

# Blazing saddles and the sellout: themes of racism



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how has paul beatty in the sellout and mel brooks in blazing saddles used similar techniques to explore the theme of racism?

## INTRODUCTION

Films and novels are two different storytelling mediums that use different languages and techniques to convey similar themes. Despite this, there are similarities in some of the techniques used to achieve this. Similar techniques can be noted between *Blazing Saddles*, a satirical comedy Western film directed by Mel Brooks in 1974, and *The Sellout*, a satirical novel written by Paul Beatty in 2015. Both authors effectively use characterisation, setting and narrative point-of-view to instigate commentary on racism.

### Characterisation/Stereotypes

Brooks and Beatty portray their characters in a particular manner to convey their own perspective of racism. Coloured characters in *Blazing Saddles* are characterised as respectable while white characters are characterised as ridiculous. These characterisations are shown when a white man, Lyle, requests “ a n\*gger work song” from Bart, the protagonist and his railroad workers, all of who are black. They respond by singing, *I Get a Kick Out of You* harmoniously and astounding Lyle and his friends. Lyle dismisses it and starts singing “ a real song”, *De Camptown Ladies*, with his friends. Their singing is raucous and accompanied by awkward dancing. The juxtaposition of these characterisations serves to deliver jokes wherein black people are not the punchline and effectively conveys the absurdity of racism by ridiculing white people in a hyperbolic manner. Unlike Brooks, Beatty

purposefully assigns stereotypes to his coloured characters. However, he avoids the negative brute stereotypes associated with black men. The black protagonist, Me, is a farmer who grows “ plant life that had the most cultural relevance” to him- watermelon and “ weed” (p. 62). Despite these stereotypes, he rejects criminal stereotypes associated with black men, having “ never stolen anything” (p. 1). This characterisation is the assumption of Me’s personal black identity that largely resulted from the legacy of racism while subverting the brute stereotypes associated with black men. Thus, by using racist stereotypes, Beatty explores its intimate relationship with one’s black identity. Through cunning characterisation, both authors effectively convey different aspects of racism. Brooks allows the audience to view racism as absurd whilst Beatty explores the relationship between one’s identity and racist stereotypes.

#### NARRATIVE POINT-OF-VIEW

Both authors utilise similar narrative point-of-views in their respective texts. However, while Brooks uses an omniscient third-person point-of-view, both authors primarily focus on the perspective of their black protagonists. Brooks uses Bart’s perspective to allow the audience to empathise with him and interpret the absurdly racist supporting cast through his perspective. In the movie, Bart politely greets an old woman, only to be called a “ n\*gger”. The next shot reveals Bart’s response in which he continues awkwardly smiling, unsure what to do. The subsequent scene shows a close-up shot of Bart being comforted by his friend after this encounter. The unreasonable nature behind racism is revealed by allowing the audience to view it and its effects from Bart’s point-of-view. Beatty uses the perspective of Me, who does not

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often voice his opinions around other characters, internalising it instead. This is shown when, in response to another character's obsession with banning "the n-word", Me internally remarks that "most oppressed peoples... vow to never forget" while "American blacks... want everything expunged" from their history of oppression (p. 97-98). With the use of a first-person narrative, Beatty allows the audience to empathise with Me and his perspective on how political correctness serves to erase the plight of black people. Both authors explore racism from the perspective of a black person. However, while Beatty's use of the first-person point-of-view conveys how being political correct serves to disregard contemporary racial issues, Brooks uses the perspective to convey the nonsensical nature of acts of racism and its effects.

## SETTING

Both authors set their stories in times and places of great racial tensions to effectively address themes of racism. Brooks explores how racism is viewed in a white American culture. Meanwhile, Beatty explores how racism contributes to personal identities and communities. The Wild West was the setting for films of the Western genre. These films typically portrayed values considered important for white America. They usually depicted stories of love and valour. The white men who starred in these films portrayed an idealistic hegemonic masculinity, which was celebrated and enforced. Thus, implicating that coloured men could not achieve this masculinity and isolating them from America's culture. In a contrasting manner, Brooks sets his comedic story in the same setting. He tells the story from a black man's perspective and characterises the white characters as ridiculous.

Additionally, in the movie, one of the characters call the white townspeople “morons”. This serves to effectively undermine and criticise the values of the white American culture that the white characters portray and that Western films used to celebrate. By extension, Brooks decimates the racist beliefs associated with this culture. Alternatively, Beatty specifically sets his story in the city of Dickens to effectively convey themes of identity and community. A latinx and black community resides in this city, which is in contemporary Los Angeles. The residents of Dickens experience a sense of loss regarding their identity once the city is removed from the map. However, upon drawing an outline of where Dickens used to be, residents stand inside of the outline and feel like “ they belonged” unlike when they stand on the other side, even though “ it was just a line” (p. 109). This line serves to distinguish Dickens from the rest of Los Angeles. Thus, Beatty explores how the presence of segregated communities, despite its racist connotations, aid in solidifying one’s identity. Though both authors set their stories in similar racial climates, the use of setting was vastly different. While Brooks set his story in the Wild West to challenge and subvert white American values and its racist implications, Beatty used a more specific setting to explore how racially segregated communities influenced one’s personal identity.

## CONCLUSION

Brooks and Beatty effectively use characterisation, setting and narrative point-of-view in different ways that are reflective of their personal perspective. The used techniques allow themes of racism to be explored critically and intimately, which allows the audience to reflect on contemporary racial issues and see it in a new perspective.