Strange Fruit

SUMMARY

The trees in the southern United States hang heavy with an unusual fruit. These trees have blood on their leaves and at their roots. The dead bodies of black lynching victims sway back and forth in the gentle southern wind; these bodies are the strange fruit that hang from the branches of poplar trees.

Picture the natural beauty and chivalry of the American South, where corpses hang with swollen eyes and contorted mouths. The sweet, fresh smell of magnolia flowers floats on the air, until suddenly interrupted by the smell of burning flesh.

Crows will eat the flesh from these bodies. The rain will fall on them, the wind will suck them dry, and the sun will rot them. The trees will drop them, this foul and unusual crop.

THEMES

THE HORROR AND INHUMANITY OF AMERICAN RACISM

"Strange Fruit" is a harrowing poem about people's capacity for hatred and violence. The poem specifically showcases the horrors of lynching in the American South (which reached a peak towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century). Lynching was a form of extrajudicial (that is, outside of the regular law) killing in which black people were brutally tortured and/or murdered by mobs of white people, which often hung their victims from tree branches. Through an extended metaphor in which black victims' bodies are presented as the "strange fruit" dangling from "Southern trees," the poem brings the horrors of racism to vivid and uncomfortable life, insisting that such violence is utterly grotesque and inhumane.

The poem contrasts something normally natural and full of life with the grim realities of lynching. The "strange[ness]" of the fruit these trees bear highlights the way that racism dehumanizes its victims, and how it makes the environment itself terrifying and inhospitable. The bodies don't *belong* on the trees, but have been put there by forces of hate.

The poem notably contrasts this "strange fruit" with what would normally be pleasant natural imagery—the trees themselves, the "scent of magnolias," the sun and the wind, the "southern breeze." These images are intended to build a picture of the "gallant south," a place of so-called refinement, civility, and manners. Gallantry relates to bravery, charm, and chivalrous behavior—qualities that are all clearly lacking here. Racism is not just hateful, then, but totally hypocritical and antithetical to the South's purported values. The poem thus forcefully argues that no society can call itself civil and also be capable of acts like lynching; the South can't be an idyllic "pastoral" place if black people's corpses swing in the breeze. According to the poem, notions of progress and civilization are nothing but hollow lies if such racism is allowed to thrive.

And, importantly, this racist hatred affects the *entire* tree—which becomes covered in blood "on the leaves" *and* "at the root." Just as a tree must suck up water from the ground and spread it all the way through its branches, the poem implies that the "blood" shed by racism works its way through humanity. Lynching is thus a failure of humanity that results in the rotting of the human family tree.

The poem then concludes with the shocking imagery of crows plucking at the corpses' flesh, the sun rotting the neglected bodies of the victims, and the branches finally giving way and dropping the victims' bodies to the ground. The earth itself is thus corrupted by this "strange and bitter crop." Death and hatred—through the fallen body—will be reabsorbed into the soil, and form part of the organic process that brings with it the next cycle of crops. American racism, the poem ultimately implies, is a poison that does nothing but spread yet more violence and hatred.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Southern trees bear ...
... at the root,

"Strange Fruit" opens by situating itself in the American South and launching straight into its extended metaphor. The poem hasn't yet specified its subject matter, however, instead opting to open with an unsettling image. The reader, of course, wonders what this "strange fruit" actually is (though most people are probably familiar with some aspect of the poem's history these days). Fruit is usually something good: beautiful-looking, edible, nourishing. But it's already signaled that something is off here—this fruit is *strange*.

The second line starts to build a sense of what brings this strangeness. This tree is covered in blood, both on its leaves and at its roots. This is like a kind of infection, linking the tree with death and violence in a way that contrasts with the normal associations of a tree (and nature more generally). The

parallelism in this line—the way that both parts of the line are constructed similarly—gives it a lilting quality that evokes the image of this strange fruit swinging in the southern breeze.

Even in the space of just one relatively short line, the poem already makes use of a lot of consonance:

> Southern trees bear strange fruit

The way that these sounds link across the line makes them sound like they have grown together, as though these are the strange sounds that hang on the line like the "fruit" that hangs on the trees. Given that, as will soon be revealed, the "strange fruit" of the title are the hanging corpses of human beings, the plural "trees" is also a depressing reminder that the scope of the poem isn't limited to discussing one individual event. Instead, it reflects the widespread reality of racism. Trees and fruit are normally symbols of life—but these "Southern trees" hang heavy with death.

