

The Sneetches: Dr. Seuss's Critique of Consumer Culture and Classism

Much has been written about the ways in which “The Sneetches” by Dr. Seuss critiques antisemitism and racism. Philip Nel notes that Seuss, whose legal name was Theodor Seuss Geisel, had been sketching out what was to become the Sneetches as early as 1953, when a single illustration of the Sneetches appeared with three paragraphs of text in the pages of *Redbook* (Annotated 164). The story’s message: “And, really, it’s sort of a shame, For except for those stars, every Sneetch is the same” (Seuss, *Redbook* 77). The story was published two years before Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat on the bus and in the summer between the two Supreme Court hearings on *Brown v. Board of Education*. “The Sneetches,” along with *Horton Hears a Who!*, as Charles Cohen notes, was “the blade [Seuss] had learned to wield against intolerance, and he was as much ahead of his fellow Americans as he had been in urging them to enter World War II” (221). In the essay “No Matter How Small’: The Democratic Imagination of Dr. Seuss,” Henry Jenkins writes that the story “rendered the whole logic of racism absurd” (200). Donald E. Pease notes that “when *The Sneetches and Other Stories* appeared [...] critics saw its antiracist theme as an elaboration of the critique of anti-Semitism that Geisel had directed against Nazi Germany in his work at *PM*” (118). And according to Walter C. Metz, the story “The Sneetches” represents a “compelling” indictment against the Holocaust. Metz claims the bird appearing in 1941 cartoon “I am Part Jewish” is

an early figure for the Sneetches—he looks exactly like a Sneetch ... Dr. Seuss may have been surprised by his friend’s observation that the 1961 Sneetches were reminiscent of war-time Jewish victims of the Holocaust, but at some un-

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conscious level, he had merely returned to his own allegorical tradition of representing Jewish-Americans using his Uncle Sam bird, 20 years prior. (31)

The bird in the cartoon does indeed resemble a Sneetch, but I contend it is instead Seuss's version of the American eagle. The beard, as well as the stars and striped hat, are allusions to Uncle Sam; it makes more sense for the bird to be our national symbol than the beach bird that would not be created for over a decade.

What has received little scholarly attention in Seuss's work, however, are the ways in which "The Sneetches" directly comments on consumer culture and emergent classism – all of which Seuss deemed detrimental to American democracy and his vision of civil society. In this article, I discuss Seuss's earlier work, particularly the work he produced for the newspaper *PM* during World War II and the editorial cartoons he produced for the Dartmouth student newspaper *Jack-O-Lantern*. I suggest that while Seuss's political perspectives were not without complications – where he offers eviscerating critiques of racism and antisemitism, his perspectives at times included xenophobic, stereotypical, and racist images – "The Sneetches" offers a greater indictment of American consumerism and prejudices based on class status.

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In the early 1940s, Dr. Seuss used his political cartoons, most published in the newspaper *PM*, to speak out against Jim Crow laws, antisemitism, and other forms of discrimination. In a September 18, 1941 cartoon, for instance, he depicts Charles Lindbergh atop a huge pile of "Nazi Anti-Semite Stink." Lindbergh, who gave his first openly anti-Semitic speech in Des Moines, Iowa, on September 11, 1941, is shown spreading the filth of Nazi thought across American soil. In "What This County Needs Is A Good Mental Insecticide," an essay published on June 11, 1942, Seuss shows Uncle Sam using a Flit-like insecticide gun to eject a "racial prejudice bug" from the heads of American citizens. And in a cartoon that appeared on August 19, 1942, Seuss draws Georgia Governor Eugene Talmadge, a divided state of Georgia, and Talmadge's own "national" bird named "Racial Hatred." These are just three examples of the many cartoons Seuss published about intolerance during his tenure at the newspaper. *PM* prided itself on being "against people who push other people around" (Minear 13). Seuss developed "the confrontational style later used to great effect in his children's books – especially the overtly political ones" while publishing with *PM* (Nel 41-2).

