novel as a satire denotes that irreverent humor and the challenging of often sacred ideas and institutions –social, cultural, and governmental – will be commonplace. This occurs immediately in the narrator's decision to smoke marijuana inside the Supreme Court building. Even though he is on trial with his freedom at stake, the narrator's utter lack of disregard for the law and for the institution of the Supreme Court is demonstrative of the narrator's disregard for anything established at all. This includes the narrator's relative lack of concern at owning a male slave, Hominy. That no man should own another is an established, moral institutional idea that the narrator has thrown away.

The narrator admits to not wanting to deal with Hominy as a slave, but he notes that Hominy insisted. This occurred following the deletion of the City of Dickens, something which gave Hominy heartache and made him feel no better than a slave –or a commodity. The decision to get rid of the City of Dickens is an attempt to increase property values for nearby, predominantly white areas. Seen in this light, Dickens is essentially an expendable commodity, and the compromising of the community has compromised the sense of identity of its citizens. Hominy –and the citizens of Dickens – are no better than slaves to the decisions of the city planners, no matter what color they happen to be.

That the narrator should even entertain such a notion is heresy to prevailing morality and cultural norms. The black community is especially outraged, signified by the slap that the narrator receives from the hand of a black woman in attendance at the Supreme Court. The woman attempts to lecture the narrator about racism. The narrator does not really pay attention to the lecture because he understands it to exist in different ways that mainstream institutions and cultures would have people believe, yet not talk about. The narrator's own father, for example, was gunned down running from the police after being told to stop. The narrator likens growing up with his father to having one hand tied behind his back at all times. Then, he compares this image to the black community at large. The narrator does not say who has tied the hand behind the back of the black community, but he will later explore this idea.

The narrator has little interest in the community or its people at first. He is primarily interested in growing strangely-shaped watermelons and weed, and would rather do anything other than giving back to the community. Giving back to the community is an institutional expectation in black communities. A successful member must return blessings to the community which gave birth to him or her. This is an institutional expectation that the narrator shirks, mocks, and finally grudgingly commits to by taking his father's place as "Nigger Whisperer." The narrator is not opposed to helping his community, but he is opposed to the idea that such a thing is institutionally expected.

Discussion Question 1

Why has the narrator been brought before the Supreme Court? What is the narrator's attitude toward the entire situation? How are those watching the unfolding case reacting to the case? What motivates their reactions?

Discussion Question 2

What are the narrator's childhood and upbringing like? How does the narrator believe this has affected him? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Despite the obvious racial aspects of the idea of slavery, the narrator has little interest in listening to the lectures of others about race and racism. Why?

Vocabulary

officious, confounding, jurisprudence, affirmative action, potency, corollary, dogmatism, pugnacious, felonious, futile, emphatically, idiomatic, beatific, profundity, conflagration, impromptu, dowager, autonomous, despondency, halcyon, flummoxed, pluperfect

The Shit You Shovel, Chapter 6 – Exact Change, or Zen and the Art of Bus Riding and Relationship Repair, Chapter 10

Summary

The Shit You Shovel

Chapter 6 – The narrator contends that slaveholding, like pimping, is not easy, especially with a slave like Hominy who only had about fifteen minutes of good work in him each day. No matter how many times the narrator tried to “free” Hominy, Hominy would come right back to work, saying it is his free right to be a slave. Each Thursday, the narrator explains he would bring Hominy to a bondage club to be beaten, all at Hominy’s request. Later, the narrator and Hominy construct an exit sign for Dickens because all of the Dickens signs have been removed following the “deletion” of the town.

The Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals

Chapter 7 – The narrator recounts to the court deciding to “reanimate” the City of Dickens, and going to a gathering of the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, among them Foy Cheshire, to make this announcement. But the Dum Dums were more interested in the number of times Mark Twain used the word “nigger” in “Huckleberry Finn” than they were in anything else. The narrator argued that it was irrelevant, that no one could be sheltered from the word, and that the book should not be changed.

The narrator is then labeled a sellout, and given the floor. The narrator then argued his idea for returning Dickens, including physically marking the boundaries of the place with descriptive terms such as “The Hood,” “White America,” “The Worst of Times,” and “The Best of Times.” But when the narrator was asked why, he could not explain. After the meeting ended, the narrator recalls eating Oreos, and local gangster Curtis “King Cuz” stealing his last cookie. Cuz went on to say that he supported the idea of bringing back Dickens. After Cuz left, the narrator was confronted by Foy who told the narrator he would not let the narrator “fuck my shit up” since the Dum Dums are all he has left.

Chapter 8 – The narrator explains to the court that he began to mark the boundaries of Dickens with spray pain and a line-marking machine. Many in the community rallied around the narrator, watching the lines until they dried. The white line the narrator painted came to remind him of the chalk outline around his father’s body.

Exact Change, or Zen and the Art of Bus Riding and Relationship Repair

Chapter 9 – Due to its location, the smell of sewage and sulfur always blew in from the refineries in Wilmington and the Long Beach sewage treatment plant. To get out away from the smell in Dickens, the narrator went down to the ocean to surf by bus. Anyone who had distance to travel who did not own a car had to take the Rapid Transit District buses, the narrator explains. Marpessa had come to drive one of the buses as he learned on one such trip. The two had a relationship in the distant past, and instead of sharing songs, they shared books, ideas, and authors. Years later, Marpessa still drove a bus, and the narrator explains he went to seek her help with Hominy. He recounts Marpessa telling him to “get the fuck off the bus.”

Chapter 10 – The narrator explains to the court that apart from slavery, Hominy went about trying to reverse civil rights by finding a white person to give his bus seat up to, but could not find a white person to get up for. For Hominy’s birthday, Marpessa’s bus was transformed into a moving party, with official-looking signs reserving seats for disabled, elderly, and white use being affixed to the first third of the bus’s seats. Marpessa argued the signs set blacks back five hundred years, and that the signs offended her. The narrator argued that he himself was not offended, and would not know what to do if he was offended. Eventually, a pretty young white woman boarded the bus, prompting a happy Hominy to head to the back. Marpessa immediately suspected the woman, Laura Jane, knew the narrator, and learned she was a part-time actress, part-time prostitute. Laura and Marpessa descend into a discussion about race, during which

The narrator recalls for the court how Laura told Marpessa she was a beautiful woman who just happens to be black and that the problem is not race but class. As Laura walked away, Marpessa was stopped from hitting her by the narrator. Marpessa then told the narrator he was a sellout on Laura’s side, and that is why she dumped him. Marpessa then brought down the bus to the beach, where she parked in the tide and most went swimming. Marpessa went on to talk about how much she hated black women being described by the color of their skin in literature, such as “honey-colored” and “dark-chocolate,"but that white women are never compared to food. Marpessa then explained she fell in love with the narrator because of food, because the narrator never had to act tough and watch the door while eating.

Analysis

The narrator says that, at first, he tried to stop Hominy from being his slave. However, Hominy insisted it was his free right to be a slave. Here, the irreverence with which the narrator treats sensitive and morally fundamental subjects like slavery is clear. Actual slavery denies the freedom of others. It is forced on the person. Hominy’s slavery is voluntary, which is essentially a surrendering rather than an exercise of freedom. Voluntary slavery is contradictory.

Greater irreverence to Civil Rights and the state of race relations is demonstrated through Hominy wanting to be forced to give up his bus seat for a white person. Not only is Hominy not satisfied with being a slave, but he wants to return to the era of

segregation. He experienced segregation as young person. This is another satirical way of noting that Dickens and its residents are only a commodity, meant to be treated as others see fit. In this case, the deletion of the City of Dickens is tantamount to a black person being forced to give up his seat for a white person on the bus.