LINES 3-4

Black bodies swinging ...
... the poplar trees.

Having established its unsettling atmosphere, line 3 shocks the reader by starkly stating what it means by "strange fruit"—this is a "Black body." The alliterating /b/ sounds make the phrase loud and impactful, also chiming with the diacope of "blood" from the line before. And just like the first line, line 3 is composed of mostly similar sounds through alliteration, consonance, and now assonance too:

> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,

This sound-patterning is intentionally pretty, grotesquely at odds with the image of tree-hung corpses. Long /e/ vowel sounds combined with /b/, soft /n/, /g/, and /th/ consonants have a delicate and gentle quality that helps create a sense of the "southern breeze" blowing through the trees. This tension between pleasantness (trees and breezes) and ugliness (the hateful actions of human beings) is vital to the poem's power. Indeed, this was part of what made "Strange Fruit" such an effective protest song in the hands of Billie Holiday—the unsettling way that beauty (through her voice) and terror (the song's content) sit side-by-side, unreconciled.

Line 4 is nearly identical to the first line, but with three key differences. Firstly, the reader now has more information about the identity of the "strange fruit" (a.k.a. "black bodies"). This makes the phrase more powerful and unsettling. Secondly, the grammatical order is switched: now the "strange fruit" comes before the "trees," whereas line 1 was the other way around. This means that, looked at as a whole unit, the stanza essentially swings from side to side, starting and ending in the same place.

The stanza's language, then, subtly conveys the movement of the bodies swaying in the breeze. The other important difference is in the switch of word choice from "bears" to "hanging." The "hanging" is more explicit and direct; while "bears" only relates to the body on the tree after it is dead, "hanging" is the *process* by which that human being was killed (though lynchings often involved shooting and torture as well). This makes the act of killing more present in the reader's experience of the poem.

LINES 5-8

Pastoral scene of ...
... of burning flesh.

Line 5 is a key line in "Strange Fruit." It highlights the hypocrisy of the era, ironically referring to the South as a "pastoral" place in which the people are "gallant." "Pastoral" is a kind of idyllic countryside scene, whereas "gallant" means honorable, fair, and civilized. The point, of course, is that any society that uses lynching as a way of applying extrajudicial (in)justice—or simply as a way of acting on irrational fear and hate—can never be called "gallant."

The reader might bear in mind that some southerners even treated lynching as a kind of social occasion, picnicking under the hanging corpses and having their photographs taken. The poem asks whether manners, social mores, and societal standards really hold any weight while hatred and racism still exist (a question that has by no means gone away). "Gallantry" was part of the cliché of the figure of the Southern gentleman—but the poem suggests that any such notions are overshadowed by the horrors of lynching.

The line keeps up the discomfortingly beautiful consonance established in the first stanza which, like the concept of being gallant, is grotesquely at odds with the poem's central image of "black bodies" strung up from trees. This stanza specifically turns to sibilance, creating a ton that is at once hushed and sinister:

> Pastoral scene of the gallant south,

This conflict between "pastoral" beauty and the ugliness of hatred intensifies over the rest of the stanza (as does the sibilance). The "scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh" is placed next to the "sudden smell of burning flesh" (suggesting another activity sometimes associated with lynching): these two smells co-exist in the same breath. Likewise, apparent civility *and* utter depravity co-exist in the South too. The sibilance throughout lines 7 and 8 further conjures an almost sickly sense of sweetness. It links the two smells together by shared sound, conveying the way that they are both on the air at once.

The poem also offers its first truly graphic details of the "black bodies," with the extremely unsettling images of "bulging eyes" and a "twisted mouth." This line is all the more horrible because

it feels so specific and accurate—this isn't some far-reaching metaphor or simile. Focusing on these two parts of the dead people's faces foreground the way that they died in fear and the violent nature of their death.

LINES 9-11

Here is fruit ...
... trees to drop,

The word "here" in line 9 draws the reader's attention, asking them to focus the eye of their imagination on the "strange fruit" in front of them. In other words, the poem refuses to let readers look away from this horror. A "crow" is a type of carrion bird. This term specifically denotes a bird that eats flesh from another animal that it *itself* has not killed. The killers, of course, are nowhere to be seen—but they are human beings, the same species that now hangs from the tree.

