White Butterfly Short Guide

White Butterfly by Walter Mosley

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

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

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

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Characters

The major character in White Butterfly is Easy Rawlins, Mosley's African American sleuth. Easy remains a remarkable fictional personality, at once strong and intelligent, compassionate and sensitive. At the center of Easy's being is his objection to racism, from which he has suffered since his poor boyhood in Louisiana and Texas. Now in 1956 he lives in his little house in Watts, having established himself as a man of some means, despite the district's poverty, moral bankruptcy, crime, and general lack of opportunity.

Easy owns properties and collects rents. He has educated himself past the high school level, and reads The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B. Du Bois, and Plato's "Phaedo," the latter making him wonder how it would feel to be white, "a man who felt that he belonged."

Easy's sideline of investigative work derives from his "outsider" status.

Easy knows Watts, and can "ask questions of people who aren't willing to talk to the law." Yet in this novel he is reluctant to resume sleuthing, being happy at home with his wife Regina, their infant daughter Edna, and the Mexican boy Jesus, who lives with them. Easy's compassionate side is most visible in his relations with children. The recurring character Jesus is a good example. Easy took Jesus to raise and love as his own after, in a previous novel, rescuing the boy from a perverted rich man.

Regina Riles Rawlins is another deft creation. At the novel's outset she has been married to Easy for two years, and is a nurse's aide in a maternity ward. Slim, pretty, and "royal in her bearing," she is loved by Easy, although their relationship is strained due to his secretiveness, part compulsive, part intended to shield her. As Easy puts it: "There were so many secrets I carried and so many broken lives I'd shared. Regina and Edna had no part of that, and I swore to myself they never would." Regina objects to Easy's light and carnal approach to her.

Also, coming from a poor Southern background, she is suspicious of his money supply. At one point she warns her husband: "You got to let a woman see the weak parts, Easy. She gotta see that you need her strength."

Appearing again in an Easy Rawlins mystery is Mofass. Easy pretends to work for this fat, crude man, who is his front and rent collector. Mofass's god is money. Easy also relies on another recurring character, Raymond Alexander, known as Mouse. Here it is Mouse's arrest that draws the friends deeper into the serial-murder case.

Mouse is, according to Easy, "crazy and a killer, no doubt. He was also the closest thing I had to a best friend."

Along with Easy, Mouse is a conveyor of messages about the racist "system."

Easy shudders to see Mouse in jail, because "he was the only black man I'd ever known who had never been chained, in his mind, by the white man."

Quinten Naylor, an African American police officer, is still another recurring character. Caught between the members of his own race and white fellow cops, he is alienated from both groups. Late in the novel Easy and Quinten find some common ground, as Quinten regrets having arrested Easy on the mere word of Robin's murderer, her father, Vernor Garnett. Vernor is a prime representative of the vicious "system," a lawyer who is influential "downtown" and willing to stage a copycat killing of his daughter to avoid exposure of her Watts career and the baby of mixed race she bore. As for that baby, named Feather, Easy takes her to raise as his own.

Among the novel's supporting cast appears a gallery of racists. The police high-ups Horace Voss and Captain Anthony Violette are part of the contingent of police who pressure Easy onto the case. Businessmen Jack DeCampo and associates, sleazy real-estate speculators, provoke Easy's moral outrage.

Mr. Arnet, Jesus's sneering, white gym coach, is put in his place by Easy. The pervasive theme of alienation and crossed racial lines is reflected in Sylvia Bride, Robin's white friend in Watts who tells Easy about Feather. Sylvia distrusts her own kind: "I'm not talking to white people about this." Easy is not surprised.

Many other characters — from cocktail waitresses and drunks to men confined in jail — contribute intriguing vignettes. Not the least of these involves Lips McGee, an elderly jazz trumpeter. Stella Keaton, a white Watts librarian, has offended Easy by steering African American children's speech patterns into conventional English, and their story interests away from the old tales of "colored folks." Old Alamo Weir, a white inmate confined in jail with Easy, creates a diversion to save him from a stabbing.