More irreverence is shown to the situation by the narrator deciding to place stickers on a third of the front bus seats, saying the seats are to be given up for the disabled, the elderly, and the white. Marpessa is absolutely furious with the narrator for this, saying the signs have set black people back five hundred years. The narrator is characteristically uncaring. He cares more about reigniting his old romance with the now-married Marpessa than what effect his segregation signs might have on race relations.

Things take an outrageous turn when the narrator hires a white prostitute for whom Hominy must give up his seat. The young, white woman contends that the current problems in America have to do with class rather than race. Marpessa disagrees, saying that racism continues to be prevalent in even subtle ways –such as comparing the skin color of blacks in books to food like honey and chocolate. Again, the narrator refuses to back down from conventional reactions to things like racism, asking just what he should feel to be offended by something.

The same is true when it comes to the narrator's dealings with Foy. Foy enjoys rewriting classic books to make them politically correct and "black" by removing use of the word "nigger" and reforming the prose where needed. The narrator refuses to even back down from this, saying that to hide and shelter kids from the ugly truths in the world of today, or the ugly truths of the past, is to do them a disservice. Rather than changing things to further a narrative, people should stand in spite of them and use them as a learning point from which to The narrator seemingly argues that everyone needs to keep moving forward. Foy is shocked at this breach of the black cultural mindset he has been fomenting, so he callously labels the narrator a "Sellout," meaning he has sided with the whites.

The deletion of Dickens does not offend the narrator so much as it outrages him. He will stand in spite of the way things are, and he will change them for the good rather than to fit anyone's world view. The narrator decides he will not just sit around brokenhearted, but he will do something proactive about the deletion of Dickens. His first acts are to restore a sign for the city on an exit from the highway and to spray paint the boundaries of Dickens along with labels describing who or what is on either side of the lines. The efforts garner the support and cheers of most of the residents of Dickens, who support the narrator's efforts to distinguish and reestablish their community.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator reluctantly agree to take Hominy on as a slave? Do you agree or disagree with Hominy's explanation for why he continues to be a slave? Explain your reasoning.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Foy label the narrator a “Sellout”? What does this mean? How does the narrator react to this? What is the basis for his reaction?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Marpessa become so annoyed with the signs the narrator puts in her bus? Is she right to be angry? Why or why not? How does the narrator react? Why? Do you believe this is a fitting reaction to Marpessa’s being offended? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

function, predominantly, ancillary, problematic, erudite, urbane, insolence, antiquity, impervious, precipitous, elephantine, unctuous, obsequiously, bequeath, preternatural, idyllic, biracial

City Lites: An Interlude – Too Many Mexicans, Chapter 15

Summary

City Lites: An Interlude – The narrator explains to the court he has never understood the concept of a sister city. He equates some to the ending of hostilities –such as Honolulu and Hiroshima –and others to shotgun weddings, such as Atlanta and Lagos. He also finds it amusing there is a city-soulmate matching service called Sister City Global. He then reveals to the court that he used Sister City Global for Dickens, but that SCG could not find Dickens on a map. Still, they found three potential matches: Juarez, Kinshasa, and Chernobyl, though none of them want to be paired with Dickens. The narrator then reveals he chose three sister cities himself: the old 1923 Hollywood set of Thebes now buried under Nipomo Dunes on the California shore, Dollerheim, Austria (birthplace of Hitler's maternal grandfather), and The Lost City of White Male Privilege.

Too Many Mexicans

Chapter 11 – The narrator explains to the court that white people and black people now have too many Mexicans in common. Charimsa Molina, the best friend of Marpessa and a friend of the narrator's, believes this. Charisma, assistant principal of Chaff Middle School, always brings students to the narrator's farm for Career Day. He comes to learn that Charisma has burned all the black-revised classics that Foy has written for the school. He goes on to describe that on the most recent Career Day. Marpessa had demonstrated stunt driving using her bus. The narrator himself described the crops he grew and the animals he kept. He told about tending to them. The narrator allowed a local girl named Sheila from El Nido, the group home on Wilmington, to carry out a castration on a calf. The narrator goes on to say that he soon after learned that Marpessa's bus is the safest in the city because the signs from Hominy's birthday were never taken down. The signs remind black residents of how far they have come and how far they still have to go. The narrator suggests to Charisma that Chaff be segregated so kids would behave, but Charisma argued there might be too many Mexicans to do this.

Chapter 12 – Record rain fell that summer, the narrator recalls. Hominy loved the idea of segregation, hoping it would bring about white resettlement and the restoration of Dickens to its former glory. The narrator also learned his Japanese satsuma fruit tree was not yet ready to bear good fruit.

Chapter 13 – The narrator tells the court he has only experienced one act of direct racism in his life. He recalls telling his father that there was no racism in America, only opportunity that black people kicked aside. His father then brought him to a run-down gas station in the working class white part of town. The white attendants were friendly and filled up the car. When a white woman walked by, the narrator's father shouted

“Look at those tits!” and forced the narrator to get outside and whistle. The narrator whistled “Bolero,” which caused his father to jump out and call him an idiot and to do a wolf-whistle himself. The white woman then left to have sex with the narrator’s father, while the narrator went into the gas station’s mini-mart. There, the cashier would not let the narrator use the restroom because he was not a paying customer, even though the narrator’s father was one. When the narrator asked to purchase a coke, the cashier charged the black price of $1.50 rather than the regular price of seven cents. The narrator then had to sprint down the street to use the bathroom.

Chapter 14 – After breaking up with the narrator, Marpessa married wealthy and moved into the affluent black neighborhood of the Dons, north of Dickens. The narrator would occasionally park outside her house to dream the life he should have been living with her. His most recent visit revealed that Marpessa has been taking the bus home with her every night. The narrator was then interrupted by Cuz and Stevie Dawson, the younger brother of Marpessa, recently out of jail after a ten-year stint. Stevie explains Marpessa has taken the bus home because she is proud of the narrator.

Chapter 15 – After the narrator’s visit to Dons, the smell returned to Dickens at the same time the oranges and satsumas were ready to be harvested. The narrator collected a few oranges and satsumas for himself, then allowed all the kids in the neighborhood to help themselves. As school started for the year, one of the local kids, Kristina Davis, told the narrator her parents were getting high rather than ensuring she got to school on time. When Marpessa arrived with her bus to pick up kids, the narrator noted she had satsuma juice on her face and that she took his joint to demonstrate they were good again after the sign incident.

Analysis

The narrator, in his efforts to reconstitute Dickens, decides Dickens needs a sister city. Amusingly, one of the suggestions for the crime-ridden and depressed Dickens is Chernobyl, the nuclear disaster-ravaged ghost town in Ukraine. The narrator himself comes to suggest that Dickens be the sister city to the Lost City of White Male Privilege. The narrator argues that white male privilege is itself like a lost city, meaning white male privilege no longer commonly exists. It is a “lost city” everyone talks about, but no one can find it. Likewise, Dickens is a city that its residents speak of, but that no one can find on a map. Everyone forgets and discards lost cities, until it is convenient to resurrect one, such as the Lost City of White Male Privilege. Here, the narrator breaks yet another taboo by daring to suggest that perceived, institutionalized racism no longer exists, at least not in the usual way.

Yet again, the narrator irreverently cuts through the heart of a morally fundamental mindset about race relations when he suggests segregating the local middle school, when it was education where many argue Civil Rights truly began in the 1950s and 1960s. As the narrator notes, racism is something which affects everyone, not just whites. Many black residents of Dickens complain about there being “too many Mexicans” now. The narrator suggests to segregate the school again because

segregation might have a similar effect as the signs in the bus, meaning safety, stability, and a commitment to bettering oneself may ensue by way of proof of how far blacks have come. Likewise, it could serve to tell how far there still is to go. Civil Rights wasn't the end, but only a beginning. Likewise, the efforts of the narrator and Hominy to restore Dickens, as well as their irreverent challenging of assumptions and attitudes about racism, are compared metaphorically to the satsuma tree that has not yet borne delicious fruit.

