

Name: _____ Class: _____

Excerpt from Southern Horrors: Lynch Laws in All Its Phases

By Ida B. Wells
1892

Ida Bell Wells (1862-1931) was an African American journalist, suffragist, sociologist, and an early leader in the Civil Rights Movement. The following excerpt comes from her work entitled Southern Horrors: Lynch Laws in All Its Phases, which was originally published in the New York Age (June 25, 1892) and was then printed as a pamphlet after much demand and many donations. In this pamphlet, Wells talks about lynching, or the murder by mob for an alleged crime without a legal trial. The targets of such wanton violence and hatred were almost always African Americans. Wells began investigating Southern lynching in 1889 when she wrote about the local lynching of a friend in her newspaper, Free Speech. This caused so much anger that people threatened Wells not to return from a trip to New York to her hometown of Memphis, prompting her to write Southern Horrors while exiled from the South. As you read, take notes on Wells' argument as to why black people in the South were so targeted and the consequences of lynching that, essentially, let whites take the law into their own hands.

The Black and White of It

- [1] The *Cleveland Gazette* of January 16, 1892, publishes a case in point. Mrs. J.S. Underwood, the wife of a minister of Elyria, Ohio, accused an Afro-American¹ of rape. She told her husband that during his absence in 1888, stumping the State for the Prohibition Party,² the man came to the kitchen door, forced his way in the house and insulted her. She tried to drive him out with a heavy poker, but he overpowered and chloroformed her,³ and when she revived⁴ her clothing was torn and she was in a horrible condition. She did not know the man but could identify him. She pointed out William Offett, a married man, who was arrested and, being in Ohio, was granted a trial.



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1. another term for or spelling of "African American"
2. To "stump" is to travel around an area (such as a district, state, or nation) making political speeches. In this case, Mr. Underwood traveled around Ohio advocating for Prohibition, the legal banning of the manufacture and sale of alcohol.
3. Chloroform is a liquid and general anaesthetic that can be used to render a person unconscious.

The prisoner vehemently⁵ denied the charge of rape, but confessed he went to Mrs. Underwood's residence at her invitation and was criminally intimate⁶ with her at her request. This availed⁷ him nothing against the sworn testimony of a minister's wife, a lady of the highest respectability. He was found guilty, and entered the penitentiary, December 14, 1888, for fifteen years. Some time afterwards the woman's remorse led her to confess to her husband that the man was innocent.

These are her words:

I met Offett at the Post Office. It was raining. He was polite to me, and as I had several bundles in my arms he offered to carry them home for me, which he did. He had a strange fascination for me, and I invited him to call on me. He called, bringing chestnuts and candy for the children. By this means we got them to leave us alone in the room. Then I sat on his lap. He made a proposal to me and I readily consented. Why I did so, I do not know, but that I did is true. He visited me several times after that and each time I was indiscreet.⁸ I did not care after the first time. In fact I could not have resisted, and had no desire to resist.

- [5] When asked by her husband why she told him she had been outraged,⁹ she said: "I had several reasons for telling you. One was the neighbors saw the fellows here, another was, I was afraid I had contracted a loathsome disease,¹⁰ and still another was that I feared I might give birth to a Negro baby. I hoped to save my reputation by telling you a deliberate lie." Her husband horrified by the confession had Offett, who had already served four years, released and secured a divorce.

There are thousands of such cases throughout the South, with the difference that the Southern white men in insatiate¹¹ fury wreak their vengeance without intervention¹² of law upon the Afro-Americans who consort with their women. [...]

Hundreds of such cases might be cited, but enough have been given to prove the assertion that there are white women in the South who love the Afro-American's company even as there are white men notorious for their preference for Afro-American women.

There is hardly a town in the South which has not an instance of the kind which is well known, and hence the assertion is reiterated¹³ that "nobody in the South believes the old thread bare lie that negro men rape white women." Hence there is a growing demand among Afro-Americans that the guilt or innocence of parties accused of rape be fully established. They know the men of the section of the country who refuse this are not so desirous of punishing rapists as they pretend. The utterances of the leading white men show that with them it is not the crime but the *class*. Bishop Fitzgerald has become apologist for lynchers of the rapists of *white* women only. Governor Tillman, of South Carolina, in the month of June, standing under the tree in Barnwell, S.C., on which eight Afro-Americans were hung last year, declared that he would lead a mob to lynch a *negro* who raped a *white* woman. So say the pulpits, officials and newspapers of the South. But when the victim is a colored woman it is different.

