

The horrors of lynching essay

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Take a step up on the platform, and breathe in one of your last breaths. Your eyes involuntarily start tearing up, though you don't mean to look weak. You didn't do anything wrong; you know that. The color of your skin is something you can't help. At this point, the noose is placed over your head. The platform drops out from under you, and everything goes black. This scenario was all too common for African Americans all throughout the United States in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

More specifically, 4, 743 innocent African Americans were killed during this time period (“Lynching Statistics”). This atrocity only furthered African American resentment towards their white oppressors, which made their rebellion a very violent affair. Many factors contributed to the mass lynchings that were primarily for African Americans.

One of these reasons was that the newly freed African American slaves posed a new threat to white women. In hopes of protecting their loved ones, white men automatically assume the absolute worst about African American men, especially if said white man sees the African American man speaking or merely looking at a white woman (“Lynching”). For example, in 1955, an African-American teenager, Emmett Till, from Chicago, was murdered while visiting family in Money, Mississippi; a town with a population of 55. Till's only offense: trying to flirt with a store owner's European-American wife due to a dare from his friends. Four days later, his beaten, unclothed, and dead body was found in the banks of the Tallahatchie River, nearby.

The store owner (the European woman's husband) and his half-brother were the culprits. Both of these men had no consequences for their violent acts of

hatred for a stranger merely speaking to their loved one, who had no harm due to the conversation (Steelwater). It was all too common that immediate assumptions were implied that African Americans had the intentions of harming or raping the white woman (“Lynching”). In the present day, this type of unfortunate situation would be instantly classified as a prime example of direct racism, yet this was commonly accepted and encouraged in the 1800’s and 1900’s. Another possible reason for lynching was speaking out of turn. If whites did not allow permission for African Americans to speak, or, even worse, had they talked back to their white oppressors, they would quickly be physically punished or put to death. Southern, white slave owners felt as though their “whiteness is a privilege”, and that questioning such a fact is sickening (Steelwater). It was believed that in the social structure of the United States, white (males, specifically) were at the very top.

Slave owners kept this in mind as a “lower human being” was giving them an unpleasant attitude, and punished them greatly for their grave mistake (Varney). Although, most times African Americans had no reason to be punished. Innocence was a common trait for those killed during these lynchings. One slave, William Coleman, actually got to tell his story of a uniform white attack on him.

In his testimony, Coleman states “Well, I don’t know anything that I had said or done that injured any one. Further than being a radical in that part of the land, as for interrupting any one, I didn’t...” (*Waldrep, 139). Instances like this depict the confusion that the African Americans had towards why the hatred was directed towards them.

They believed that they were being punished for no reason whatsoever, yet took these punishments without question due to the fear that the white supremacists had instilled in them. These punishments were not so easy to accept; regardless of knowing the reason they were receiving them or not. Lynching is not only limited to public hangings, but also includes travesties such as burning, beating, stabbing, shooting, and/or slowly torturing to death (Varney). In some cases, especially when the Black was suspected of committing an actual crime, lynchings became tremendous public spectacles, with entire families and even journalists coming from miles away to watch the day's event. The Chicago Tribune began a tally of lynchings in 1882 that it continued until 1968. It was joined by Crisis, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in 1912, in a list that came to be called "The Shame of America" ("Lynching"). More often than not, these public occurrences were carried out by a small group of Whites late at night, with less than 1% of the lynchings ever successfully convicted (Wood). With the knowledge that they can successfully get away with such an atrocity, the whites felt as though they have the power to do whatever they please, and that there are no consequences.

Although, they were wrong about this assumption. These sickening acts of public violence directed towards one race slowly, but surely, angered enough people of the African American race that the majority of them eventually experienced true hatred for the white race. This hatred inspired some great people to commit acts purely based on personal hatred for someone, regardless of what the better thing was to do in the situation. For example,

one slave, Nat Turner, eventually led the most violent slave revolt in United States history. Not only will he accomplish that, but he also had escaped from the family that owned him, and grew so angry at them that he returned, years later, in order to pay them back for the mistreatment that he received. He killed the entire family, as well as neighboring slave owners in the area (Wood, 92-4). Violence such as this in retaliation to the white's horrible treatment in the past was common, yet sometimes unsuccessful.

Another former slave, Denmark Vesey, formed a rebellion in Charleston, North Carolina. He recruited anybody he could find; young or old, women or men, etc. He needed anybody and everybody that was willing to fight for this worthy cause. His original plan was to free all the slaves that he could, and more importantly, kill their white masters and their families.

Although, authorities heard about what Vesey was planning before it could take place, and immediately arrested Vesey and some other leaders of this rebellion ere of its beginning. Although, many antislavery abolitionists still regarded Vesey as a hero, despite his failure, due to his genuine tenacity and perseverance in the matter (Varney). Heroes were hard to come by in desperate times such as this. Taking the expected way, like not putting up a fight to the white oppressors, occurred incredibly frequently.

For example, while awaiting his trial for a wrongly accused rape of a white woman, a black veteran, Mack Charles Parker, was shot to death in Mississippi in 1959. Had he refused to show at this wrongfully accused trial, or protested against it, he would not have been in the situation in which angry, white men could shoot at him for reasons he can't control (Wood, 26-

9). Although, many of the whites who lynched African Americans were part of a hate group, the Ku Klux Klan, which was made primarily for the benefit and success of the white race. They believed that whites need to come before everyone else, and did all measures (violent OR non-violent) to ensure that this happens.

Going against an incredibly powerful force such as this one was near impossible for any African American; hero (like Denmark Vesey) or not (like Mack Charles Parker) ! The Ku Klux Klan had a total of about 4, 000 members in the early 1900's, all of whom were incredibly passionate about the continuation of white power (Steelwater). The Ku Klux Klan did all in their power to keep things this way. Lynching was a main factor, although they also intimidated African Americans by wearing their masked white robes and hosting public hangings of African Americans, as well as giving speeches at these hangings to enforce the “ white supremacy” point throughout the audience. The audience, terrified to speak out at this incredibly horrifying display of inhumanity and cruelty, could do nothing in their power except agree with these intimidating strangers (“ Lynching”). Scary as that may have been, it depicted how rebellion was so very difficult for anyone, especially an African American, to start without consequences. The fear of being hanged, beaten, or harmed in any way, especially being done so in public as a demonstration, was always present in the mind of those who wish to change the white supremacy. Although, many have managed to do so, without regrets.

Brave souls such as Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey are prime examples of true heroism. Though this heroism was for a good cause, it took a lot of pure hatred for the treatment being given by the whites to the African Americans. The way the white masters treated the African American slaves was unacceptable. They had to do whatever the masters wanted, work all day, receive little food, and live in harsh conditions with no pay, and no way to change their unfortunate lifestyle (“Lynching”). Due to these atrocious standards of living, the African American slaves came to hate their white oppressors. In a way, they were justified for their violent rebellion by dealing with the extreme conditions and hatred that they had to tolerate through their masters and the hatred groups in the United States, like the Ku Klux Klan.

This period in time was very difficult for the slaves to live through. Although this time in history has passed, the bravery of the African American slaves throughout it will live on in the hearts of Americans forever, and will inspire them to be more tenacious and perseverant as they were. Works Cited: “Lynching.” Spartacus Educational. Web. 28 Oct 2009. .

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