The sounds in this line are slightly harsher than those that came before, the two hard consonant /k/ sounds in "crows" and "plucks" suggesting the force with which the birds pull flesh from the bone. This line also introduces the grammatical structure that repeats in the next four clauses of the sentence (taking "Here is the ..." as the beginning of the phrase): Here is fruit for the *something* to *something*. The parallelism of these lines has a sing-song swinging motion to it, evoking the body swaying in the breeze (not dissimilar from the way that line 4 echoed line 1).

These four clauses, then, relate to different aspects of nature's elements, and the cycle of seasons and their accompanying weather. The mention of rain, wind, sun, and fruit-shedding ("the trees to drop") pretty much covers all the different stages in the tree's life. But with the tree now standing as a stark symbol of death—rather than life—this depressingly suggests that the violence on display here is nothing new. Indeed, it's almost macabrely natural itself, humankind unable yet to avoid inflicting such misery on itself, to break the cycle of violence. These lines are also distinctly gruesome, making the reader think about the decomposition of bodies left to "rot" on trees (denied a proper burial).

LINE 12

Here is a ... and bitter crop.

The last line is grammatically similar to the line 9 (the first line of the last stanza). Once again, this parallelism gives the poem a pendulum-like quality, conveying the image of a body "swinging in the southern breeze." Indeed, this line also echoes the first line by emphasizing the *strangeness* of what grows on these trees. By now, of course, the poem's extended metaphor is well-established and the reader knows that the "strange fruit" is a corpse.

The poem intentionally doesn't try to define its use of "strange"—it's up to the reader to infer what's going on here. The "fruit" is strange in large part because it is unnatural—bodies, of course, don't belong on trees. The image of a body swinging from a branch instinctively feels wrong and grotesque—but both the reader and the poem know that human violence is very much real. The strangeness is also the poem's way of holding human behavior up to the light and saying: what does it really mean to be human if we can behave like this?

The idea of the "black bodies" as a kind of crop is vital too. The natural world plays an important part in the poem's overall point about the cyclical nature of violence: "bitter[ness]" cultivates further bitterness; hatred grows out of hatred. And while fruits are supposed to taste good, this crop is "bitter" because it is unnatural and borne of hate.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is an important feature in "Strange Fruit." The first instance is in line 1:

> Southern trees bear strange fruit,

The two /s/ sounds here link "Southern" with "strange." That is, they tie the "strange[ness]" of the fruit to a specific geographical location—the southern United States. Lynching predominantly took place in these states, and the alliteration gently reinforces this link.

The next example is in line 2, with the strong repetition of /b/ and /l/ sounds:

> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,

The two /bl/ sounds chime together, suggesting an abundance of blood (in turn suggesting the horrible violence that caused blood to be on the tree in the first place). "Black bodies" in the following is then linked via sound with this "blood," making it clear this "blood" has been spilled by black people. The loudness of these two voiced /b/ consonants also adds weight to the suddenly explicit way in which the poem clarifies what exactly "strange fruit" means (the terms of the poem's extended metaphor). In the same line, the "swinging" bodies are again specifically linked to "southern" America.

The second stanza features alliteration of the /s/ sound, also known as sibilance:

> Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
> ...
> Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
> Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

This sibilance becomes even stronger when considering the /s/ sounds that pop up in the middle of words too. There's an almost sickeningly sweet sensation to having so many /s/ sounds in such close proximity, and this plays on the grotesque tension between prettiness and ugliness that runs throughout the poem. The magnolias smell "sweet" and beautiful, small proofs of nature's beauty—but the same air that carries their fragrance also carries the sudden and horrific smell of "burning flesh."