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4. **Revive (verb):** to restore to consciousness
 5. **Vehemently (adverb):** strongly or passionately
 6. At the time, it would have been against the law for a black man and a white woman to engage in a romantic/sexual relationship.
 7. **Avail (verb):** to help or benefit
 8. **Indiscreet (adjective):** having or showing too great a readiness to reveal things that remain secret or private
 9. "Outrage" in this context is an outdated term for rape.
 10. Likely this is a reference to a sexually transmitted disease.
 11. **Insatiate (adjective):** never satisfied
 12. "Intervention" in this context refers to interference or something that would stop something else.

Last winter in Baltimore, Md., three white ruffians assaulted a Miss Camphor, a young Afro-American girl, while out walking with a young man of her own race. They held her escort¹⁴ and outraged the girl. It was a deed dastardly¹⁵ enough to arouse Southern blood, which gives its horror of rape as excuse for lawlessness, but she was an Afro-American. The case went to the courts, an Afro-American lawyer defended the men and they were acquitted.

- [10] In Nashville, Tenn., there is a white man, Pat Hanifan, who outraged a little Afro-American girl, and, from the physical injuries received, she has been ruined for life. He was jailed for six months, discharged, and is now a detective in that city. In the same city, last May, a white man outraged an Afro-American girl in a drug store. He was arrested, and released on bail at the trial. It was rumored that five hundred Afro-Americans had organized to lynch him. Two hundred and fifty white citizens armed themselves with Winchesters¹⁶ and guarded him. A cannon was placed in front of his home, and the Buchanan Rifles (State Militia) ordered to the scene for his protection. The Afro-American mob did not materialize. Only two weeks before Eph. Grizzard, who had only been *charged* with rape upon a white woman, had been taken from the jail, with Governor Buchanan and the police and militia standing by, dragged through the streets in broad daylight, knives plunged into him at every step, and with every fiendish¹⁷ cruelty a frenzied mob could devise, he was at last swung out on the bridge with hands cut to pieces as he tried to climb up the stanchions.¹⁸ A naked, bloody example of the blood-thirstiness of the nineteenth-century civilization of the Athens of the South!¹⁹ No cannon or military was called out in his defense. He dared to visit a white woman.

[...]

The New Cry

The appeal of Southern whites to Northern sympathy and sanction,²⁰ the adroit,²¹ insidious²² plea made by Bishop Fitzgerald for suspension of judgment because those "who condemn lynching express no sympathy for the *white* woman in the case," falls to the ground in the light of the foregoing.

From this exposition of the race issue in lynch law, the whole matter is explained by the well-known opposition growing out of slavery to the progress of the race. This is crystalized in the oft-repeated slogan: "This is a white man's country and the white man must rule." The South resented giving the Afro-American his freedom, the ballot box and the Civil Rights Law.²³ The raids of the Ku-Klux and White Liners²⁴ to subvert reconstruction government,²⁵ the Hamburg and Ellerton, S.C., the Copiah County, Miss., and the Layfayette Parish, La., massacres were excused as the natural resentment of intelligence against government by ignorance.

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13. **Reiterate** (*verb*): to say something again for emphasis or clarity
 14. "Escort" means someone who accompanies another, usually for companionship or protection.
 15. **Dastardly** (*adjective*): wicked or cruel
 16. A Winchester is a type of rifle gun.
 17. **Fiendish** (*adjective*): extremely cruel or unpleasant; devilish
 18. A "stanchion" is an upright bar, post, or frame forming a support or barrier.
 19. "Athens of the South" is a nickname for Nashville, TN.
 20. a threatened penalty for disobeying a law or rule
 21. **Adroit** (*adjective*): clever or skillful (in using the hands or mind)
 22. **Insidious** (*adjective*): proceeding in a subtle way, but with harmful effects
 23. A reference to the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which was enacted during the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War. The law was intended to guarantee African Americans equal treatment in public accommodations and public transportation (essentially forbidding segregation), but several years later it came under scrutiny. In 1883, the

[...]