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, Seuss' "confrontational style" took on a decidedly sinister hue. As fears of a Japanese invasion swept the country, Seuss propagated anti-Japanese messages in his *PM* cartoons and spoke in favor of the internment of Japanese Americans. Seuss' caricatures in his anti-Japan cartoons were

drawn upon longstanding Western stereotypes about the Japanese people. In a cartoon that appeared in March of 1942, as in many similar cartoons of that time, Seuss likens Imperial Japan to Nazi Germany. Given that Japan had signed the Tripartite Pact with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in 1940, Seuss' relating of the two Axis powers seems reasonable. But whereas Nazi Germany is represented by the clearly recognizable figure of Hitler, Japan is rendered as an unspecified individual who seems to stand for the entire Japanese population. Moreover, Seuss' portrays this individual with exaggeratedly slanted eyes and pig-like nose. Even more troubling are his anti-Japanese American cartoons that lent strong support to internment camps. Seuss, who maintained a summer home in California, would have witnessed the racist hype and paranoia directed against Japanese and Japanese Americans living on the West Coast at this time. A cartoon showing a long line of Japanese men running all the way up the western coastline queuing up to collect bricks of TNT was titled "Waiting for the signal from home." The illustration was published less than ten weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor when America's distrust of Japanese and those of Japanese descent was greatly heightened and gave renewed rise to old racial stereotypes. Nel writes that "Seuss's caricatures of the Japanese are no more derogatory than those of his contemporary cartoonists" (Icon 55). But this can hardly exculpate Seuss, not least because many of his contemporaries were just as derogatory in their depictions of Jewish people and African Americans as they were in their depictions of the Japanese. That Seuss resisted stereotyping Jews and Blacks in his *PM* cartoons indicates that he deployed racist images of Japanese and Japanese Americans consciously and purposefully.

But that mind-set would disappear from Seuss' work entirely after the fall of 1953. Jenkins writes that Seuss went on a trip for *Life* magazine, a "fact-finding mission to Japan, researching the American occupation's impact on education and child-rearing practices" (188). In the process of this investigation, Seuss interviewed Japanese school-children and this altered his outlook for life. The experience helped transform Seuss' attitude toward the Japanese people, and his book, *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954) "drew on his recently acquired knowledge of Japan's schools, where individualism was a relatively new concept" (Pease 93). Seuss dedicated *Horton Hears a Who!* to Mitsugi Nakamura, an educator whom he met on this trip, and he never again depicted the Japanese people in a negative light. Additionally, Seuss discovered his books "had been adopted in both Japan and Korea as part of the official post-war re-education curriculum" (Jenkins 188). With this discovery, "Seuss knew *Horton* would be used to train not only American children, but children in emerging democratic cultures around the world" (Jenkins 188).

Seuss deployed the "confrontational style" he developed at *PM* to combat intolerance and racism at home. World War II and the Holocaust had no doubt fueled Seuss' opposition to antisemitism, as did his earlier experience at Dartmouth College, which throughout the first half of the twentieth century had a reputation for limiting the ad-

mittance of Jewish students and whose president, Ernest M. Hopkins, declared as late as 1945 that “Dartmouth is a Christian College founded for the Christianization of its students” (qtd. in Honan 16A). Although he was not Jewish, Seuss experienced anti-Semitic sentiments at New Hampshire Ivy League school. As a freshman he found that not a single fraternity expressed any interest in him. “With my black hair and long nose,” Seuss said, “I was supposed to be Jewish. It took a year and a half before word got around that I wasn’t” (qtd. in Morgan 27). Seuss’s ability to deflect painful jibes with sarcasm and biting humor sparked his interest in joining Dartmouth’s student magazine, *The Dartmouth Jack-O-Lantern*, as a satirical cartoonist.

