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### Echoes of Violence

In his timeless poem, *Between the World and Me*, Richard Wright uses hyper-realistic visuals, symbolism, and a surreal first-person perspective shift to illustrate the many-layered horrors that lynching visited upon people of color both then and now. Wright's choice of language also hints at themes beyond "simple" racial hatred and points to nuanced motivations like classism and sexual depravity.

Born in 1908 and raised in Mississippi, Wright was familiar with the south's long and bloody history of lynching. Published in 1935, *Between the World and Me* takes place at the midpoint of both the Great Depression and the ninety-year-long epidemic of lynching in the south. According to the NAACP, thousands of lynchings took place in this period, mostly under the guise of protecting white women from black men or avenging rape ("History of Lynchings").

Wright's use of personification illustrates a belief that even the physical world is haunted and damaged by witnessing atrocities like these. The speaker describes the scene of the crime as "guarded by scaly oaks and elms" and the details of the scene "thrusting themselves" between the world and him as if they are begging the speaker to notice them (Wright 3, 5). In her essay, *Afro-Surrealism Between the World and Me*, Hue Tran argues that the oaks and elms reference "implies the speaker has stumbled upon a situation of sinister origins, its location meant to hide transgression against the victim" (Tran 2).

In the next stanza, Wright describes "a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky" which again characterizes nature as wounded or ashamed (9-10). In her own analysis, Tran concludes that this visual implies the question of why God would condone the crowd's behavior (Tran 2). When it's evident to the speaker what has happened in the clearing, the sun pours "yellow surprise into the eye sockets of the stony skull" which seems to suggest that nature is shocked at the evil that men have wrought there (Wright 20).

The poet's choice to flip the viewpoint of the speaker from after-the-fact observer to the in-the-moment victim is an unusual and powerful mechanism to incite empathy. This shift not only humanizes the victim, it makes the details of the lynching more visceral and forces the reader to experience the terror of the victim. By sharing the victim's terror with the reader, Wright begins to show how violence has the power to change everyone it touches.

To further this point, Wright combines symbolism and realistic visuals to illustrate how racial violence infiltrates the psyches of those who learn of it, even after the fact. The speaker "stumbled upon the thing" and as he takes in the details of the scene, they coalesce, "thrusting themselves between the world and me" (1, 5-6). Wright repeats a variation on the "yellow surprise" metaphor at the end of the last stanza, after the speaker has become the victim. This time, the speaker says, "Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull starting in yellow surprise at the sun" (54-55). These two symbolic elements—something "coming between" the speaker and the world and his eyes filling with "yellow surprise"—combine to create an allusion to the heightened contrast a black and white photograph achieves when exposed through a yellow filter. In the same way, the speaker's knowledge of the violence changes how he sees the world.

Other details reinforce not just the psychological devastation mob violence had over blacks but how it helped preserve the economic and social supremacy of white southerners. The

poet could have chosen any number of pieces of evidence to help establish the scene of the crime, but his choices illustrate a class disparity between the murderers and the victim. "Dead matches, butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick" all form a picture of a mob with disposable income (15-17). More than that, it suggests they are a crowd with the kind of depravity that would have them behave at a lynching as though they were taking in a film. By contrast, the language used to describe the evidence left behind by the victim is both humble and haunting: "A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood." Even his bones are "slumbering forgottenly upon a cushion of ashes" (13-14).

In *Eating the Black Body*, Carlyle Van Thompson says that Wright's poem is a great text for "examination of racist white people's often-hysterical desire for and consumption of the African American male body, a ritual of consumption that was designed to enhance their socioeconomic subjectivity." Van Thompson cites historical examples of mob violence where black men were tortured and mutilated, with white mobs cutting off and keeping body parts as mementos. He argues that lynchings represent not just racial hatred but a displaced sexual desire and contends the lynching is a "ritual of intense sexual desire for the Black body" (Van Thompson 19-21).

And indeed, Wright does use language designed to juxtapose the depravity of the crowd's sexual undertone with the innocence of the victim. "The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth" is followed by "the whore smeared lipstick red upon her lips" (35-37). Wright references the whore and her lipstick twice in his poem which should raise questions for the reader. Why bring a whore to a lynching if there's no sexual element? Beyond the visuals of mouths and lips, Wright also uses lines like "my black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands" (42). In another

context, this kind of language might be intended to be erotic but the thoughts of the speaker dwell on innocence, salvation, and mercy. He thinks of baptism when doused in gasoline and recalls how he "clutched childlike, clutched to the hot sides of death" (52).

But to delight in the destruction of another human, the mob must first dehumanize that person. In Tayte Pollmann's analysis, *Between the World and Me: Dehumanization of Blacks in America*, he argues that Wright's language drives home the point that the victim's identity, and therefore his humanity have been stolen from him. Describing the scene the speaker sees, Pollman says, "These images show the remains of the horrible fate that befell the unnamed black man who was lynched. The words used to describe his bones and belongings, "forgottenly" and "lonely" contribute to the idea that this man was not only viciously murdered, but not remembered by the larger community" (Pollman 2). This dehumanization, above all others, could be perceived as the worst of the violations visited on the victim and it would certainly have added another dimension of fear for the speaker. As Pollman says of the speaker, "He feels the lasting effects of the black man's struggle for survival in this society" (Pollman 3).

In his 2014 New Yorker article, *Between the World and Ferguson*, Jelani Cobb equates the racial violence described in Wright's poem to the killings we still see today, mostly between white police and young black males. He observes that, "nothing save random fortune separated the fate of the man who died from that of the one telling the story." In Cobb's opinion, Wright's poem illustrates how "history is an animate force, and how we are witnesses to the past, even to that portion of it that transpired before we were born." (Cobb).

Wright recognized that lynchings, more than "normal" violence, had layered motivations and repercussions. In a relatively short poem, he has managed to humanize the brutality visited

upon a lynching victim, touch on many of its underlying motivations, and even illustrate the ripple effect this form of terrorism had on the black community and individual.

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