One by one the Southern States have legally disfranchised²⁶ the Afro-American, and since the repeal of the Civil Rights Bill nearly every Southern State has passed separate car laws²⁷ with a penalty against their infringement.²⁸ The race regardless of advancement is penned into filthy, stifling partitions²⁹ cut off from smoking cars. All this while, although the political cause has been removed, the butcheries of black men at Barnwell, S.C., Carrolton, Miss., Waycross, Ga., and Memphis, Tenn., have gone on; also the flaying alive of a man in Kentucky, the burning of one in Arkansas, the hanging of a fifteen-year-old girl in Louisiana, a woman in Jackson, Tenn., and one in Hollendale, Miss., until the dark and bloody record of the South shows 728 Afro-Americans lynched during the past eight years. Not fifty of these were for political causes; the rest were for all manner of accusations from that of rape of white women, to the case of the boy Will Lewis who was hanged at Tullahoma, Tenn., last year for being drunk and "sassy" to white folks.

[...]

This cry has had its effect. It has closed the heart, stifled the conscience, warped the judgment and hushed the voice of press and pulpit on the subject of lynch law throughout this "land of liberty." Men who stand high in the esteem of the public for Christian character, for moral and physical courage, for devotion to the principles of equal and exact justice to all, and for great sagacity,³⁰ stand as cowards who fear to open their mouths before this great outrage. They do not see that by their tacit encouragement, their silent acquiescence,³¹ the black shadow of lawlessness in the form of lynch law is spreading its wings over the whole country.

[...]

- [15] The mob spirit has grown with the increasing intelligence of the Afro-American. It has left the out-of-the-way places where ignorance prevails, has thrown off the mask and with this new cry stalks in broad daylight in large cities, the centers of civilization, and is encouraged by the "leading citizens" and the press.

Supreme Court ruled that parts of the act were unconstitutional, allowing states to essentially sidestep or repeal the act altogether. This was around the time that the proposed idea of "separate but equal" began gaining prominence to get away with violating this law. This concept of "separate but equal" was later upheld in the Supreme Court case of Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1896, giving constitutional validity to the growing practice of segregation, despite going against the Civil Rights Act.

24. The Ku Klux Klan is a white supremacist and right-wing extremist group in the United States. "White Liners" was a name given to those who showed white supremacist attitudes during the Reconstruction Era in the South, and these groups often formed militias, armed unofficial groups.
25. "Reconstruction government" refers to the government of the Reconstruction Era, the period following the American Civil War that focused on rebuilding the South, especially after the sudden freeing of 4 million slaves.
26. "Disfranchise" is an old spelling of "disenfranchise," which means to deprive someone of their rights (particularly the right to vote).
27. Louisiana was the first to pass these "Separate Car Acts" in 1890, dividing the white and black riders on trains. While segregation wasn't unheard of, it became far more common and institutionalized in the post-Reconstruction Era. Indeed, many other states followed this route, beginning what would become a very commonplace practice of public segregation and the set of laws known as Jim Crow.
28. **Infringement (noun):** breaking the terms of a law or agreement; violation
29. a structure dividing something into parts (i.e. a wall)
30. **Sagacity (noun):** wisdom
31. **Acquiescence (noun):** a reluctant acceptance of something without protest

[...]

The South's Position

Henry W. Grady in his well-remembered speeches in New England and New York pictured the Afro-American as incapable of self-government. Through him and other leading men the cry of the South to the country has been "Hands off! Leave us to solve our problem." To the Afro-American the South says, "the white man must and will rule." There is little difference between the Antebellum³² South and the New South.

Her white citizens are wedded to any method however revolting, any measure however extreme, for the subjugation³³ of the young manhood of the race. They have cheated him out of his ballot, deprived him of civil rights or redress therefor in the civil courts, robbed him of the fruits of his labor, and are still murdering, burning and lynching him.

The result is a growing disregard of human life. Lynch law has spread its insidious influence till men in New York State, Pennsylvania and on the free Western plains feel they can take the law in their own hands with impunity,³⁴ especially where an Afro-American is concerned. The South is brutalized to a degree not realized by its own inhabitants, and the very foundation of government, law and order, are imperiled.

[...]

