

Analysis of strange fruit essay sample



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First recorded in 1939, the protest song “ Strange Fruit” came to articulate the racism and brutality of lynching* endured by so many in the United States, particularly in the south. According to figures kept by the Tuskegee Institute, of the 3833 lynchings between 1889 and 1940, four fifths of the ninety percent lynched in the south were of African American descent.

As horrific and cruel lynching was, it was considered acceptable. Society at the time believed that lynching was an act that was designed to keep African Americans in their place, its supporters rejected the notion that ‘ negroes’ or other minorities had equal rights. Lynching was also considered a sport in some ways, postcards were taken of crowds picnicking under hanging corpses to show people how proud they were of what they had accomplished. A Jewish schoolteacher, Abel Meeropol, saw one of these postcards in the 1930s and was prompted to write the song “ Strange Fruit” (which was originally called “ Bitter Fruit”) – later to be famous by Billie Holiday. “ I wrote “ Strange Fruit”” Meeropol said, “ because I hate lynching and I hate injustice and I hate people who perpetuate it.”

Billie Holiday was only able performing at Café Society due to harmful ramifications of racist insults she’d encountered while touring with the popular Artie Shaw band. For example she would have to enter hotels through the backdoor while other performers would have the privilege and respect of entering through the front doors. This was not only because of the response to the song, but also because of her African American background.

Holiday said that singing “ Strange Fruit” made her fearful of retaliation but, because its imagery reminded her of her father, she continued to sing the

piece, making it a regular part of her live performances. She would close her performances with this song; the waiters would stop all service in advance; the room would be in darkness except for a spotlight on Holiday's face; and there would be no encore.

Though no one at the time knew it, when Billie Holiday first sang "Strange Fruit" at Café Society, it was an early cry for civil rights—some might even say she was singing America into the beginning of the Civil Rights Era. Jazz writer Leonard Feather said it was "the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism." Now, more than seventy years later, such is the song's enduring power that rapper Kanye West sampled the track on his latest album *Yeezus* (Track is called, "Blood on the Leaves")

*Lynching: Dictionary Definition - kill (someone) for an alleged offence without a legal trial, especially by hanging.

Southern trees bear strange fruit - Meaning that the trees in the American South bear a different kind of fruit: people. Blood on the leaves and blood at the root - This could be interpreted two ways, one literally that there is blood on the leaves and the root of the tree. But also it could be said that there is blood on the leaves meaning the present, and the root being the past meaning that there always has been bloodshed since the beginning. Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze - Taken literally, there were bodies swinging from the trees in the breeze. Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees - People were commonly hung from the poplar trees which are abundant in the south.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south - Pastoral means the countryside which implies something beautiful and natural. When put with the adjective "gallant", which refers to the chivalry of the south, we can see that the writer is being ironic as the image presented is the opposite. The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth - How the bodies looked hanging from the trees (Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh

Then the sudden smell of burning flesh) - The contrasting diction of these two lines contribute to the overall theme of the song. The romantic outlook is then sharply contrasted by the shocking truth: the smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck - Crows are used as a symbol of death as they are known for eating dead things (carrion). (For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck

For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop) - The natural decompositions of the bodies. Here is a strange and bitter crop - A crop is something which has to be planted, therefore this line is implying that the people of the south have created this. This final line shocked the listeners when Billie sang it and left them with something to ponder.