The narrator himself argued in the past that there was no racism in America, which infuriated his father. The narrator, who personally experienced racism at the gas station even after his father's antics designed to elicit a racist response received no such response, is enough to prove to the narrator that racism does indeed exist. Yet, it is not widespread as it once was, and does not encompass all aspects and extents of society and culture as the narrator later comes to point out. And as noted earlier, racism exists among all races. Consider that Charisma, an African-American assistant principal, contends segregating the school might be impossible because there are 'too many Mexicans." Interestingly enough, Hominy hopes the efforts at re-segregation will return white people to the area rather than keeping them away.

Discussion Question 1

What was the one instance of direct racism the narrator has received in his life? What was the experience like for the narrator? How did this affect the narrator's thinking? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator decide to suggest segregating schools? What does he hope this will accomplish? How do Charisma and Hominy feel about this? Why?

Discussion Question 3

What is the unintended consequence of the segregation signs on the school bus? What does this encourage the narrator and Hominy to do? Why?

Vocabulary

perspicacity, vicarious, reactionary, prestigious, fulcrum, lecherous, libidinous, ebullient, studious

Too Many Mexicans, Chapter 16 – Apples and Oranges, Chapter 20

Summary

Too Many Mexicans

Chapter 16 – The narrator's newly finished, whites-only Wheaton Academy has enraged Foy. The narrator watched as Foy took pictures of the place, condemned the decision to build an all-white school in the middle of the ghetto, and condemned the "racist asshole" who put segregation signs in a local bus. This all amused the narrator. A car then drove by, from which Stevie shouted at Foy to take his "black ass back to white America." He threw an orange at Foy, which hit Foy in the head. The narrator went over to check on Foy, who told the narrator not to touch him, that it was war, that he knew whose side the narrator was on, and that he would be back.

Apples and Oranges

Chapter 17 – The narrator tells the court that he probably has attachment disorder. Marpessa suggested he had the disorder during the time they were together when he was in college because he could not establish a strong attachment to anyone. The narrator tells the court that he and Marpessa slept together after the orange/racism incident, during which time Marpessa admitted that it was she who threw the orange. The narrator tells the court that, despite Los Angeles supposedly being desegregated, it is one of the most racially-segregated cities in the world. The narrator then reveals that his plan to segregate Chaff to foster student improvement was revealed by Marpessa to be working, and that Charisma was very happy with the results.

Chapter 18 – The narrator continued to sleep with Marpessa as the weeks went by, he explains. While working in the garden, Hominy suggested a new class system similar to India's caste system, with Untouchables and those that are godlike. It was during this time that the narrator reflected on his father being buried in the corner of the yard, and how nothing ever grew in that corner. He also reflected on how his father had loved apples, and how each crop was put in a certain place for equal access to sunlight and water, the kind of segregation the narrator believed people also needed.

Chapter 19 – The narrator attended a meeting of the Dum Dums after his talk with Hominy. The guest speaker for the evening was a black conservative named Jon McJones who read from his book "Mick, Please: The Black Irish Journey from Ghetto to Gaelic." Foy then proceeded to condemn the Wheaton Academy once more even though the school brought unemployment down slightly while bringing grades and graduation rates up slightly. Foy went on to say he would organize a protest with big names that the narrator says he cannot mention for legal reasons. Cuz and McJones then debated the race question, arguing things like whether or not it was better to be

born in Dickens than in Africa, and whether or not Dickens was a hellhole. As the meeting wound down, the narrator was given an autographed copy of Foy's latest black-revised classic, "Tom Soarer," (a take on "Tom Sawyer") which was inscribed "To the Sellout, Like father, like son…" This enraged the narrator, who sped home.

Chapter 20 – Over the next few months, the narrator tells the court, he and Hominy became employed full-time in segregation, which the narrator explained was fun. They went around Dickens, putting up "Colored Only" and "White Only" signs. A "Whitey Week" was arranged at Chaff to celebrate white contributions to leisure while critiquing white privilege through a "race wash" activity, where levels of whiteness were dictated by what privileges were afforded. For example, "Deluxe Whiteness" included warnings instead of arrests from the police. At last, the narrator and Hominy came to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Hospital, located in a predominantly Latino area. The Latino area, Polynesian Gardens, was a place the narrator explained he never went at night. The narrator explains he was worried about segregating the hospital, because it was the one place outsiders might see his work. He admits he never truly solved the healthcare problem, but inspired blacks and other minorities to question whether or not the doctors in the hospital truly cared about them.

Analysis

The narrator continues to irreverently challenge black cultural norms in the City of Dickens, including creating an all-white school, the Wheaton Academy. This, in addition to the segregation signs on Marpessa's bus, draws the ire and fury of Foy. Despite Foy's insistence on his blackness, a car full of black locals –including Stevie and Marpessa –tell Foy to take his "black ass back to white America" because Foy no longer lives in the city he claims to be defending but using to his benefit. Foy is still raging against the Lost City of White Male Privilege. He is so swept up in division and race that his opposition to the Wheaton Academy has less to do with a desire for equality than it has to do with segregating blacks away from whites by refusing to allow integration. Foy has become a caricature of white segregationists in the South of the 1950s and 1960s.

The narrator, genuinely concerned when Foy is hit in the head with an orange, is rebuked by Foy, who tells the narrator he knows what side the narrator is on. The narrator's critique of Foy's concepts of racism and blackness is apparent in Foy's own racially-tinged behavior, declaring there are sides. Foy says there will be war, while the narrator seeks to unite (rather than to divide) Dickens. As noted previously, the real segregationists are those who oppose white integration in Dickens. It should be noted that the narrator sardonically equates his own conceptions of segregation with farm fields being divided according to crop variety.

The narrator and Hominy go around the entire city, putting up segregation signs. The all-white Wheaton Academy has meanwhile generated motivation in Dickens, contributing to a slightly falling unemployment rate and a slightly rising graduation rate. It is clear that Charisma's contention that the segregation signs are motivating and reminding locals is accurate. Interestingly, even the narrator himself admits to racial impulses,

avoiding the heavily-Latino neighborhood where the hospital is located at night. The narrator also takes exception with the mainstream contention that Los Angeles is a desegregated city by explaining it is actually one of the most segregated cities in the world. Popular conception is not necessarily reality.

Discussion Question 1

What popular conceptions about integration and race relations does the narrator take to task in this section of the novel, especially those concerning Foy, the black community, and Los Angeles? What do these conceptions have to say about race relations in general?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Foy become so outraged with the all-white Wheaton Academy? What does his reaction –and the way he treats and speaks to the narrator –say about Foy's own conceptions of race and his own attitudes toward other races?

Discussion Question 3

How does the narrator's plan to segregate Chaff Middle School turn out? What does this encourage the narrator to attempt next? Why?

Vocabulary

attachment disorder, plethora, intuitively, pretentious, plenipotentiary, anonymous, conducive, disingenuous, paradoxically, trepidation

Apples and Oranges, Chapter 21 – Epilogue

Summary

Apples and Oranges

Chapter 21 – For Hood Day, the local gangs merely pretended to fight one another. The entire black community turned out to celebrate Dickens. They were watched by two curious Hispanic males. Though these men caught Stevie's attention, no violence broke out. The narrator hoped it was because of his segregation signs.