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "s"
- **Line 2:** "Bl," "bl"
- **Line 3:** "B," "l," "b," "s," "s," "b"
- **Line 4:** "S"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "S," "s"
- **Line 8:** "Th," "th," "s," "s"
- **Line 9:** "f," "f"
- **Line 10:** "F," "f," "s"
- **Line 11:** "F," "s," "t," "f," "t"
- **Line 12:** "s"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a strong presence in "Strange Fruit." This helps the poem sound distinctly musical—lending it a sort of beauty that contrasts sharply with the horrors being described. The first stanza, for example, relies heavily on assonance of the long /ee/ sound throughout, in "trees," "leaves," "bodies," and "breeze." These long /ee/ sounds are evocative of a gentle breeze, and deliberately help the poem build tension between pleasant-sounding lines and the grotesque horror at hand. The shorter /i/ sounds are also clustered together in this line and give the middle of the line a kind of bounce, evoking the movement of the "bodies" in the wind:

> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,

Similarly musical sound assonance appears with the short /eh/ sound in lines 7 and 8:

> Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
> Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Again, the assonance here creates a gentle, bouncy rhythm—one that feels very unsettling, given that the words here describe the smell of burning bodies.

The other main example of assonance is in lines 10 and 11:

> ... for the wind to suck,
> For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
> Here is a strange and bitter crop.

The assonant /uh/ and /aw/ sounds here draw attention to the relentless biological processes that affect the bodies on the trees. The repetition of the /aw/ sound in particular feels sonically satisfying—closing the poem on a neat and tidy rhyme. Again, this contrasts with the horror being described.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ee"
- **Line 2:** "ea"
- **Line 3:** "ie," "i," "i," "i," "ee"
- **Line 4:** "a," "a," "ee"
- **Line 5:** "e"
- **Line 7:** "e," "e"
- **Line 8:** "e," "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 9:** "u"
- **Line 10:** "u"
- **Line 11:** "u," "o," "o"
- **Line 12:** "o"

CAESURA

There are only three caesuras in "Strange Fruit." The first of these is in line 7 (quoted with line 8 for context):

> Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
> Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

These two lines both describe smells, but they couldn't be more different. Line 7 discusses the pleasant aroma of magnolias, a fragrant flower with a "sweet and fresh" scent; line 8, on the other hand, refers to the smell of burning human flesh. Line 8 is intensely—and intentionally—shocking after line 7 in the same way that line 6 relates to line 5. The caesura in line 7 forms part of this effect, giving line 7 a breezy, carefree sound—as though the poem momentarily has nothing to do with lynching or racism; instead, it can pause to consider the lovely smell of the magnolia flowers. This allows for the caesura-free line 8 to pack a more powerful punch.

The other two caesuras are both in the final stanza:

> For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
> For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,

This section describes the exposure of "black bodies" to the natural elements. Hanging from the trees, these bodies will be altered by the rain, wind, and sun, and the caesuras help to establish the repetitiveness of this section's grammar. Death is often depicted as a kind of stillness, but the restless caesuras here show the way that the abandoned bodies, having been denied a proper burial, will suffer further indignity at nature's hands. One natural element after another will destroy them.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "magnolias, sweet"
- **Line 10:** "gather, for"
- **Line 11:** "rot, for"

CONSONANCE

"Strange Fruit" is full of consonance (which in some cases takes the form of alliteration, covered separately in this guide). The poem employs a deliberate strategy of using language that is actually quite beautiful to describe something utterly horrific. This mirrors the corruption of nature through the use of trees as sites of murder—the way that they are hung with bodies rather than fruit. This gives the poem an extremely tense and uncomfortable atmosphere throughout. This consonance starts in the very first line:

> Southern trees bear strange fruit,

Three sounds—/s/, /t/, and /r/—dominate the line. They hang on the line like fruit from a branch, gently building a picture of some kind of grotesque and unnatural growth.

Throughout the poem consonance creates ironic beauty. Take line 5:

> Pastoral scene of the gallant south,

Here, the /s/, /l/, and /th/ sounds are soft and almost luxurious, chiming together with an air of refinement. The speaker is sarcastically calling out the hypocrisy of the southern states, using beautiful language to undermine the idea that anywhere where lynches take place truly could be either "pastoral" (idyllic) or home to "gallant" (chivalrous or civilized) people.

Another important use of consonance is in line 9:

> Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,

Here, two hard /k/ sounds suggest the strength of a crow's beak as it pulls flesh off the bones of a decomposing corpse.

Finally, the /r/ sound—which is consonant even in the poem's first line—is especially prominent throughout the poem. This is a guttural, back of the throat sound—one that suggests bubbling anger and rage. This is especially clear in the poem's final two lines:

> For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
> Here is a strange and bitter crop.