Social Concerns

In White Butterfly, Mosley explores the injustices of racism through a historical perspective on the life of Easy Rawlins, the novel's narrator. The year is 1956, the setting is the Watts district of Los Angeles, and the situation involves the brutal murders of four "party girls." When the third woman is murdered, Easy is contacted by the police for help. "I was worth a precinct full of detectives when the cops needed the word in the ghetto."

Then there is a fourth murder. The first three victims, African Americans, barely make the newspapers, but the fourth, Robin Garnett, is a white coed and garners headlines. Coerced into action by the pressure from the police, who declare Easy's best friend a suspect, Easy hits the streets again.

Police pressure and brutality are integral to the African American experience depicted. "Most cops blended into one brutal fist for me after a while," Easy says. Significant also are poverty, despair, and lack of opportunity. "It seemed to me that my whole life had been spent walking into shabby little houses with poor people bleeding or hacking or just dying quietly under the weight of our 'liberation.'" At the same time it becomes clear that slum conditions and police mistreatment can be the lot of poor people of any kind, and broken family ties do occur among the affluent. Robin, a Watts stripper known as White Butterfly, had become alienated from her wealthy father and gone to reside on squalid Hollywood Row. Her father's retaliation shows that the worst criminal acts are possible of anyone, even members of the so-called respectable class.

Techniques

White Butterfly displays the mastery of realism and characterization that marks the Easy Rawlins series, which follows and uniquely develops the hard-boiled detective tradition. Mosley is attentive to details of ethnic food, clothing, popular culture — even to the point of photos of 1956 stars Little Richard and Elvis Presley tacked to a wall — that accurately convey locale and historical context. The choice of a historical rather than a contemporary setting is a device that subtly enhances the moral message of evil in racism by drawing the reader into a somewhat more objective view. The dialogue is rich, snappy, and ranges from "white man's English" to the rhythmic dialect of Watts.

The immediacy of themes and situations is aided by the use of first-person narration. Besides narrator Easy Rawlins, Mosley provides a wide range of alienated and racist characters, including abused children, helpless wives, exotic dancers, barflies, crooked businessmen, brutal cops. The characters are vividly rendered, and artfully linked to thematic interests. The character Roger Vaughn is one of many possible examples. He is a drunk at the Yellow Dog bar who did seven years' prison time for killing a bartender. Mosley drives home the point: "If the bartender had been a black man Roger wouldn't have done half that." Also, Easy later sees Roger clubbed by cops.

Comparisons and contrasts are often used for thematic effect. Easy reflects, for example, on the physical characteristics of two women. Baby-sitter Gabby Lee had "wiry strawberry hair and definite Negro features." White librarian Stella Keaton had been wiry with the same strawberry-colored hair. Stella's hair color "came out of a bottle, whereas Gabby's came from the genetic war white men have waged on black women for centuries." Also, the Spanish-style house of the Garnetts contrasts sharply with an African American's very small, tenement-type dwelling.

For greater emotional impact, Mosley puts Easy into the picture. Easy recalls that the house of his childhood was that small. Easy's current house in Watts boasts a bedroom so tiny it is "mostly bed." His living room is "like a small public toilet" when filled by five big men. Similar descriptive technique is obvious in depictions of Hollywood Row and historical Bone Street.

The Street's decadence shows in recollections of its "bold and flashy" days, and present observations of its broken sidewalks and shabbily dressed women. Again, cleverly woven in is a thematic point: "All the promise after the war had drained away and a new generation was asking, 'Where's ours?'"

The novel abounds in powerful images. Easy describes the reaction of greedy businessman Jack DeCampo: "His laugh was the sizzle of acid on skin." Easy depicts joy at entering a home still occupied by his wife and family: "I went in finally, feeling like a shadow, stalking himself into light."