Chapter 22 – The narrator and Hominy attended the L.A. Festival of Forbidden Cinema and Unabashedly Racist Animation, where Hominy was invited up on the stage as the last living member of the Little Rascals. Hominy spoke and talked about the actual production, as well as the fact that he wished more people would have noted Buckwheat's range of emotions. A handful of audience members in non-ironic blackface were then called out as racist by a white man, but Hominy wrote off blackface merely as acting. A woman then asked if it was true that Foy owned the rights to all of the racist Little Rascals movies. Hominy declared that his master, the narrator, would get them back. This petrified the narrator, who explains he was thankful because the racist cartoons began immediately after Hominy's answer to the question. Afterward, the narrator, Hominy, and a medical student in attendance at the film festival named Butterfly drove over to Hollywood Hills to Foy's house. The narrator there learned that Foy was not home. He was at a nearby recreation area living in his car. The narrator, Hominy, and Butterfly went skinny dipping in the pool at Foy's old house.

Chapter 23 – Two weeks later, The New Republic magazine went to press with a cover featuring a photo of a white kid with the question of whether or not education is now the "New Jim Crow," and if it has "Clipped the Wings of the White Child." Later, five white kids again integrated Chaff Middle. While most people who were on hand to see the event welcomed the children, Charisma barred the doors and refused the white kids entry. Likewise, Foy told the white kids to wait until the Academy opened to attend school in Dickens. The white kids sat on the grass by the Chaff flagpole. Using a gun which he fired at his car, Foy incited those gathered to sing "We Shall Overcome" until the white kids returned to their bus. Foy then turned the gun on himself, after which the narrator approached him to talk him down, asking Foy the same questions his own father had asked many years before. Foy then shot the narrator. The police and paramedics then arrived, taking Foy into custody and learning from Hominy that he was the narrator's slave. It is for this the narrator is charged, with later counts of violations of Civil Rights stacking up against him. The first local judge noted that the narrator was merely seeking to restore his community through reintegrating ideas that are officially and supposedly dead and that the case would end up in the Supreme Court.

Unmitigated Blackness

Chapter 24 – The narrator has finished his recounting of the past. It is the longest case in Supreme Court history. The narrator is unhappy with his court room sketch. He asks the artist, Fred Manne, to shave down his teeth. As the court reconvenes after a recess, the narrator finds a pale white boy now sitting beside him, saying he is in the narrator's corner. The narrator thinks that few people talk openly and honestly about race anymore, such as white middle-aged men who romanticize the Kennedys, the Black Guy at The Atlantic magazine, or white kids like the one sitting next to the narrator.

The lights go out as Hampton Fiske speaks about segregation and asks what it means to be black. He says that many have argued that blackness is a sense of identity shaped over time which results in feelings of inferiority and feelings of hopelessness. The stages of blackness result in a third-stage attempt to fight oppression and seek serenity –with people such as Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Sitting Bull, Ichiro Suzuki, and others. Meanwhile, the narrator is doing his best to light up again in the darkness. The narrator believes there should be a Stage IV in the black identity called Unmitigated Blackness. This is a seeming unwillingness to succeed but in reality, it is actually "not giving a fuck." Stage IV includes the idea that contradictions are not a sin, that there are no absolutes except when there are, and that as meaningless as everything it is, it is that same nihilism that makes like worth living, among other things.

Chapter 25 – The narrator wins his civil suit against Foy, though Foy is found innocent on attempted murder. The settlement is the receiving of the old Little Rascals episodes and outtakes. The recordings are not as racist as the narrator thought they might be, and include a five year-old Foy Cheshire in outtakes not being "niggerish" enough. This, Cuz believes, is something that weighed down on Foy's conscience for the rest of his life. The recordings also give the locals newfound respect for Hominy, because they realize how difficult black actors had it back then. It is at this point that Hominy says he quits slavery, and will talk reparations in the morning. On the news that night, the City of Dickens reappears in the weather forecasts. However, the narrator's fate with the Supreme Court remains uncertain.

Chapter 26 – The narrator attends a comedy show where the Dum Dums host their meetings. The black comedian drove out a white couple who attended the show, telling the white couple it was "our thing" with the room falling into absolute silence. The narrator reflects on the night not as a question of right and wrong, but the silence he showed. Silence can be protest or consent, the narrator knows, but most of the time it is fear. The narrator wishes he wasn't silent not because he wanted to defend the white people or protest the comic, but because he wanted to ask the comic what "our thing" exactly is.

Closure – When Barack Obama wins the Presidency, Foy drives around town waving an American flag because he believes America's debt has finally been paid. The narrator asks Foy about all the others, like the Japanese, the Native Americans, and the Chinese. He wants to know when these other groups will collect their debts. Foy shakes

his head and tells the narrator he will never understand. The narrator agrees that he never will.

Analysis

The segregation of Dickens yields important returns as, on Hood Day, a united community of Dickens sees its gangs refuse to fight other gangs; Hispanics are curious and show up to see what is happening in the black community in Dickens; and the people of the black community seemed far closer together than they ever had before. The narrator hopes that this can be attributed to his segregation signs, and the dialogue he has begun by tackling the one subject that everyone says needs to be debated, but that few people ever have the courage of approaching: race. The narrator later says that there are courageous people who wade into the discussion on race no matter how controversial it might be –such as the young white man who sits beside him at the Supreme Court, or the black writers of The Atlantic Monthly.

Things transpire toward their climax when the narrator seeks to have Chaff Middle School integrated with the arrival of five white kids. While the black students of the school are interested in the new arrivals, a handful of angry blacks, including Charisma and Foy, oppose white students attending “their” school. Charisma, like Foy, becomes a caricature of the white segregationists in the South in the 1950s and 1960s when she bars the doors and refuses to allow the white students to enter the school. Foy becomes so worked up over the incident that he fires off a gun to force the white kids to get back on the bus, then seems poised to kill himself. Instead, he shoots the narrator –which is how the police ultimately come to learn that the narrator owns a slave.

A number of important conclusions come to the narrator through the course of his case at the Supreme Court. The first is that, as mentioned earlier, not enough people are willing to engage in an actual conversation about race and race relations, but are merely content with the status quo of assumptions and conceptions –such as the false conception that Los Angeles is one of the most integrated cities in the world. Likewise, misconceptions about blacks –such as the seeming unwillingness of blacks to succeed leads to their plight in life –are part of a fourth stage of black identity which needs to be understood rather than spurned or incorrectly characterized.

Interestingly enough, Foy’s racism and antagonism toward whites comes from his own ill-treatment as a child actor in the Little Rascals films. No one before knew the reason. Cuz considers the idea that Foy must have carried the weight of such horrible, racist experiences all his life, and he must have dealt with the unwitting part he had in perpetuating black stereotypes. While Foy’s racism cannot be defended, it can now be explained. The narrator notes that this is an important step to remind young black people that, though they may still encounter racial difficulties, what they are dealing with now is nothing compared to what Foy and Hominy dealt with many years ago.

No matter how much good the narrator has done for Dickens, racism still remains. The narrator learns this when he attends a comedy night where one white couple is in

attendance and he is shamed into leaving. No one defends the white couple, and no one protests the black comedian who ordered the white couple out. The narrator says nothing, and he is later ashamed at his silence –not because he did not defend the white couple or protest the black comedian. It is because he did not have the courage to challenge the black cultural mindset of the comedian when he declared the comedy night “our thing.” Likewise, the narrator is annoyed with Foy’s insistence that the election of Barack Obama has resulted in America paying off her debts. The narrator knows that other groups of people have suffered due to racism in the past. The narrator also knows that the struggle against racism never ends. It is a constant, ongoing effort that yields better results every year, but it is a proactive effort that must be maintained.

Discussion Question 1

How do you interpret the narrator’s behavior and decision to remain silent regarding the black comedian and the white couple? Was he wrong for remaining silent? Likewise, do you believe the narrator’s decision to be upset about remaining silent and not challenging the comedian on what he said about “our thing” rather than his treatment of the white couple to be fair? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What is at the root of Foy’s racism? Does this excuse Foy’s racism? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator consider Foy’s position that America has paid off all of her debts with Barack Obama’s election to be wrong? Do you agree or disagree with the narrator? Why?

