

# Alvin ailey cry essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Question 1: Give an account of the socio-historic context of the work Cry In the early 17th Century, European settlers in North America turned to African slaves as a cheaper, more plentiful labour source than indentured servants. After 1619, when a Dutch ship brought 20 African ashore at the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, slavery spread throughout the American colonies. Though it is impossible to give accurate figures, some historians have estimated that 6 to 7 million slaves were imported to the New World during the 18th Century alone, depriving the African continent of some of its healthiest and ablest men and women.

In the 17th and 18th Centuries, black slaves worked predominantly on the tobacco, rice and indigo plantations of the southern coast. After the American Revolution, many colonists began to link the oppression of black slaves to their own oppression by the British ultimately resulting in the call for slavery's abolition. Slavery itself developed primarily in the South however, many of the Northern businessmen held investments in Southern plantations and benefitted economically in the slave trade. However, this did not deter the abolition of slavery between 1774 and 1804, in all of the northern states.

Despite this movement, the industry continued to be vital to the southern states. From the 1830s to the 1860s the abolition movement gained strength in the northern United States, led by free African's such as Frederick Douglass and white supporters such as William Lloyd Garrison. While many abolitionists based their activism on the belief that slaveholding was a sin, others were more inclined to the non-religious " free-labour" argument,

characterised through points such as the regressive nature of slavery, its inefficiency and its pointlessness derived from an economic perspective.

Anti-slavery supporters began at this point helping fugitive slaves escape from southern plantations to the North via a loose network of safe houses as early as the 1780s. This practice became commonly known as the Underground Railroad, gaining momentum towards the 1830s and although estimates are varied, it is believed to have achieved freedom for around 40000 to 100000 slaves.

The success of the Underground Railroad spread abolitionist emotions throughout the North and undoubtedly increased sectional tensions, implicit in convincing and persuading southerners of their northern countrymen's determination to defeat the institution that sustained them. Finally, in 1865, the 13th Amendment was adopted, abolishing slavery officially. Despite this development, the status of freed slaves in the post-war period remained precarious and significant challenges faced the Black peoples during the Reconstruction period.

Former slaves received the rights of citizenship and the equal protection of the constitution under the 14th Amendment as well as the right to vote as outlined in the 15th, however these provisions were oftentimes ignored or violated and former slaves were faced with the ensuing challenge of inducting themselves into the post-war economy which was aggravated further due to restrictive, discriminatory codes and regressive contractual arrangements such as sharecropping.

Despite seeing an unprecedented degree of black participation in American political life, Reconstruction was ultimately frustrating for African-American's, and the re-birth of white supremacy; such as the rise of racist organisations not unlike the Ku Klux Klan; had triumphed in the South by 1877. Near to a Century later, resistance to the lingering racism and discrimination in America that began during the slavery era would lead to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which would consecutively achieve the greatest political and social triumphs for black peoples since the Reconstruction.

Alvin Ailey produced the work Cry utilising this context as a stimulus. The timeline apparent mirrors the stages observed throughout his composition with the only addition being the induction of emotion into the piece. Emotion draws the audience evoking reactions such as empathy and allows the audience to witness the journey taken by the African-American woman, a microcosm of the journey taken by all those recruited or forced into the slave trade. Question 2:

Explain how the elements of dance are used in Alvin Ailey's Cry to engage the audience, " She represented those women before her who came from the hardships of slavery, through the pain of losing loved ones, through overcoming extraordinary depressions and tribulations. Coming out of a world of pain and trouble, she has found her way-and triumphed. " In this three part solo, the dancer, clad in a white leotard and long ruffled skirt, brings the audience on a journey of bitter sorrow, brutal hardship and ecstatic joy. The piece begins in the centre of the stage towards the back, immediately pronouncing to the audience the fact that the woman will be the principal aspect of the piece with her placement on the stage also

foreshadowing the journey which she is to undertake. The dancer hides her face before beginning movement; lowering her only possession, a white cloth to show her pride. This symbolises the white peoples, as she begins the piece, she is drowned in white fabric creating an initial introduction of the oppression of black women. From the beginning of the piece, the audience are immediately aware of the contradictory elements intrinsic in Cry.

The movements are inspiring, despite the woman struggling, forcing her torso into contractions, her expression remains complacent and composed, depicting her strength. The woman utilises the space, through levels and dimension however, she undoubtedly conveys her confinement, beating her fists into the air. Additionally, motifs of open and closed shapes further enhance the implicit notions of pride and dignity whilst concurrently displaying the constraints aforementioned. These contradictions, inherent throughout Cry, build atmospheric tension in order to engage the audience.

As tension arises, the audience immediately seek to understand and find solutions to denounce this. As section one develops, we see the woman collapsing to the ground before writhing at the foot of the cloth, the pressure pushing down on her, forcing convulsions, binding her to the ground.