Self-Help

In the creation of this healthier public sentiment, the Afro-American can do for himself what no one else can do for him. The world looks on with wonder that we have conceded so much and remain law-abiding under such great outrage and provocation.³⁵

- [20] To Northern capital³⁶ and Afro-American labor the South owes its rehabilitation.³⁷ If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South. A thorough knowledge and judicious³⁸ exercise of this power in lynching localities could many times effect a bloodless revolution. The white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities.

[...]

The appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is to be gained by a further sacrifice of manhood and self-respect. By the right exercise of his power as the industrial factor of the South, the Afro-American can demand and secure his rights, the punishment of lynchers, and a fair trial for accused rapists.

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32. "Antebellum" is a term used to describe a pre-war period, in this case before the American Civil War. In Latin it literally translates to "before the war."
33. the state of being under control or being secondary, typically through means of force
34. **Impunity (noun):** being exempt from punishment or free from consequences
35. **Provocation (noun):** action or speech that makes someone annoyed or angry, especially done in a deliberate way
36. "Capital" in this sense refers to wealth.
37. **Rehabilitation (noun):** restoration to health or normal life
38. **Judicious (adjective):** having, showing, or done with good judgement or sense

[...]

Nothing is more definitely settled than he must act for himself. I have shown how he may employ the boycott, emigration and the press, and I feel that by a combination of all these agencies can be effectually stamped out lynch law, that last relic of barbarism and slavery. "The gods help those who help themselves."³⁹

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39. A popular motto from ancient Greece, the English translation was made popular by Algernon Sidney.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Why does the author likely include the story of William Offett in the beginning of the passage (Paragraphs 1-6)?
 - A. to condemn Mrs. Underwood for her actions and to embarrass her for her lie
 - B. to compare an example of a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman to a white man accused of raping a black woman
 - C. to compare an example of a black man in the North wrongly accused of rape to similar cases in the South that ended in lynching
 - D. to prove that there is always hope for innocent people sent to prison and that they can eventually be released

2. How does the mention of African Americans being “disfranchised” (Paragraph 13) contribute to Wells’ larger argument regarding lynching?
 - A. Disfranchisement allows for the segregation of different races; Wells argues for it because hopefully white people will stop lynching if they are separated from black people.
 - B. Disfranchisement takes away African Americans’ right to vote, as protected by the Fifteenth Amendment, which Wells’ is fighting to restore in this essay.
 - C. Disfranchisement decreases African Americans’ rights and power, making it easier for whites to use and justify violence against them (i.e. lynching).
 - D. Disfranchisement comes from the Reconstruction Era, which sought to return the South to its state during the antebellum years, contributing to Wells’ argument that the Civil War isn’t over.

3. PART A: What does the word “tacit” most likely mean as used in paragraph 14?
 - A. understood without words
 - B. awkward or graceless
 - C. obviously enthusiastic
 - D. skilled or expert

4. PART B: Which of the following phrases from paragraph 14 best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “warped the judgment”
 - B. “stand high in the esteem of the public”
 - C. “devotion to the principles of equal and exact justice to all”
 - D. “their silent acquiescence”

5. What is the “new cry,” as mentioned in the section of the same name (Paragraphs 11-15)? Cite evidence in your answer as you explain the “cry” and the figurative language used to describe it.

6. How does the following quote from paragraph 22 contribute to the author’s central ideas in the final section of the text: “The gods help those who help themselves”?

7. Which of the following best describes the author’s purpose in writing this text?
- A. to provide an unbiased summary of the status of lynchings in America
 - B. to speak out about the violence against African Americans and declare a call-to-action, particularly aimed at black people, to end lynchings
 - C. to inform the public about wrongful imprisonment and seek release for black people who were wrongly imprisoned
 - D. to talk about her own personal experiences with the anti-lynching movement

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In your opinion, is taking the law into one's own hands ever justified? Why or why not? Explain your position and provide examples to support your answer.

2. In the context of this passage, what are the effects of prejudice? Why, according to the passage and your own knowledge of history, were African Americans specifically targeted? What factors contributed to this prejudice, discrimination, and violence? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of this passage, what is fair? Consider your current justice system. In what ways, if at all, are law and punishment weighed against certain people or groups? Can these inequalities be corrected? If so, how? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

4. In the context of this passage, how has America changed over time? Is lynching or taking the law into one's hands still an issue where you live? In the nation? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.