Vocabulary

apartheid, animosity, rhapsodized, lucid, sauntered, didactic, extolling, indefatigable, admonished, nihilism, reparations, human bondage, frivolity

Characters

The Narrator

The never-named narrator is an African-American male of an undetermined age who lives and works as a farmer in Dickens, California. The narrator is a brilliant, college-educated, irreverent, sarcastic, comedic. Initially, he is a self-interested libertarian who has no interest in giving back to his community. The narrator disagrees with the prevailing black cultural mindset among people. For example, his father and Foy see racism as prevalent everywhere. Though the narrator himself has experienced racism firsthand, he also knows that race relations are far better than they used to be, though they still require cultivation. When the City of Dickens is “deleted” from the map to increase the property values of homes and business surrounding the area, the narrator takes it upon himself to restore Dickens.

The narrator grudgingly takes on Hominy as a slave because Hominy insists. The narrator and Hominy set about marking the boundaries of Dickens with spray paint. They put up signs for Dickens and seek to re-institute segregation in the community as a way to bring people together. It will serve as a reminder of how far they have come and of how far they still have to go. The narrator’s work enrages people like Foy, who condemns the narrator as both a “Sellout” and a “racist asshole.” The narrator’s attempts to integrate the all-minority Chaff Middle School with five white kids are opposed on racist grounds by Foy, who ends up shooting the narrator. It is during this time that the narrator's holding of Hominy as a slave and his work in segregation are discovered. The two factors earn him a case tried before the Supreme Court. Though the narrator’s fate is uncertain at the end of the novel, the narrator is thrilled to see Dickens listed once more on the local news weather forecast.

The Narrator's Father

The narrator’s father is a deceased, black sociologist who treated his son more like a social experiment than an actual son. For example, a conditioning experiment involved putting Richard Nixon campaign buttons and toy cars in the narrator’s crib while firing a gun and shouting, “Nigger, go back to Africa!” The narrator’s father believed racism to be prevalent in every aspect of life, and he was enraged when his son denied racism was commonplace.

Years later, the narrator’s father pulled around a police car during a bust at a stoplight and shouted at the police. When the police told him to stop, he refused. This resulted in the police shooting and killing the narrator’s father.

Hominy Jenkins

Hominy Jenkins is an elderly African-American man in his eighties. He is a local celebrity for being the final remaining living member of the Little Rascals. Hominy is well-loved and well-respected, but he is heartbroken when the City of Jenkins is "deleted" for the sake of surrounding property values. Hominy, who has experienced the most vile racism of anyone in the neighborhood, feels used like a slave. He opts to become the narrator's slave. Hominy goes on to want to give up his seat on the bus to a white woman and to help the narrator re-segregate the City of Jenkins. By the end of the novel, as locals come to realize what Hominy went through as a child, and with things in the community looking up, Hominy decides he no longer wishes to be a slave. He tells the narrator they will soon talk reparations.

Foy Cheshire

Foy Cheshire is a local black intellectual who was once friends with the narrator's father. Foy became rich after stealing an idea from the narrator's father for a Saturday morning cartoon. Foy went on to move out of Dickens to a wealthy, predominantly white area, but he returned to Dickens regularly to protest racism, to declare that it was everywhere, and to rewrite classic literature. The literature was conscious of black culture and politically correct. Foy's financial fortunes later declined.

Currently, he lives out of his car, but he continues to rail against racism, both real and imagined. However, Foy's own racism becomes apparent when he opposes white integration at the local middle school. He becomes a caricature of a white, Southern segregationist in the 1950s and 1960s.

Marpessa

Marpessa Dawson is a black woman from Dickens who has married rich and now lives in a wealthy black neighborhood outside Dickens. She still drives a bus for the city. Marpessa, an ex-lover and ex-girlfriend of the narrator, is initially enraged when the narrator puts up segregation signs in the bus for Hominy's birthday. Marpessa believes the signs have set black people back five-hundred years, though she later comes to recognize that the signs are contributing to community improvement. Merpessa begins sleeping with the narrator again as the novel unfolds.

Charisma

Charisma is the African-American assistant principal at Chaff Middle School. Charisma is intrigued by the segregation signs on the bus and by the positive effect they have had on locals. The narrator suggests segregating the school, which Charisma later does although she initially worries there may be "too many Mexicans" to accomplish segregation successfully. However, despite improvements in school, the narrator's

attempt to have the school integrated with white students is blocked by Charisma, who literally bars the door against their entry.

Hampton Fiske

Hampton Fiske is a black criminal defense attorney and old friend of the narrator's. Hampton becomes the narrator's lawyer as his case moves through local and state courts, all the way up to the Supreme Court. Hampton argues that being black is a sense of identity rather than mere skin color and that the narrator did not seek to bring about more racism, but to generate conversation about race relations in general.

Stevie

Stevie Dawson is the brother of Marpessa, Having recently gotten out of a ten year stint in jail, Stevie wants to leave his gang ways behind and return to community involvement. This is demonstrated on Hood Day. Instead of attacking two Hispanic men who have come to see the black community's celebration, Stevie merely stares them down.

King Cuz

King Cuz is a local black gangster who was rejected by both the Bloods and Crips for being too violent. Cuz has now left most of his former gangster life behind, but still no one messes with him. It is Cuz who bears the insight into Foy's soul regarding Foy's radical behavior and the paradox of his arguing against racism while being racist against whites. Cuz believes that Foy, himself an actor for the Little Rascals, had the weight of helping to perpetuate black stereotypes and the trauma of experiencing vile racism weighing down upon him.

Barack Obama

Barack Obama is the forty-fourth, and first African-American President of the United States of America. Obama's election occurs at the very end of the novel, prompting Foy to celebrate. Foy thinks that America has finally repaid its debts by electing Barack Obama. The narrator disagrees, noting that racism will always be around. He feels that blacks are not the only ones to suffer racism and that there is never an official "end" to racism.

Symbols and Symbolism

Conditioning Experiments

Conditioning experiments are conducted by the narrator's father on the narrator when the narrator is young. These demonstrate the outlook on fatherhood held by the narrator's father, in which the narrator's father considered his son more a research subject than an actual son. Among the conditioning experiments was a practice where the narrator's crib was lined with things like toy police cars and Richard Nixon campaign buttons. His father had fired a gun and shouted, "Nigger, go back to Africa!"

Spray Painted Lines

Spray painted lines denoting the boundaries of the City of Dickens are created by the narrator. When the City of Dickens is "deleted" to improve surrounding property value, the narrator is angry. In order to physically remind people Dickens exists, he marks the boundaries with white spray paint. The community is both curious and supportive of these efforts, as they want the rest of the world to know they exist.

Coke

A bottle of Coke constitutes the lone, direct racist incident experienced by the narrator. While at a gas station with his father, the narrator was denied use of the restroom unless the narrator purchased a Coke. However, the white cashier stated the price for a black was $1.50 rather than the list price of seven cents. Rather than purchase a Coke to use the bathroom, the narrator left and ran down the road to use the bathroom.

Black-revised Novels

Black-revised classic novels are written by Foy Cheshire. He gives them to local schools and residents. Foy's revised classics are geared toward a black audience. They retell the stories in a politically correct way. For example, "Tom Sawyer" becomes "Tom Soarer." The books are considered nonsense by most, burned by Charisma at the school, and laughed at by the narrator. The narrator argues that changing classics to remove words like "nigger" to fit Foy's conceptions of racism and race do a disservice to young people, sheltering them from reality and from history. For this, Foy labels the narrator a "Sellout."

