

Between the World and Me

Richard Wright (1951)

And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly
upon the thing,
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks
and elms
And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves
between the world and me....
There was a design of white bones slumbering forgottenly
upon a cushion of ashes.
There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt
finger accusingly at the sky. 5
There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and a
scorched coil of greasy hemp;
A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and
a pair of trousers stiff with black blood.
And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches,
butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a
drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick;
Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the
lingering smell of gasoline.
And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise
into the eye sockets of the stony skull... 10
And while I stood my mind was frozen within cold pity for
the life that was gone.
The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by
icy walls of fear—
The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the
grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods
poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the
darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the witnesses rose
and lived:
The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into
my bones.
The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my
flesh. 15
The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and ciga-
rettes glowed, the whore smeared lipstick red
upon her lips,
And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that
my life be burned....
And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth into
my throat till I swallowed my own blood.
My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my

black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as
they bound me to the sapling.
And my skin clung to the bubbling hot tar, falling from me in
limp patches. 20
And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into my
raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.
Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a baptism
of gasoline.
And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like
water, boiling my limbs
Panting, begging I clutched childlike, clutched to the hot
sides of death.
Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in 25
yellow surprise at the sun....

Between the World and Me

Richard Wright (1951) African American
→ Civil Rights poet
1st pov.

* color symbolism

And one morning while in the woods I stumbled suddenly upon the thing,
Stumbled upon it in a grassy clearing guarded by scaly oaks and elms

* vivid imagery = burnt words
extraordinary realism

And the sooty details of the scene rose, thrusting themselves between the world and me... ← title ref.

There was a design of white bones slumbering forgotten upon a cushion of ashes. → pers. > amplifies surprise + fear = suspense

There was a charred stump of a sapling pointing a blunt finger accusingly at the sky. → pers. || damage = 5 crime scene details

There were torn tree limbs, tiny veins of burnt leaves, and a scorched coil of greasy hemp; denot. lynching (hate crime) *

A vacant shoe, an empty tie, a ripped shirt, a lonely hat, and a pair of trousers stiff with black blood. pers.

And upon the trampled grass were buttons, dead matches, pers. butt-ends of cigars and cigarettes, peanut shells, a drained gin-flask, and a whore's lipstick; tar + feathers = hate crime

Scattered traces of tar, restless arrays of feathers, and the lingering smell of gasoline.

recurr

And through the morning air the sun poured yellow surprise into the eye sockets of the stony skull... (see line 25) 10

And while I stood my mind was frozen within cold pity for the life that was gone.

The ground gripped my feet and my heart was circled by icy walls of fear— met. > cold adj. in contrast w/ burnt imagery

The sun died in the sky; a night wind muttered in the grass and fumbled the leaves in the trees; the woods poured forth the hungry yelping of hounds; the darkness screamed with thirsty voices; and the witnesses rose and lived. → pers. m. p. est. shift

The dry bones stirred, rattled, lifted, melting themselves into my bones. pers. racial * narrator in scene - uses symb. to transmit feelings 15 of anger

The grey ashes formed flesh firm and black, entering into my flesh. → taking it in

The gin-flask passed from mouth to mouth, cigars and cigarettes glowed, the whore smeared lipstick red upon her lips, hyperbole

And a thousand faces swirled around me, clamoring that my life be burned...

And then they had me, stripped me, battering my teeth into my throat till I swallowed my own blood. || focus on 1st pov. / repetition =

My voice was drowned in the roar of their voices, and my || * puts self in victim's place; living scene

Horrific shift from observer to victim

black wet body slipped and rolled in their hands as
(they bound me to the sapling) ^{hate crime → imagery}
And my skin clung to the bubbling hot (tar) falling from me in
limp patches.

20

And the down and quills of the white feathers sank into my
raw flesh, and I moaned in my agony.

|| evokes terror?

Then my blood was cooled mercifully, cooled by a baptism
of gasoline. * ^{re. irony}

relig. allusion = irony
rebirth

And in a blaze of red I leaped to the sky as pain rose like
water, boiling my limbs

Panting, begging I clutched childlike, ^{all: r.} clutched to the hot
sides of death.