The intensity of the /r/ sound here feels almost like a growl. The pops of /t/ sounds throughout then make it feel as though the speaker is forcefully spitting out these lines.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "S," "r," "tr," "s," "r," "s," "t," "r," "t"
- **Line 2:** "Bl," "d," "l," "d," "bl," "d," "t," "t"
- **Line 3:** "Bl," "b," "s," "s," "ng," "ng," "n," "th," "s," "th," "n," "b," "r," "z"
- **Line 4:** "S," "tr," "r," "t," "r," "tr"
- **Line 5:** "st," "l," "sc," "th," "ll," "s," "th"
- **Line 6:** "Th," "s," "th," "t," "st," "m," "th"
- **Line 7:** "Sc," "nt," "m," "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 8:** "Th," "th," "s," "n," "s," "m," "n"
- **Line 9:** "r," "f," "r," "f," "r," "c," "r," "ck"
- **Line 10:** "r," "th," "r," "th," "r," "r," "th," "ck"
- **Line 11:** "r," "t," "r," "t," "t," "r," "s," "t," "r"
- **Line 12:** "r," "s," "tr," "tt," "r," "r"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"Strange Fruit" focuses on one main image: "black bodies ... hanging from the poplar trees." This is depicted through an extended metaphor that runs from start to finish. In fact, it's not until line 3 that the poem makes the terms of its metaphor clear—that the "strange fruit" of the title actually refers to the decomposing bodies of black people killed by lynching. Before looking at the implications of this metaphor, it's worth noting that on another level this isn't really a metaphor at all. That is, these black bodies really are (or were) swinging on the branches of trees: lynchings really did take place, and black people really were hanged by white people (and often shot and tortured too).

But the use of metaphor allows the poem to walk a delicate line between graphic description and figurative language. It *could* have just been written as a straight-up description of murdered bodies decomposing on the branches of trees, but holding some of this back has a powerful effect. In particular, it allows the poem to build tension between the apparent prettiness and pleasantness of nature—the trees, the flowers, the sun, and the breeze—with the utter horror of what humankind is capable of. The "strange fruit" is like a grotesque invasion on what should otherwise be a pretty banal nature poem in praise of the southern landscape.

Another important aspect of the metaphor is it allows the poem to map characteristics of the natural world onto humankind's capacity for hatred and violence. In other words, death here becomes a kind of "crop" that is sowed and reaped by hatred. This suggests that violence is cyclical, and, until humankind changes its behaviors, an inevitability.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

REPETITION

"Strange Fruit" makes effective use of repetition throughout. One of the main aims of the sound in "Strange Fruit" is to conjure the image of a body swinging in the breeze, and repetition is a key part of this.

All four lines in the first stanza have some element of repetition in them. Line 2 suggests an abundance of blood covering the tree, and the diacope of the word "blood" creates a parallel structure, making it sound as though the words are swinging back to forth (this is also looked at in the Meter section of this guide):

> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

Lines 3 and 4 then use parallelism by following a similar grammatical formula: [something] + swinging/hanging + in/from + [something]. This gives the line a light, airy feel evocative of the southern breeze:

> Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
> Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

This pendulum-like use of parallelism is written more widely into the stanza. Look at the way the stanza starts and ends with "trees"—how line 4 reverses like 1's mention of trees and then "strange fruit." This is an example of chiasmus, or a sort of *abba* pattern. Line 1 is basically "trees bear fruit," while line 4 is structured in reverse, "fruit hangs from trees":

> *a*
> Southern trees
> *b*
> bear strange fruit,

And then:

> *b*
> Strange fruit
> *a*
> hanging from the poplar trees.

It's as though the first line starts the poem's motion, and, like something swinging from a tree, that motion swings the other way at the end of the stanza.

The final stanza also uses repetition. Lines 9-11 all use a similar grammatical construction ("for the *something* to *something*") in order to show the way that these abandoned bodies suffer further indignities after death. (The repeated line openings throughout this stanza can also be thought of as anaphora.) Utterly dehumanized, these bodies are left exposed to the elements—food for carrion birds, obstacles for nature to overcome.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Lines 3-4
- Lines 5-8
- Line 9
- Lines 9-11
- Line 12

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is used primarily in the second stanza. Here, the contrast between the idyllic pastoral scene and the bodies of lynching victims serves to highlight to horror and inhumanity of racism. Lines 5 to 8 rely on a sort of parallel structure, introducing a pleasant element of the natural world and then undercutting it with grotesque imagery. Lines 5 ("Pastoral scene of the gallant south,") and 7 ("Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,") could both, taken out of context, be part of a pleasant (and banal) poem about natural beauty.