Bus Segregation Signs

Bus segregation signs are created and attached to the interior of Marpessa's bus by the narrator for Hominy's birthday. The signs denote the first third of the seats as being

reserved for the elderly, the disabled, and the white. Marpessa is furious with the signs because she believes they set black people back five-hundred years. Later, she forgets they are up. Her bus becomes the safest bus operating in the city, which is later explained by the fact that the signs have brought the black community together in respect for how far they have come and how far they still have to go. This inspires the narrator and Hominy to segregate the city, including Chaff Middle.

Segregation Signs

Segregation signs reading “Whites Only” and “Colored Only” are placed around the City of Dickens by the narrator and Hominy. Like the bus signs, these segregation signs remind the local population of how far they have come and of how far they still have to go. The signs begin to inspire and motivate people to do better and to be better people. Later, the narrator must account for his acts of segregation when he stands trial for “owning” Hominy as a slave.

Satsumas

Satsumas are a kind of sweet, Japanese fruit that the narrator grows on his property, and which represent the unfinished effort to restore Dickens, as well as the unfinished debate and work on race, racism, and Civil Rights. The satsuma fruit is also metaphorical for the irreverent challenging of assumptions and attitudes about racism by the narrator and Hominy, which has not yet borne real fruit. Not until the very late summer does the tree finally bear delicious satsumas, at the same time that the narrator’s work really begins to bring the community together.

Little Rascals Film

A collection of Little Rascals episodes, outtakes, and recordings are rumored to be kept by Foy. They are given to the narrator as part of the settlement of the civil suit over Foy shooting the narrator. It is revealed that the reason why Foy kept the recordings had little with the racism contained in them. He kept them because he was once the child actor who appeared onscreen. He had been the object of racism, and he had unwittingly perpetuated stereotypes of blacks. It is this weight that King Cuz believes Foy has carried for so long which has led to the paradox of Foy fighting racism while being racist himself toward whites.

Revolver

A .38-calilber revolver is wielded by Foy when he challenges plans to integrate Chaff Middle School with white students. Foy fires the gun in order to convince the white students to return to the bus, then threatens to commit suicide. The narrator talks Foy down from committing suicide, Ironically, Foy shoots the narrator.

Weather Forecast

A weather forecast featuring the City of Dickens is seen by the narrator near the end of the novel. The narrator is thrilled to see that the City of Dickens has actually been restored, regardless as to whether or not he will end up in jail. The return of Dickens to the weather forecast also serves as proof to the narrator that, not only can he –or anyone –start a conversation about an issue or a cause, but that issues can be discussed and causes can be won.

Settings

Dickens

Dickens is an impoverished, minority city located ten miles south of Los Angeles. Originally set aside as agricultural residential land, the city now has the strange appearance of being urban farmland. The City of Dicken is “deleted” from maps in order to give a property value boost to the surrounding areas. This angers the narrator and hurts Hominy deeply. The deletion of Dickens –and its subsequent restoration –become core to the narrator’s efforts not only to put the city back on the map, but to actually improve the community and the lives of the people in the city. He uses the event as a way to begin a conversation about community, race, and improvement by way of segregation signs and attempting to integrate the local school with white students. The narrator’s efforts gain national attention through his Supreme Court case, and the City of Dickens is finally restored.

Surrounding Area

By removing Dickens from the map, the people in the wealthy area surrounding Dickens hope that their property values will increase. Marpessa and Foy live in those surrounding areas.The narrator makes frequent trips to the surrounding area to sit outside of Marpessa’s house and dwell on what could have been. Later in the novel, the narrator and Hominy travel to Foy’s neighborhood to discover that Foy is financially insolvent. He is living in a car.

Chaff Middle School

Chaff Middle School is one of Dickens’s local schools. It is where Charisma serves as assistant principal. The school’s students are segregated according to the narrator’s insistence, leading to a more harmonious and productive work environment. Chaff becomes the scene of the novel’s penultimate climax, where the narrator attempts to have the State of California integrate the school with white students. While most locals, including the black students, are intrigued and welcoming of the white students, a handful are not. Among those who do not welcome the white students are Foy and Charisma.

The Narrator's Home

The narrator’s home, located at 205 Bernard Avenue, features a modest house and two acres of land. The narrator, like his father before him, farms the land and keeps a number of animals, including horses and cows. His primary crops, however, are oddly-shaped watermelons and weed. The narrator invites local school kids onto his property to learn about farming firsthand, and later invites local kids and their parents to harvest

and keep the oranges, satsumas, and other fruits he has grown. It is also at the narrator's home that Hominy comes to work as a slave and to keep the narrator company.

Marpessa's Bus

Marpessa's bus becomes a setting for part of the novel on Hominy's birthday. On Marpessa's bus, the narrator installs signs reserving the first third of seats for whites, the disabled, and the elderly, which in turn draws Marpessa's ire. Hominy, meanwhile, has been waiting to give his seat up for a white woman on the bus, which happens when the narrator hires a white prostitute to make this possible. The signs on the bus ultimately come to remind locals of how far they have come, but how far they still have to go. The signs serve as a source of inspiration and motivation to do and be better.

Themes and Motifs

Racism as a Spokeperson

Paul Beatty uses racism as a way to speak about race relations in his novel, The Sellout. Racism appears in different ways and takes different forms throughout the course of the novel. Ultimately, all point to Beatty's contention, expressed through his narrator and through the closing statement of Hampton Fiske. Beatty's contention is that dialogue about race relations and racism must be had.

The narrator himself believes that racism is nowhere near as prevalent as it used to be, despite the beliefs of his father and people like Foy Cheshire. Attempts to solicit a racist response from white gas station attendants by the narrator's father fail, for example, only for the narrator himself to be denied use of the gas station bathroom unless he purchases a bottle of Coke at the "black price." While local black and minority students are welcoming of the potential white students that will join Chaff Middle, some like Foy and Charisma are utterly opposed to this.

The narrator contends that his father, and Foy, inflate racism in the present day because it either suits themselves or the narrative they seek to sell others around them and doesn't actually help to make things better. For example, the narrator's father attempted to condition automatic responses of fear and hatred toward police cars and white, Republican politicians by firing a gun and shouting "Nigger, go back to Africa!" while Foy has rewritten classic literature to be black-oriented, politically correct, and to omit the word "nigger." The narrator says this is an injustice to shelter young people from reality and from history, so Foy labels the narrator a "sellout."

The narrator recognizes that, although racism is nowhere near as bad as it used to be, it still exists and must be dealt with, rather than ignored or exaggerated. The narrator approves of young white people and black writers at the Atlantic magazine who are willing to risk controversy by having conversations about race. He opposes people like Foy who want to shut down debate and then control the narrative, or people like the black comedian who chases white people out of the audience by saying that this is "our thing."

In order to generate a discussion about race in Dickens, the narrator irreverently challenges what has become culturally and popularly unacceptable. He segregates buses, businesses, and schools. He pretends to own Hominy as a slave. At first, people are outraged that the narrator would do such a thing. Marpessa contends this has set black people back five-hundred years, but she is soon amazed to learn how much of a rallying cry the signs become and how much better the community becomes as a result of talking about how far blacks have come and how far they still have to go.

Complex Nature of Prevailing Racism

Paul Beatty speaks about the prevailing nature of racism as being far more complex than many believe in his novel, The Sellout. Generally, mainstream culture contends racism to be directed toward minorities by whites. But Beatty's narrator points out that this is not always true, and that racism is far more complex in its nature than many are willing to consider or discuss.

People, like the narrator's father and Foy Cheshire, argue the narrative that racism is product of white America and that it is directed primarily toward blacks. The narrator's father's own social conditioning experiments to cause fear and hatred in his son toward white Republicans and police cars, as well as Foy's attempts to convert traditional literature into black-conscious, politically-correct books. While much of this stems from their own past racist experiences –consider Foy's time as a Little Rascal, and being told to act more "niggerish" –their assumptions that only whites are racist is a racist assumption itself. While the nature of their racism may not necessarily be hypocritical, it is paradoxical.

