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Dorothy West: The Wedding

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The Literary Encyclopedia

The Wedding

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West, Dorothy
(1995)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

Dorothy West's second and last novel, *The Wedding* (1995), was published forty-seven years after her debut novel, *The Living Is Easy*. In *The Wedding*, West returns readers to the still important issues of class and color-consciousness that she previously had explored in the exclusive circles of east-coast African Americans. After West's first novel was published, she received a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehard Foundation to support her second book. This novel, *The Wedding*, also includes sections from another unfinished manuscript titled "Where the Wild Grape Grows," an apparent allusion to the, perhaps unacknowledged, rule-breaking spirit that

West will locate among staunch Oak Bluffs traditionalists at Martha's Vineyard.

The immediate action in the novel occurs at Martha's Vineyard in the Oval, a fictional neighborhood on the Island of Oak Bluffs. Although the novel is set in 1953, West's narrator supplies readers through flashbacks with more than one hundred years of history. In *The Wedding*, West focuses, more closely than she does in her first novel, on the imbroglios of intra-group color consciousness and class.

There is a new-guard in the Oval in 1953, the year before the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* ruling against *de jure* segregation in the United States. This new-guard marries black and white and thus breaches the entrenched cultural rules among upper-class, old-guard black residents in this neighborhood. For the old-guard marrying light-skinned – not white – and marrying well had been the rule. Between them, Shelby Coles and her Sister Liz have broken all of the rules. Liz's husband is a dark-skinned physician, whose occupation saves him from a completely *déclassé* status in the Oval. Liz, unlike her mother and their neighbors in the Oval, is

concerned that her sister Shelby is rejecting African American men out of fear. Shelby, notwithstanding everyone's restrained distress, is planning to marry a white, Jazz musician. Meade, Shelby's fiancé, is not a light-skinned black man; he is not a member of the right socio-economic class; and his career is unsuitable for a resident of the Oval.

Shelby and Liz are not, however, the only ones breaking the rules. Corrine Coles, their mother, has had over the years a succession of dark-skinned lovers. Clark Coles, their father, has been involved with his brown-skinned nurse throughout most of his marriage. The only member of this family who has no reservations about Shelby's marriage is Gram, Shelby's white great-grandmother who dreams of regenerating the white branch of her family, which was cut off when her daughter Josephine married Hannibal, the son of a woman who was formerly enslaved at Xanadu, the plantation owned by Gram's family.

This novel illuminates the social construction of desire and of race. There is little room in this selective community for people to feel deeply for others, as they are bound by the rules of their class. Even in the selection of marriage

partners, the last consideration among the residents of the Oval seems to be feelings. While West situates her characters in the powerful narratives that shape their lives, she also shows these characters making numerous moral and psychological convolutions in behavior and thought to justify themselves in their contradictions. Yet they, including Shelby, remain ambivalent about and distanced from true feelings of love.

Dorothy West refuses to tell a simple story in *The Wedding*. Instead, she demonstrates the complexities of desire, class, and color through her illustration of the duplicity of the old-guard that attempts to impose tradition on the younger generation. Yet West also interrogates the motives of the young: Liz's and Shelby's – the sisters whose stories shape the narrative – rejection of their parents' attitudes on race and class raises questions of motives. Why, for example, do these sisters choose mates that are at different poles of the socially unacceptable extremes to other residents of the Oval? Are they rebelling against tradition or are their choices based in feelings? Dorothy West never really provides satisfactory answers to these questions in *The Wedding*. This open-endedness, however, does not nullify the value

of West's novel, as she demonstrates through her characters the complex lives people live.

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