But they are deliberate set-ups. As soon as those lines are done, the poem deploys its most graphic descriptions, focusing on the facial contortions of someone who has been lynched ("The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,") and then "the sudden smell of burning flesh." Arguably, this works similarly to the poem's use of parallelism in that it creates a back-and-forth swinging motion, switching from one extreme to the other. Above all, it highlights the hypocrisy of ideas of gentility, chivalry, or beauty in the American South—insisting that these things cannot coexist alongside racist violence.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

VOCABULARY

Southern (Line 1, Line 3, Line 5) - The southern United States.

Poplar Trees (Line 4) - A type of tree common to the American South.

Pastoral (Line 5) - Rural and idyllic.

Gallant (Line 5) - Civilized, well-mannered, and chivalrous/honorable.

Magnolias (Line 7) - Sweet-smelling flowers.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Strange Fruit" is a 12-line poem consisting of three quatrains, each of which can be further broken down into two rhyming

couplets. The form is steady and simple throughout, which lends itself well to being set to music. And, of course, it was as a song performed by Billie Holiday that the poem became famous.

At the same time, the poem's smooth and easy form contrasts with its content. The poem deliberately juxtaposes grotesque horror side-by-side with seemingly pleasant natural descriptions. This helps it conjure a "pastoral scene" that has been corrupted by the presence of racism. The poem's simple, clear form can also be thought of as giving this racism nowhere to hide.

METER

"Strange Fruit" does not have a strict meter. Generally speaking, the lines have four or five stresses, and a varied number of syllables. The poem uses simple diction and rhyming couplets to create a fairly easy flow, one which intentionally mimics the poem's main image: bodies swaying in the breeze.

At times, this grotesque breeziness expresses itself strongly in the arrangement of unstressed and stressed syllables. For example, take line 2:

> Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

Metrically speaking, this line is symmetrical. It starts *and* ends with a stress, meaning that the motion it puts in place with "blood" returns to the start in "root." This has a pendulum-like quality that echoes the poem's main image of bodies "swinging in the southern breeze."

The last line is also important metrically. After repeating "for the" in the previous three lines, the stress in line 12 falls definitively on "Here," as if to grab the reader's attention and force it to confront the image of "black bodies swinging in the southern breeze."

RHYME SCHEME

"Strange Fruit" is written in rhyming couplets, meaning it has the following pattern in each stanza:

> AABB

The rhymes are all full, perfect rhymes—"fruit"/"root," "breeze"/"trees," etc. This gives the poem a deceptively—but deliberately—easy flow. Its lines *sound* poetically pleasant as they unfold, even as they reveal the poem's utterly horrific subject matter. This is part of the poem's point: that the South has tried to project an air of "pastoral" gallantry even as it is plagued by deeply disturbing racist violence.

The clear-sounding rhymes emphasize the grotesque contradiction between the beauty of the natural world and the horror created by human beings, as the "black bodies," dehumanized through racism and violence, have become part of the landscape. Take note, for example, of the way that "fresh" is rhymed with "flesh"—the smell of flowers marred by the smell of burnt human tissue. The rhyme between "drop" and "crop" also emphasizes the way that hatred will only cultivate more hatred, that the seeds planted by racism will help violence grow.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Strange Fruit" is unspecified, but it's clear where they stand in relation to racism and violence. This is a voice of protest, one that holds up humanity's horrors and asks whether this is how it has to be. The poem is entirely focussed on the image of "black bodies swinging in the southern breeze," and it's notable how there is no human speech in the entire poem. Instead, there is only the near-silence of the corrupted "pastoral scene," the only sounds being the breeze through the leaves and the branches creaking under the weight of their "strange fruit." Much of the poem's power comes from the way that its poetic voice feels so universal, untethered to any particular identity other than an opposition to racism and hatred. (Indeed, that's part of the reason that the poem worked so well as a song—because Billie Holiday was able to bring it to life with her powerful voice.)

SETTING

The poem is set somewhere in the American South. It doesn't specifically state *when* it is set, but it is roughly dated by the focus of its subject matter: lynching, which reached its peak during the latter half of the 19th century through the first half of the 20th century. It's fair to assume it takes place around the 1930s, as that's when it was written. This was during the era of racial segregation, when deeply racist Jim Crow laws dictated life for black Americans living in the South.