While Easy talks to Regina, a halfcrouched, staring tomcat is seen through the window: "His eyes were Regina's, staring through my lies." The remembered smell of fried okra

returns to plague Easy during troubled talk with Regina, to foretell a dying relationship. Okra was served many years ago at his mother's wake, Easy recalls, and its smell usually returns when he feels "strong emotions about a woman who was almost within my reach, just beyond touch."

Themes

The premise of Mosley's detective series is the evil of racial prejudice, which Easy Rawlins encounters at every turn. In White Butterfly, Easy is caught in a racist society that forces him to conceal or to subvert his identity. This self-alienation relates to an important theme in the novel, African American gender relations. This time around Easy is married with two children, an adopted son and a baby daughter born to him and his wife, Regina. But Easy has never let his wife know the source of their income, his secretly held rental properties.

Easy's secrecy is built upon the concern not to alienate the African Americans he knows, who endure lives of limited opportunities in deteriorating Watts. Easy's secretiveness is also compulsive, based on long experience defending himself in a precarious world: "Never in my whole life had anyone ever been able to demand to know about my private life." Because his wife feels a right to know about her husband's doings and source of income, their relations become strained.

Racism even breaks up marriages.

Regina, weary of begging Easy to be more open, leaves him and takes their daughter, reflecting the theme of alienated genders. The novel's downtrodden women — waitresses, dancers, manhating Gabby Lee, the murdered "party girls" — develop the theme of gender inequity. "I treated Maria like a piece of meat," Easy reflects, about a prostitute with whom he had a fling. "I wasn't honest with my wife and I yelled at my baby." Easy declares men generally "on the warpath against women," but the novel's stress is on African American gender relations. Easy's friend Mouse underscores the point: "Mouse ran through women like a boy going through toys on Christmas morning."

The coed murder victim echoes the central thematic concept of alienation seen in Easy, since she too had lived a secret life. The alienation of African Americans from not just the police but the whole legal system, is underscored by Easy's arrest on her father's false charge of extortion. Easy reflects on his wrongful incarceration without good counsel and access to a phone, remarking that the same could happen to white people. "I came to understand that we're all just one step away from an anonymous grave."

Easy is knifed by police arrangement in a jail cell and threatened by brutal interrogation. Easy's sideline of sleuthing is based on alienation between people and the legal system. "Somewhere along the line I had slipped into the role of a confidential agent who represented people when the law broke down," he explains. "And the law broke down often enough to keep me busy."

The question of morals in a corrupt, racist milieu is another theme. Easy is often troubled by issues of right and wrong. Mouse, on the other hand, is "brash and wild and free. He might have been insane, but any Negro who dared to believe in his own freedom in America had to be mad." And: "He'd shoot it out with the law for his own people, but Mouse couldn't hold a moral concept in his brain." Easy discusses morals

with Mouse, notably the police setting him up to track J. T. Saunders whom they assassinate to save face. Easy thinks that isn't right, but Mouse declares that an African American "ain't gonna get nuthin' right till they put 'im under six feet of loose dirt. That's as right as it gets round these parts." Again racism is the roadblock to right behavior.

Adaptations

An abridged book-on-tape edition of White Butterfly, read by Paul Winfield, was published in 1993 by Audio Renaissance. In 1994 Audio Renaissance published an unabridged library edition, read by Stanley B. Clay.

Key Questions

Mosley is deeply concerned about exposing the evils of racism through his fiction, and his writings should thus provoke stimulating discussion.

At the same time, Mosley has constructed his character Easy Rawlins to reflect social concerns beyond the experience of African Americans alone.

White Butterfly has particular relevance to questions of erosion of morals at all levels from rich to poor. Lines of discussion that may be pursued include the kinds of motivations and social pressures that could turn a white coed of affluent background to a life on Hollywood Row, and a man like her father into a killer.

