

It's easy to have principles when you're rich. The important thing is to have principles when you're poor. — Ray Kroc

Though I am grateful for the blessings of wealth, it hasn't changed who I am. My feet are still on the ground. I'm just wearing better shoes.

— Oprah Winfrey

There's nothing surer / the rich get rich and the poor get children.

— Gus Kahn and Raymond B. Egan

Journal Response Write a short journal entry about your attitude toward money. How much is enough? Do you consider yourself wealthy? middle-class? working-class? poor? Why? How do you view people who are better-off than you are? How do you view those who are struggling to make ends meet?

Walter Mosley

A former computer programmer turned writer, Walter Mosley (born 1952) is best known for his critically acclaimed Easy Rawlins detective novels, which explore the moral ambiguities of crime in the African American neighborhoods of Los Angeles. Mosley grew up in the Watts section of Los Angeles, attended Goddard College, and received a BA in political science from Johnson State College. He worked for Mobil Oil for several years before pursuing a master's degree in writing from the City College of the City University of New York, where he later founded a publishing degree program for young urban students. In addition to the Easy Rawlins series, Mosley has published a number of mystery and science-fiction novels notable for examining issues of race and class—among them Blue Light (1998), Fearless Jones (2001), and The Wave (2006)—as well as several collections of short stories, such as Futureland: Nine Stories of an Imminent Future (2001). An outspoken social critic and political activist, Mosley also writes provocative nonfiction, including regular essay contributions for the New Yorker and the Nation. He wrote the Grammy-winning liner notes for Richard Pryor . . . And It's Deep Too!: The Complete Warner Bros. Recordings (1968–1992) (2000) and the book Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History (2000), an analysis of capitalism's failings. He lives in New York.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

In this essay Mosley draws on his research for Workin' on the Chain Gang to propose a new system for understanding class structure in the United States. A longer version first appeared in the Nation on December 18, 2006, as part of a cycle of essays Mosley wrote to start a dialogue about American cultural issues that have, as he put it, "weakened our spirits to the point of collapse."

"The rich get richer . . ." This truism is irrefutable. ". . . and the poor get poorer." We look away from ourselves, and our loved ones, when the latter phrase is used to complete the saying.

Often only the first part of this age-old axiom is quoted. It's as if we are silently saying, "There's no reason to talk about the poor, about poverty. Let's just accept the notion that money migrates toward money and leave it at that."

But where does this money, which moves so unerringly into rich folks' pockets, come from? This is one of the most important questions in everyday working people's lives. Because the money that makes the rich richer comes out of the sweat, the sacrifice, and ultimately the blood of working men and women. . . .

Most people I know consider themselves middle-class workers. They're making good money, they say, and have good credit at the bank. Their children will go to good colleges and get better jobs. They will retire in comfort and travel to Europe (or Africa) to see the genesis of their culture.

These self-proclaimed middle-class citizens feel a certain private smugness about their proven ability to make it in this world while those in the working and lower classes—because of upbringing, lack of intelligence or will, or bad luck—are merely the fuel for the wealth of the nation.

But how do you know where you fit in the class system? Is it a level of income? Is it defined by education or the kind of job you possess? Is class a function of your relationship to your labor? For instance, are you in the middle class because you own your own business? Or are we defined by our rung on the ladder? As long as we are not at the bottom (or the top), then we can say we are in the middle.

It's a difficult question because the economic state of every one's life in this world is in perpetual flux. Depression, inflation, recession—all these and many other economic events continually change our finances and redefine our position in society. Our money grows in the

bank, but at the same time it loses value. Our property increases in value, but taxes and expenses also rise. We say that we own the mortgage on our home, but more often than not the mortgage controls us. To buy a \$10,000 home we pay \$40,000 over thirty years. Where did that extra \$30,000 go?

It seems to me that we need a rule-of-thumb definition of class. We can't use the pristine forms of geometry to prove where we are and what we're worth. Mathematical sums don't define wealth; the ability to control your time and quality of life does.

I'd like to put forward a system of class definition that is grounded in what I believe to be a common-sense approach to the issue.

Poverty is defined, in my system, by people not being able to cover the basic necessities in their lives. Indispensable medical care, nutrition, a place to live: all these essentials, for poor people, are often and chronically beyond reach. If a poor person needs \$10 a day to make ends meet, often he or she only makes eight and a half.

Wealth, in my definition, is when money is no longer an issue or a question. Wealthy people don't know how much money they have or how much they make. Their worth is gauged in property, natural resources and power, in doors they can go through and the way the law works. Wealth moves like a shark over the rockbound crustaceans of the poor and working classes.

The middle classes, which logic would tell us occupy the space between poverty and wealth, are made up of two very different subspecies. One is the working class; the other is the class of limited privilege.

It is my proposition that the great majority of us fall into the former group. The privileged middle class are people who have to work for a living but who can buy almost anything they desire: a summer cottage, a prestige car, berths at the finer schools for their children. These people are lawyers, real estate developers, the owners of small and successful businesses. If someone in the class of privilege were to lose his job or experience reversals in his business, he would have time (between nine and twelve months) to consider his options before any part of his lifestyle would necessitate change. His children could stay in private schools, he could still go to fine restaurants and the opera on Friday nights, and even donate to the same charities.

But if a person from the working class loses her job, she would have to find an equivalent one within the month or it'll be fast food and junior college for everyone in the family.

Working-class people are (excuse the Marxism) wage-slaves. Those in the working class live on the edge of poverty, saying to themselves that they are doing all right. They drink and watch far too much TV.