The poem describes itself ironically as "pastoral scene of the gallant south." The South had a self-defined reputation for gallantry, which is a kind of combination of charm, civility, honor, and refinement. "Pastoral" relates to idyllic natural and/or rural scenery. But the poem asks how the South can really be either of the above if "black bodies" are strung up from the trees and left to rot. This tension within the setting is part of the poem's power, with the speaker deliberately mixing pleasant-sounding words and imagery with stark and graphic depictions of the dead. There may be the "scent of magnolias" on the air, but, in the South, they're mixed in with the "sudden smell of burning flesh."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Abel Meeropol was a teacher, songwriter, and poet who lived from 1903 to 1989. He grew up in the Bronx (New York) within a Russian Jewish family, and subsequently studied at Harvard.

Meeropol was a politically active man, and was for a large part of his life a member of the Communist Party (which at the time was one of the few mainly white organizations that campaigned for racial equality). "Strange Fruit" was first published in 1937 under Meeropol's pseudonym, Lewis Allan, and was originally called "Bitter Fruit." Its composition was inspired by the harrowing photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith (this photograph—which is graphic and disturbing—is linked to in the Resources section if this guide).

The significance of "Strange Fruit" can hardly be overstated. It was the first protest song to break through into the world of mass popular culture. This success—which seems like a strange word in the context of the poem's subject matter—is largely owed to the heartbreaking song version performed by Billie Holiday. Performances of the song would shock the audience into silence, the poem working its unsettling spell of "pastoral" imagery and unflinching graphic description. Though fearing reprisal for the content of the song, Holiday performed it regularly. It was often the last song in her sets, and waiting staff were instructed to stop serving before it began.

Since then, musicians as diverse as Nina Simone, Jeff Buckley, Bob Dylan, and Kanye West have cited the song as a major influence and/or recorded their own versions. It's a testament to the power of the original text that it still feels as relevant as ever.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Strange Fruit" is a poem about racism and hatred. Specifically, it is about the treatment of black people by white people during a period of time roughly running from the end of the American Civil War up to the time of the poem's composition in the 1930s.

That said, the injustices of racism stretch back beyond this period. America is a nation that in the early days of white settlement was deeply intertwined with the African slave trade. Put simply, this trade saw European powers capturing African men and women and taking them to the so-called New World (specifically North America and the Caribbean islands). African men and women were put to work, some forced to help cultivate crops like sugar, tobacco, and cotton, while others became household servants. Millions of Africans suffered this fate in the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Slavery was entrenched in American society—George Washington himself was a slave-owner from an early age (later choosing to emancipate his slaves in his will).

From the late-19th century onwards, Jim Crow laws were enacted in the Southern United States. A kind of psychological hangover from the slave trade, these laws treated black people as fundamentally inferior to white people and institutionalized segregation. During this era, lynching became an increasingly popular form of extrajudicial killing. Sometimes motivated by unfounded fears about the threat from black people, and sometimes just the product of pure racial hatred, lynching was a form of public execution. As the poem suggests, this was mainly defined by the act of hanging the body from a tree, but also involved burning, shooting, and torture (and psychological humiliation). This poem was inspired by the photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith. In 1955, the young Emmet Till was lynched after whistling at a white woman. His death was a significant motivating factor in the American Civil Rights movement spearheaded by Martin Luther King.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" — Listen to Holiday's famous sung version of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI)
- The History of Holiday's Version — A fascinating article about Billie Holiday's relationship with Meeropol's poem. (https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/feb/16/protest-songs-billie-holiday-strange-fruit)
- Lynching in America — A valuable resource that looks at the history of lynching and racial hatred in the United States. (https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org)
- Meeropol's Inspiration — This is the (graphic and disturbing) photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in 1930 that inspired the composition of the poem. (https://rarehistoricalphotos.com/lynching-thomas-shipp-abram-smith-1930/)
- "The House I Live In" — Meeropol wrote the lyrics to the closing song from a short 1946 film of the same title, which focused on anti-Semitism in post-war America. The song is sung by Frank Sinatra in the film. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgvfTXixjDI)

HOW TO CITE

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