Racism exists among many of the black characters in the novel, and its nature and extent varies. The narrator himself will not venture into the Latino neighborhood where the hospital is at night. Charisma, and many others in the black community of Dickens, complain that there are "too many Mexicans" frequently. Marpessa's first instinct is to strike the white prostitute who suggests that class, more than race, affects things in present-day society and culture. Charisma bars the doors of Chaff Middle School while Foy threatens violence at gunpoint to prevent white integration. Interestingly, the black students and most black members of the crowds watching are intrigued and welcoming of the white students.

At the end of the novel, the narrator relates an experience he had where he witnessed a black comedian chase the lone white couple in an all-black audience out of the building, telling them this is "our thing." The narrator, like all others in the audience, remained silent for fear of being labeled a sellout, or worse. The narrator later contends he felt bad for remaining silent –not because he wanted to defend the white couple or criticize the black comedian –but because he did not have the courage to stand up and ask they black comedian what he meant by "our thing," with the idea that "our thing" implied a sort of self-imposed racism to assume that certain things may only be "black".

Critique of Cultural Mindsets about Racism

Paul Beatty critiques cultural mindsets about racism in his novel, The Sellout. When the novel begins, the narrator is on trial for owning a slave, and is under scrutiny for his decision to put up segregation signs in the City of Dickens. The response to this –primarily from the black community –is swift and roundly condemnatory, but interestingly enough, the narrator does not seem to mind too much. The narrator has generated a conversation about one of the most taboo subjects in American society –race.

The narrator believes that a conversation about race, racism, and race relations needs to be had. It is the one subject which everyone thinks they know something, but few want to say anything out of fear of causing controversy, and/or being branded a racist. The narrator applauds the white boy who sits beside him during the Supreme Court case, and the black writer at the Atlantic magazine for courageously being willing to talk about race when most others are not. Far too many are willing to condemn than try to understand, and are quick to silence rather than to listen.

Among those people are Foy and the narrator's own father. While their own experiences with racism must be taken into account as a governing factor in their own racism and their handling of racism, their refusal to see that progress has been made and their desire to control the narrative and nature of the debate on race do more harm than good. The narrator contends as much when he tells Foy that removing the word "nigger" from classic literature and rewriting such books to make them black-friendly and politically-correct hurt people by sheltering them rather than exposing them to the truth of reality and history.

Just as quickly as the narrator is quick to criticize those who say racism is still as bad as ever and who want to control the debate for their own reasons, the narrator is quick to remind those who do not believe such that racism was indeed far worse in the past, and it still exists. The narrator himself experiences racism during the gas station Coke incident after denying that racism existed at all. The narrator is also quick to challenge or disagree with anyone of any race who believes they have a "right" to anything exclusively, such as the black comedian who chases out a white couple from an all-black audience, telling them this is "our thing."

Community, an Essential Component of Identity

Paul Beatty argues that community is essential to identity in his novel, The Sellout. A person's home and community can shape him or her based on shared experiences, beliefs, attitudes, values, and culture. Where one comes from gives roots to the person's life and identity in a place and a time. It is a defining feature of life. This is especially true of the City of Dickens, for numerous reasons.

In the novel, the City of Dickens, in order to boost the property values of surrounding homes and businesses, is "deleted" from the map. Many in the community are utterly heartbroken that the place they call home is not to be found on maps anymore. It is as if they are suddenly without a home. The narrator is angered that this has happened without anyone local having say in the matter. Hominy is utterly heartbroken, and feels like he and his community are a cheap commodity to be used at will –like a slave. As a result, Hominy decides to become what others outside Dickens must see him as –no better than a slave.

The narrator refuses to take things lying down. He decides to reestablish the city of Dickens by drawing lines around the city to mark its boundaries, seeks to get Dickens a sister city, and to improve the actual community through a conversation and dialogue

about race through the segregation signs and irreverent challenging of popular conceptions of race. As a result, people begin to come together in Dickens. Gang violence goes down while graduation rates go up. Unemployment falls while motivation increases.

Residents come to take pride in their city because it is where they have been born, have been raised, and now live. Also, they see promise and hope for the city's future, of which they can all be a part. Likewise, they see themselves as being able to be successful and worthwhile products of a successful city. The restoration of Dickens grounds the people of the city in a real place and a real time to which they belong –and with the security of a foundation of this nature in place, Hominy no longer feels the need to be slave, and feels as if he is his own person with his own identity once more.

Using Irreverent Humor and Satire to Challenge Institutions and Assumptions

Paul Beatty uses irreverent humor and satire as a way to critique and challenge institutions and assumptions in his novel, The Sellout. Satire –using humor, ridicule, irony, exaggeration, and other methods to offer critique –is critical to the narrator's efforts to generate discussion on race and restore the City of Dickens. This allows the possibility for discussion about the things which have been challenged and critiqued.

From the very start of the novel, the narrator opposes convention when he challenges the sacred respect for which people hold the Supreme Court by smoking marijuana there –a reckless defiance to the system that now holds him on trial for slavery. Indeed, that a black man should be on trial for slave-owning is itself utterly irreverent humor, given the history of black slavery in America. The narrator's upbringing also defies conventional American expectations for parenthood, as the narrator's father treated him like a social experiment rather than a son. Irreverent humor and satire is apparent in the father's firing a gun and shouting "Nigger, go back to Africa!" instead of cuddling his son and singing lullabies. Likewise, that a father should be present and instrumental in a child's early development more than the mother is a challenge to mainstream culture; and that a black father should be around to raise his son at all is an ironic challenge to black stereotypes.

When the narrator grows up, he refuses at first to give back to the community which has given him so much because it is expected of him that he do so. Great satiric irony is presented later in the decision to write Dickens off the map, though in the real world, it very much still exists. Great irony is also seen in the free choice of Hominy to volunteer himself into slavery. Great satiric irreverence is shown in Hominy's desire to give up his bus seat to a white woman, while segregation signs put up on the bus and all over time bring the local African-American community "back" in time. The narrator ridicules Foy over his rewriting of classic literature to be both politically-correct and to exclude the word "nigger," noting that sheltering people from reality and from history does far more harm than good.

The instruments of segregation themselves become a satire on the racism among certain members of the community and prove to be the linchpin for a much-needed conversation on race and community. Foy Cheshire and Charisma, both who ostensibly claim to stand against racism, exhibit racism themselves when they refuse white students entry to Chaff Middle School, and become caricatures of white Southern segregationists of several decades before. Meanwhile, the segregation signs serve as instruments of reminding local blacks how far they have come, but also about how far they still have to go. The past becomes a motivating factor for the promise of the future.

Styles

Point of View

Paul Beatty tells his narrative The Sellout using the reflective, stream-of-consciousness model. The first person point of view is that of the unnamed narrator, who is also the principal protagonist. The prologue of the novel and the final chapters are told in present tense by the narrator both before and after the Supreme Court case. The majority of the novel itself is told in a reflective past-tense, as the narrator is relating all of the events he is reciting years later to the Supreme Court Justices. The narrator makes frequent asides to contextualize or further explain certain things to the Court. For example, in Chapter 6, the narrator complains about the difficulties of having to deal with Hominy as a slave, and also notes that he tried multiple times to talk Hominy out of the desire to act as a slave. Many of these events in the novel trigger thoughts, ideas, or memories that are closely or loosely-related, which move from one subject to the next in a stream-of-consciousness. This quick succession of thoughts and words comes as a result not only of the narrator being educated and brilliant, but being high on marijuana during his court case. For example, in Chapter 9, the narrator finds himself going surfing, but then begins to wonder why white people trust a black person with a surfboard when they wouldn't trust a black person without one.