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The racial climate of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the United States was tumultuous and increasingly galvanized the nation. In 1954, the Supreme Court made the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, stating that state laws that segregated students based on race were unconstitutional and that separate was not equal. Just one year later, Rosa Parks refused to stand on the bus and give her seat to a white man. Each of these situations drew national attention and caused Americans to examine the artificiality of separating people by the color of their skin. In September 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower deployed federal troops to desegregate Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas after Governor Orval Faubus used the Arkansas National Guard to keep nine black students from entering the school. “By the end of the decade,” William and Nancy Young conclude, “the nation found itself poised, reluctantly or not, to enter some of the greatest social changes of the century” (xx, 9). On February 1, 1960 a sit-in at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina was the first of what was to become more than a decade of peaceful demonstrations. Inspired by the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., the activities of civil rights groups such as the Freedom Riders drew increased attention to the discrimination of people based on the color of their skin.

“The Sneetches” tells the story of a society of ostrich-like yellow birds that live on a beach.¹ Some Sneetches have stars on their bellies and some do not. The Star-Belly Sneetches are “a distinct and dominant group,” an elite caste in an “oppressive social structure” (Bracey 83, Klaassen and Klaassen 123). What some critics see as “The Sneetches” generalized condemnation of race and ethnic prejudices appears tied to a

1 Seuss had used the image of the ostrich to represent American isolationism. In light of racial tensions of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the similarity of Sneetches to ostriches seems hardly coincidental and appears to suggest that large segments of the population had buried their heads in the sand, hoping the Civil Rights Movement might somehow disappear.

fairly specific critique of class-based social inequalities. The Sneetch society is completely homogeneous save for the presence or absence of stars on their bellies. As Johann and Mari-Gretta Klaassen explain:

‘Because they had stars,’ the Star-Belly Sneetches (SBSes) refused social contact with Plain-Belly Sneetches (PBSes), and appear to have control over the Poozer’s share of the resources on the beaches—SBS children excluded PBS children from their ball games; SBS adults excluded PBS adults from their ‘frankfurter roasts/Or picnics or parties or marshmallow toasts.’ These exclusionary social practices were systematic and long standing. (122)

In a show of conspicuous consumption, the Star-Belly Sneetches engage in leisure activities such as playing ball (with the ball featuring a star no less) and roasting hot dogs, while the Sneetches who have no stars are left to stand apart and watch. The Sneetches treat the stars as a type of arti-factual communication that is similar to that of wearing name brand clothing. Although wearing brand name clothing affords no legal privileges, it is often perceived as signaling an elevated social status. By wearing distinctive logos, wears intend to let the world know they are well-off enough to afford the brand. The French sportswear company, Lacoste, was among the first to affix a logo – the distinctive green crocodile – to its garments, which quickly became status symbols. In 1952, Lacoste began exporting their apparel to the United States (Lacoste), where the wealthy would wear them during their leisure pursuits. Ads began to appear toting their signature Izod polo with crocodile on the breast as “the shirt of champions.” That the green color of the Lacoste crocodile is of a nearly identical shade of green as the stars on the Sneetches’ bellies further supports a reading that detects a deep strain of consumer culture criticism in “The Sneetches.”

Further evidence of the reading rests in the fact that the Sneetch stars can be removed and replaced for the right price. And the villain who supplies the means comes in a character drawing on ethnic stereotypes. Sylvester McMonkey McBean looks a little like a chimpanzee, wears a green hat and bow-tie, and has a name most definitely has a ring of Irishness to it. He “gives an immediate impression of deviousness” (Bracey 85). Metz notes the racial connections: “[T]he positioning of the Irish capitalist as a subhuman ‘McMonkey’ relies on the same sort of stereotyping that fueled early 20th century antisemitism, a topic that was frequently a major target for the German-American Geisel” (28). Though Seuss said “The Sneetches” was “inspired by antisemitism” (qtd. in Fensch, Sneetches 118), he was certainly not above making racial slurs of his own.