Exhibiting solely low and medium levels, conjointly with contrasting dynamics of sustained and vibratory or percussive movements, the woman reaches out to the audience, provoking involvement, and emotional attachment. Her determination and longing for freedom is oppressed as the representational movements manifest.

The dancer ascends to an erect position, wrapping the cloth around her and stepping on it, binding herself to the ground. These introverted, constrained movements convey to the audience the dancer's struggle, particularly when combined with the myriad of literal and abstracted movements. The audience are shown her struggle against not only the symbolic interpretation of the ground as her work and the pressure placed upon her to work, but also the literal meaning of being bound and specifically the African-American woman's fight to rise above.

The woman continues to pull the cloth above her head, releasing these metaphorical chain indicative of her persistence to begin to free herself and maintain her pride and dignity. Section one demonstrates a moderate tempo, to which there are many rhythms that the dancer follows. The metre is employed as a rhythmic underpinning for the dancer and is consistently interchangeable between the predominant melody and background music as observed through the choreography. The skittish pace and layered rhythm allows tension to build, emphasising the multiplicity and depth within the piece which the audience are witness to.

Section two is defined by pain and sorrow. The dancer's movements transcend into angular shapes and literal interpretations of the lyrics. The dancer begins by thrusting her skirt to the side with her hand placed on her hips, standing en face to establish her power before crumbling, displaying the weakness behind the facade. The lyrics of the music highlight the journey the dancer is enduring, and in contrast to the preceding and following sections, the choreography and music are switched, allowing the movements to accompany the music rather than vice versa.

The choreography aids the musician in explaining the tortuous escape and longing for freedom throughout the loss of companions. The dancer acts out the jabbing of a needle into her skin in slow motion to emphasise "dying slow." The choreography eludes to a more consistently sustained dynamic however similarly utilises the space, however develops the levels to demonstrate the gradual rise of the African-American woman. The audience are aware of the direction the piece has taken, and the combination of the slower tempo and less contrasting dynamics engage the audience in a plot line.

The journey has become sorrowful and is no longer primarily focused on action but rather the communication of the emotions felt by those subjected to slavery. The cloth remains at the front of the stage, a constant reminder of white supremacy and their dominance over the black people. The section then suddenly transitions into pain and anger, though not innate within the movements can be observed as a motivation as the tempo of the music increases and the dancer returns to centre stage in a series of turns resembling her oncoming freedom.

From the centre she branches out to each side of the stage respectively in a phrase consisting of percussive thrusts of weight shifts before repeating an earlier motif of crumbling to the ground in a vibratory manner further symbolising the concept of weakness as aforementioned. The section depicts the escape of the individual on an Underground Railway leaving the section to finish with the dancer attesting her relationship with the audience, reaching outwards whilst walking slowly in a circle until she surrenders her

pride due to relief of reaching her final destination and overcoming the oppression.

The final section is characterised with large, open shapes, spinning, high levels and aerial patterns accompanied by a fast tempo piece of music. The woman travels diagonally across the stage to affirm her power over all and to establish this with the audience. The choreography is feminine, with the dancer using her long ruffled skirt as a prop rather than a hindrance as seen in prior sections. The section reinforces the strength of freedom and the character's freedom. The dancer drops to knees, clasps her hands together and lifts them above her head following which, she throws them backwards and proceeds to then rise again without struggle.

The audience are therefore in this section relieved of the tension built in the composition; the dancer has finalised the contradictory elements and the use of dynamics, space and time respectively have increased in consistency. The concluding section is simplified with uniform concepts ending the composition. The dynamics transition to become solely percussive and vibratory and the tempo is consistently fast paced with simplified metre and a regular rather than syncopated rhythm. This secures the audience in understanding the piece.

They were taken on a journey and after empathising and witnessing the emotions of the dancer in the previous section, they are enlightened to know the problem they were presented with at the beginning of Cry has been solved and the tension has been released. The dancer concludes with the repeated motif of throwing and waving her hands around her head and torso



in a circular motion whilst stamping her foot against the ground. However, the dancer then disappears from the screen after a slow fade into nothingness.

The cloth still lies on the ground at the front of the stage therefore suggesting the conclusion of paramount white supremacy overruling all. The dancer begins and finishes the piece in the same placement on the stage, perhaps implying that there was no real development. As the composition mirrors the context of the time, it is possible that Ailey demonstrates the emotions felt by the black people's only up until the beginning of the Reconstruction phase. Though the slaves were pronounced free, the challenges awaiting them proved equally difficult as after the abolition of slavery, as discrimination took its toll.

Cry finishing with the disappearance of the dancer subverts the notion of freedom and allows for the white dominancy which followed this freedom to take precedence using the white cloth as a symbol. In conclusion, within Cry, the audience are consistently engaged through the constructs of tension, plot, and solution which are made evident with movements derived from the elements of dance. Space, Time and Dynamics allow the audience to engage in the piece and further their understanding of the socio-historic context upon which the composition was based.