Now I am dry bones and my face a stony skull staring in
yellow surprise at the sun....

25

-
- * social injustice - hate crime
 - * loss of innocence } realization of scene
 - * enlightenment } reveals truths of soc. flaws
 - * wickedness of man-hatred-lynching-tar/feather

1. In the course of the passage, the speaker moves from detached observation to
 - (A) vicarious suffering
 - (B) callous indifference
 - (C) terrified flight
 - (D) solemn resignation
 - (E) stubborn denial

2. The speaker's description of the gruesome site in lines 1-2 suggests that the site had been
 - (A) totally obscured by vegetation
 - (B) accidentally preserved by nature
 - (C) formally designated by an historical marker
 - (D) recently damaged by vandals
 - (E) deliberately concealed by the perpetrators of the violence

3. In the poem the charred stump of the sapling may be said to do all of the following EXCEPT
 - (A) provide enduring evidence of the macabre crime
 - (B) reproach the divine for human wickedness
 - (C) censure God for His lack of intervention
 - (D) contrast with the otherwise idyllic setting
 - (E) guard the entrance to the clearing

4. In delineating the scene of the ghastly event, the speaker makes the LEAST use of
 - (A) the clothing of the deceased
 - (B) the personal items discarded by the vigilantes
 - (C) the ashen remnants of the fire
 - (D) the skeletal remains of the deceased
 - (E) the location of the incident

5. The incident at the site seems so recent that the speaker claims he can still detect the smell of
 - (A) cigarettes
 - (B) perfume
 - (C) tar
 - (D) gasoline
 - (E) liquor

6. Which of the following is NOT used to promote the speaker's belief that the nocturnal killing is "unnatural"?
 - (A) "charred stump" (line 5)
 - (B) "torn tree limbs" (line 6)
 - (C) "burnt leaves" (line 6)
 - (D) "scorched coil" (line 6)
 - (E) "trampled grass" (line 8)

7. In the second stanza (lines 4-17), the poet personifies all of the following EXCEPT
 - (A) the skeleton of the deceased
 - (B) the burnt sapling
 - (C) the ropes that had bound the deceased
 - (D) the night wind and the darkness
 - (E) the killing ground itself

8. In effecting his imaginative transformation from belated witness to actual victim, the speaker relies primarily upon images of
 - (A) sight
 - (B) sound
 - (C) smell
 - (D) feeling
 - (E) taste

9. At the end of the second stanza (line 17), the speaker emphasizes his helpless position by means of
 - (A) hyperbole
 - (B) metonymy
 - (C) personification
 - (D) irony
 - (E) allusion

10. The extraordinary realism of the final stanza (lines 8-25) is achieved primarily through the use of

- (A) purely chronological development
- (B) the simile comparing the flames to a boiling kettle
- (C) the contrast between the victim's black skin and the white feathers
- (D) enjambment that accelerates the stanza's rhythm
- (E) participles and verbs that intensify the speaker's desperate agony

11. In the context in which it appears, the phrase "leaped to the sky" (line 23) suggests which of the following?

- I. The gruesome nature of the human holocaust.
- II. A desperate attempt at escape.
- III. A defiant liberation of spirit.

- (A) I only
- (B) II only
- (C) I and II
- (D) I and III
- (E) I, II, and III

12. The phrase "yellow surprise," as it is used in line 10 and again in line 25, marks a thematic shift from

- (A) tranquility to violence
- (B) beauty to repulsiveness
- (C) innocence to knowledge
- (D) preservation to decay
- (E) youth to age

13. The poet most likely structures the poem in the manner that he does in order to do all of the following EXCEPT

- (A) illustrate the indelible effect of the discovery upon the speaker
- (B) dramatize an otherwise macabre unreality
- (C) suggest that such events can and will happen again
- (D) elevate the anonymous death to the level of martyrdom
- (E) lend the scene greater historical credence

14. Which of the following might qualify as a possible interpretation of the title, "Between the World and Me"?

- I. A rift caused by a horrifyingly cruel action.
- II. A vendetta that the speaker has to settle with the world.
- III. A secret shared by the speaker and Nature.

- (A) I only
- (B) II only
- (C) I and II
- (D) II and III
- (E) I, II, and III