McBean provides the plain-bellied Sneetches with a “magical” solution in a machine that puts stars on their bellies and make them appear like the Star-Belly Sneetches. Once the plain-bellied Sneetches have stars on their bellies, they want to be treated “exactly like” the star-bellied Sneetches (Seuss, *Sneetches* 12). As Klaassen and Klaassen explain,

“The machine erased the external differences between the PBSes and the SBSes—suddenly, all the Sneetches had stars” (124). The external markers of all the Sneetches were suddenly the same as this had been the only thing differentiating the Sneetches in their minds. According to Klaassens and Klaassen, “The sudden shift that the ‘very peculiar machine’ brought about in Sneetch society presented the PBSes with an option they had never had before: they were able to shift from one group to the other” (124). Once the plain-bellied Sneetches acquire the external symbol of privilege, the presence of “stars upon thars,” those who had been in power, the original star-bellied Sneetches, turn to McBean, who uses another machine to remove stars from their bellies and declare the elitists are Sneetches sans stars. Pretty soon, confusion reigns with Sneetches running in and out of machines until no one is sure who was an original Star-Belly Sneetch and who was not.

McBean’s machines allow the Sneetches “to alter and manipulate caste markers, until nobody can be sure who is elite and who is subordinate” (Jenkins 200). After a while, it is pretty clear the only one coming out ahead is the capitalist and inventor McBean. As Mensch and Freeman note, “the scene turns into an orgy of capitalist exploitation, with constant streams of Sneetches paying to enter one machine to be starred and then to enter another to be un-starred, while McBean stands grinning in the center, in front of an ever-growing mountain of cash” (34). The Sneetches run from one machine to the next and McBean, who stops interacting with them altogether, merely stands by as the birds literally throw their money at him. In the end, the Sneetches are unified by their “shared victimization,” that is, a “complete economic destruction of Sneetch society” when McBean drives away with all of their money. Having been reduced to common economic powerlessness, the Sneetches finally realize a unitary class consciousness” (113). Only total economic destruction brings the two types of Sneetch together. Only absent capital can the Sneetches learn to accept each other.

The enduring value of “The Sneetches” is in the way it seems to link the constructiveness of race and ethnic categories to economic privileges, yet it falls short in offering strategies on how persistent discriminatory practices may be effectively resisted. Shared economic exploitation may result in something like “a unitary class consciousness,” as Mensch and Freeman suggest, but it seems highly unlikely that this will erase racial and ethnic difference as well. In her 2010 article “Emerging Themes on Aspects of Social Class and the Discourse of White Privilege,” Jennifer Heller argues that a

more comprehensive understanding of racial advantage is achieved when theorists indicate how whiteness leads to the manifestations of materially based advantages as it interacts with other social features such as race, class and gender, which shape identity and life chances. (112).

“Sneetches” does not wrestle with race or ethnic difference – or multiculturalism or the

political approaches employed by Black, Asian, Native American or Latino people – because the physical differences in the Sneetches are minor and removable; the society is utterly homogeneous save for the salesman McBean and the bird who observes the story but does not interact. As Michael Kazin notes, “The Sneetches” show Seuss as “a typical 1930s/40s Liberal in that he cared less about multiculturalism than he did about the more fundamental American ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality” (qtd. in Wood).

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Although he found antisemitism and Jim Crow laws reprehensible (or, perhaps, more accurately, un-American), Seuss had a blind spot when it came to people of Japanese descent, whom he once depicted stereotypically in his political cartoons. A 1953 trip changed his views on the Japanese people. He met educators and children alike and shifted his perspective. He understood that books could be used to educate not only American school children but those in emerging democracies, as well. Seuss’ post-war books therefore include the social and political messages he saw as vital in educating an effective citizen. Although problematic with regard to its apparent endorsement of assimilation and its use of ethnic stereotypes, “The Sneetches” presents a sustained critique of the perils of consumerism and classism, and about the construction of difference and our still very pronounced inability to deal with it. The text is an example of radical children’s literature as it does “not guarantee a better future for American children, but [...] challenge[s] them to think critically and creatively about their choices” (Zipes, *Tales* ix). As Julia Adams notes in “Class Analysis and Culture: What the Sneetches Can Teach Us”: “The ending of “The Sneetches” is a sly vision of utopia, in which the Sneetches decide to be just one big happy mutually indistinguishable group” (11). The Sneetches learn a lesson that Seuss hopes everyone will learn – to be inclusive and accepting of all others in spite of how they look.

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