Groups might benefit from comparing this novel to others in the series, in order to determine whether Mosley depicts a society in the process of overall improvement or deterioration. Although Mosley places his characters in a historical context, his fiction readily relates to the present day. Groups interested in the current situation regarding racism, urban blight, police brutality, and lack of upward mobility for some groups, should find much in White Butterfly to discuss.

1. How does the secretiveness of Easy relate to other aspects of his complex character?

2. Easy is strongly critical of businessmen and capitalist greed, yet he owns many properties and cuts deals himself. Is this a capitulation to the "system?" A desire to outsmart white racists on their own terms?

3. How do Mosley's details give a flavor of 1956?

4. Easy depicts the decadence of once-lively Bone Street, and comments: "All the promise after the war had drained away and a new generation was asking, 'Where's ours?'" Do you find any similarity between the feelings of thwarted African Americans in 1956 and members of the present generation of young working people?

5. After his brief courtroom appearance on the false charge of extortion, at which his lawyer ignores him, Easy indicates that the police and judicial system can subvert the rights of anyone. Is this true? Why does he believe this?

6. Discuss Easy's relationship with his wife Regina.

7. How does the librarian, Mrs. Stella Keaton, displease Easy? Are the complaints valid today?

8. Mosley occasionally injects Easy's dreams into the narrative. What does this accomplish?

9. What does the character Lips McGee represent in African American cultural life and history?

10. Toward the novel's end Easy indicates that he is moving to what the reader presumes will be a better neighborhood. What does this move indicate about his identification with his fellows in Watts?

Literary Precedents

Generally discounted is any real tie between Mosley's Easy Rawlins novels and the formal mystery tradition which includes Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason, among other crime-solving heroes. While it is true that the Perry Mason novels reflect Gardner's interest in justice for the "underdog," a theme found in Mosley's fiction, the resemblances end there. Attorney Mason functions within the social mainstream. Critics generally agree that Mosley's detective fiction relates to the hard-boiled tradition of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Chester Himes, although here too there are differences.

Chandler's "dark streets" are not located in the heart of African American neighborhoods, like Mosley's. Although Himes's stories especially reflect the social concerns of African Americans, his two plainclothes police officers in Harlem play a law-enforcement role alien to Easy Rawlins.

Related Titles

Mosley retains the same themes of alienation and racism through novels which maintain chronological continuity. The character Easy Rawlins is introduced in Devil in a Blue Dress (1990), and his background defined as ex-soldier of World War II and the object of a racist-motivated firing from aircraftassembly work in 1948. Financial necessity impels him to work for a white gangster seeking a blond woman known to circulate in Watts, the central setting of the detective series. The process establishes Easy in the business of doing detecting "favors" for people, involves him with a recurring, homicidal friend Mouse, and provides him the windfall of money whereby not only to keep his house but to purchase new properties.

A Red Death (1991) follows the earlier novel by showing Easy in trouble for tax evasion in 1953, the result of owning properties bought with money he could not legally declare in 1948.

Easy's detecting in this novel is done to avoid serious penalties. He is enticed by an FBI agent willing to use influence in the tax matter in exchange for McCarthy-era spy work against a Jewish communist doing charity work at the local church. In the process, Easy suffers crises of conscience over betraying his newfound Jewish friend as well as his sidekick Mouse with whose wife he is having an affair.

In Black Betty (1994), Easy is a single man in 1961 with two adopted children, a dwindling business income, and serious trouble with Mouse, who is just out of jail. Easy accepts muchneeded money to look for a rich family's housekeeper who has disappeared.

The novel reflects the series' progressively darker view of life.

In A Little Yellow Dog (1996), it's the early 1960s and Easy has settled for a quiet respectable life working as a maintenance supervisor at a public school in Watts. But dead bodies interfere with his tranquility, and when the white police come sniffing around, Easy is the focus of close scrutiny. In the violent events that lead to the bloody climax on the day JFK is shot, Easy and his friends hold to a code that never falters, meeting the worst that life can throw at them with humor and grit.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

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

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