Language and Meaning

Paul Beatty tells his novel The Sellout in language that is both educated and streetwise, reflecting the narrator's college education and upbringing in the community of Dickens. Such extremes are often reflected in single paragraphs, for example as when the narrator describes his own sexual nature in Chapter 7: "I'm frigid. Not in the sense that I don't have any sexual desire, but in the obnoxious way that men in the free-love seventies projected their own sexual inadequacies onto women by referring to them as 'frigid' and 'dead fish.' I'm the deadest of fish. I fuck like an overturned guppy." The use of an educated, objective consideration of the sexuality of the 1970s to include words like "projected" and "inadequacies" is contrasted with the streetwise and blunt comparison to having sex "like an overturned guppy." Such use of language does not begin or end with the narrator. Consider a line from college-educated Dickens native Marpessa in Chapter 10 from Hominy's party bus drive: "Miss. Excuse me, would the lady with the strawberry-blond hair who was preternaturally comfortable with a literal busload of niggers and Mexicans (and by 'Mexicans' I mean all people. Central, South, North, and whatever Americas have you, native-born and otherwise), please approach the front of the bus. Thank you." The use of the word "preternaturally" is indicative of Marpessa's intelligence, while her use of the phrase "literal busload of niggers and Mexicans" is indicative of her upbringing in the black community of Dickens. The use of both highly educated language and streetwise vernacular adds a sense of realism to the novel and provides a level of dimension, depth, and realism to the characters that Beatty has created.

Structure

Paul Beatty divides his novel The Sellout into eight primary parts, with each part being subdivided into twenty-six chapters arranged in a linear, numbered format from 1 to 26. Each part has a title that relates to the events of the chapters of that particular section. For example, the part “Too Many Mexicans” relates to the racist mantra that there are “too many Mexicans” in Dickens and opens up a broad new discussion about race within those chapters. Each chapter specifically deals with a core set of events or situations relating to the overall part, such as in Chapter 11 when Charisma expresses her belief that there are too many Mexicans to segregate her school. The first part of the novel is a prologue where the narrator prepares for and begins his Supreme Court case. Most of the succeeding novel is a recounting of the events of the past several years that slowly catch up to the present time by the end of the novel.

Quotes

He's demanding to know how it is that in this day and age a black man can violate the hallowed principles of the Thirteenth Amendment by owning a slave.
-- Narrator (Prologue paragraph 49)

Importance: When the novel begins, the unnamed narrator is brought before the Supreme Court to face trial for owning a slave. This is especially distressing to the black community in particular since the narrator himself is black. As the case gets underway, the lone black judge on the Supreme Court can no longer hold back, and demands to know how a black man in the present day and age could own a slave given the history of racism and everything black people have been through. The narrator asks what harm a little slavery and segregation ever did anyone.

Who am I? And how may I become myself?
-- Narrator's father (Chapter 1 paragraph 45)

Importance: Despite the rocky upbringing the narrator faced with his father, the narrator remembers that his father had a good reputation among the people of the community. Known as the "Nigger Whisperer," the narrator's father had the ability to talk down black people –even drug addicts –from doing stupid things. The question the narrator's father posed spoke to the identity of the person, and who that person was intended to become. These two questions the narrator found himself unable to answer when his father died and his neighborhood disappeared.

They say 'pimpin' aint' easy.' Well neither is slaveholdin'.
-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 1)

Importance: As Hominy begins to lose his mind, he takes on the assumption that he is a slave. The narrator decides to help Hominy by allowing Hominy to live out the fantasy. This becomes more of a headache for the narrator than a help, because Hominy only works well for about fifteen minutes each day. Secondly, the narrator attempts to "free" Hominy multiple times, but this has no effect whatsoever on Hominy.

Go on, Sellout. Say what you came to say.
-- Foy Cheshire (Chapter 7 paragraph 19)

Importance: When the narrator attends a meeting of the Dum Dums, he challenges them by opposing the idea that they shelter black people from the word "nigger," and opposes the idea that classic books be changed to remove the word. Foy labels the narrator a sellout for this, and recognizes him to speak. The narrator then reveals he wants to restore the City of Dickens, a decision which will have important consequence for the narrator and the community.

You're a sick fuck, and those damn signs you made have fucking set black people back five hundred years.

-- Marpessa (Chapter 10 paragraph 17)

Importance: To celebrate Hominy's birthday, the narrator creates official-looking segregation signs for Marpessa's bus. Marpessa is enraged at the narrator for having done so. She believes it has set black people back five-hundred years, and will bring about nothing positive. Ironically, Marpessa ends up forgetting about the signs, and this has important ramifications.

It's the signs… On that bus it's like the specter of segregation has brought Dickens together.
-- Charisma (Chapter 11 paragraph 66)

Importance: Marpessa, who has forgotten about the segregation signs on her bus, has left them up. Inexplicably at first, her bus becomes the safest and most-sought after bus there is. It is later revealed by Charisma that the narrator's segregation signs have brought this about by reminding black people of how far they have come, but how far they still have to go. The signs are a conscience reminder that inspire black people to do better.

I've experienced direct discrimination based on race only once in my life.
-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 1)

Importance: The narrator reveals he has never experienced direct racism in his life, with the exception of one particular instance. This involved him being charged the black rate of $1.50 for a Coke, rather than the normal price of seven cents if he wanted to use the bathroom at a gas station minimart run by white men. The narrator is understandably not happy about this, but it demonstrates he and his father had to go looking to find racism because it wasn't apparent to the narrator beforehand.

Hominy, you ready to segregate?
-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator, after successful segregation on Marpessa's bus and at Chaff Middle School, decides the entire community of Dickens should be segregated. The narrator and Hominy went around the community, segregating everything they could – and finding it fun. They went around the city, putting up "Colored Only" and "White Only" signs, and seeking to give the city a better sense of identity through doing so.

I've whispered 'Racism' in a post-racial world.
-- Narrator (Chapter 23 paragraph 50)

Importance: After Foy shoots the narrator, the narrator explains to a sheriff's deputy that he has dared to give his community an identity in the modern era. He explains that he has whispered "Racism" in a post-racial world, and that it is akin to yelling "fire" in a crowded theater. While racism is not as bad as it was years before, it still exists, and affects everyone. But most people try not to see even these elements of race and

racism, wanting to live in a world where race isn't even considered or where people like Foy try to control the narrative for his own purposes.

In attempting to restore his community through reintroducing precepts, namely segregation and slavery, that, given his cultural history, have come to define his community despite the supposed unconstitutionality and nonexistence of these concepts, he's pointed out a fundamental flaw in how we as Americans claim we see equality.
-- Judge Nguyen (Chapter 23 paragraph 80)

Importance: In the hearing, the judge notes that the narrator has been attempting to restore his community, and to give it an identity, by returning to practice things which were supposedly, and are officially, gone –such as segregation and slavery. The narrator has demonstrated that such things do still exist no matter how many people claim they do not. The narrator has orchestrated a new conversation about race in his quest to reclaim his community.

There should be a Stage IV of black identity –Unmitigated Blackness.
-- Narrator (Chapter 24 paragraph 37)

Importance: The narrator believes there should be a Stage IV in the black identity idea called Unmitigated Blackness. It includes the idea that contradictions are not a sin, that there are no absolutes except when there are, and that as meaningless as everything it is, it is that same nihilism that makes like worth living, among other things.

So what exactly is our thing?
-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph 11)

Importance: The narrator attends a comedy night where the black comedian chases out the only white people, a couple, in the audience, saying that the comedy evening was "our thing." The narrator feels shame for being silent along with the rest of the room. He does not feel shame for silence because he did not defend the white couple or protest the black comedian, but feels shame because he did not have the courage to stand up and ask the comedian what "our thing" exactly is.