They buy Lotto tickets and live moderate lives that are far beyond their means. The profit they generate flows to the rich, and they borrow to fill out the coffers.

Most Americans are working-class wage-slaves, arguing that they're better off. This fantasy, more than any other confusion, hobbles us. Because we fear to see how delicate our economic state is, we cannot motivate ourselves to demand change.

Capitalism, the accrual of wealth from labor, is the religion of America; poverty our cardinal sin. To recognize our position in relation to wealth would be perceived as a confession of wrongdoing, and so we stoically bear up, pretending we are doing all right. And because we don't see ourselves clearly, we have poor healthcare, no adequate insurance for old age, poisons in our water and our food and the continual nagging fear that things may at any moment fall apart.

Where is the money? It's not in our bank accounts or serving our people. It's not in affordable housing, quality education or the development of sciences that would better the species and the planet. It's not being used for the purpose of global peace.

America is the wealthiest nation in the world, by far, but we the American people are not wealthy. We, most of us, live on the border of poverty. In the distance are towering silvery skyscrapers housing our corporations and our billionaires. But do not be fooled. This skyline does not belong to us. We are not partners in the corporation of America. . . .

This knowledge, as depressing and oppressing as it is, is also a harbingering of hope. Poverty is not our fault or our destiny. We, the poor and working class, have built this nation and it, along with all its fabulous wealth, belongs to us. From the Atlantic to the Pacific we, the workers, are the ones who hold sway. And every vault, every clinic, every drop of sweat fallen upon American soil is our democratic birthright. . . .

A man can be rich, but only a nation can be wealthy. And if any person of any age suffers from poverty, then our whole country bears the shame.

Meaning

1. What is the author's thesis? What reasons does he give for classifying?
2. In which category does Mosley place himself, and what does he say about this group in relation to the others?
3. In paragraph 3, Mosley writes, "The money that makes the rich richer comes out of the sweat, the sacrifice and ultimately the blood of working men and women." What does he mean?

4. Try to guess the meanings of any of the following words that are unfamiliar to you. Test your guesses in a dictionary, and then come up with a sentence or two using each new word.

truism (1)	pristine (8)	coffers (15)
irrefutable (1)	indispensable (10)	accrual (17)
axiom (2)	chronically (10)	cardinal (17)
genesis (4)	gauged (11)	stoically (17)
flux (7)	crustaceans (11)	harbinger (20)

Purpose and Audience

1. What do you think Mosley's purpose is? Do you think his classification is really motivated by a desire to offer a "harbinger of hope" (paragraph 20)?
2. Who is Mosley's intended audience? What in the text supports your answer?
3. What do you think of Mosley's categories? Are they complete? convincing? If you know people in these categories, do they match Mosley's description?

Method and Structure

1. How does or doesn't the method of classification lend itself to Mosley's purpose?
2. Summarize each of the groups Mosley identifies (even those he does not discuss in detail). What is Mosley's principle of classification? Why does he categorize the groups the way he does?
3. What do you notice about Mosley's organization and the space he devotes to each category? Why do you think he varies the amount of space he gives to the categories? Do some of the categories get shortchanged?
4. **Other Methods** In addition to classification, Mosley relies heavily on definition (Chapter 11) to advance his argument. Why do you think he defines each class so painstakingly? What would the essay lose if Mosley didn't define his terms?

Language

1. Examine Mosley's tone. How would you characterize his attitude toward his subject? Is he angry, resigned, hopeful, something else? Does his overall tone strengthen his argument or weaken it? Why? (If necessary, see pp. 38–39 and 334–35 on tone.)

2. Mosley uses a lot of "five-dollar words," many of which appear in the vocabulary list. He also injects the first person (*I*, *me*, *we*, and *our*) throughout his essay. How do his diction and point of view relate to his purpose and to his audience?
3. Mosley asks his readers to "excuse the Marxism" when he introduces the phrase "wage-slaves" in paragraph 15. Look up the term *Marxism* in a dictionary or encyclopedia and identify other economic terms in Mosley's essay that hold Marxist connotations. (If necessary, see pp. 48–49 on connotation.) What does his use of such politically charged language reveal about Mosley's relationship to his subject?

Writing Topics

1. **Journal to Essay** Building on your journal entry about your attitude toward money (p. 186), write a response to Mosley's essay. Does it anger you? irritate you? reassure you? inspire you? make you feel something else? Did it lead you to rethink your own class status? Do you find Mosley's categories, definitions, and conclusions to be fair? Why or why not? Support your response with details from Mosley's essay and examples from your own experience.
2. Using Mosley's essay as a model, write an essay that proposes a new classification of a group of people (teachers, bosses, or salesclerks, for example) for the purpose of advancing an argument about a larger issue. Sort your subject into classes according to a consistent principle, and provide plenty of details to clarify the classes you decide on. In your essay, be sure to explain to your readers why the classification should persuade them to accept your argument.
3. **Cultural Considerations** Mosley's classification questions the foundations of the American dream, which holds that a person from even the most humble circumstances can achieve prosperity through determination and hard work. How realistic, or not, do you think the American dream is today? Write an essay answering this question. As evidence for your argument, you may want to discuss how, if at all, the American dream applies to you, given your social and economic background.
4. **Connections** In his paragraph on page 171, E. B. White alludes to the financial struggles of newly arrived New Yorkers but prefers to celebrate their contributions to the city. Write a brief essay in which you compare and contrast White's and Mosley's attitudes toward economic hardship in America, as well as their assumptions about how it can be overcome. Be sure to support your analysis by citing details from each selection.