

TURN ME LOOSE: THE UNGHOSTING OF MEDGAR EVERS

INTRODUCTION AND PART I: DIXIE SUITE

Epigraph

Examine the epigraphs that follow the dedication. The purpose of an epigraph is to set the tone of a text for the reader. How do these contrasting quotes set the tone for the collection of poems? What do you think you can expect based on these two quotes?

Introduction

Use this link to write a definition of a Greek Chorus: https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_chorus

Who are the primary speakers in the collection of poems? Why would the author choose to exclude Medgar Evers' voice from the collection of poems? Even though he does not speak in the poems, how is he "present?"

Based on the last paragraph of the introduction, why did Frank X Walker write this collection of poems?

Time Line

Study the timeline at the end of the book. The events of this timeline are referred to in the poems. List three historical events from the timeline with which you are familiar, and three with which you are unfamiliar.

Familiar:

Unfamiliar:

Part I: Dixie Suite

The song “Dixie” is referred to many times in Walker’s poems. Listen to the song at the first link, and then read about the history of the song at the second link. Some see “Dixie” as a song full of Southern cultural pride; others see it as a reminder of the horrors of slavery and the oppression of Black Americans, specifically in the South. The word “Dixie” refers to states south of the Mason-Dixon line, which were slaveholding states. Why would Walker include references to this song in his poem?

Song and Lyrics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6FaJ9U2bh8>

History of the Song: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dixie_%28song%29

“What Kills Me”

What is “the movement?”

What does Myrlie Evers mean when she says, “When people talk / about the movement as if it started in ‘64, / it erases his entire life’s work.” (Hint: <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/civil-rights-act>)

Why do you think Frank X Walker chose to make this the first poem in the collection?

“Ambiguity Over the Confederate Flag”

Read the article at this link for a brief history of the controversy surrounding the confederate flag: <http://www.npr.org/2016/03/17/470824030/reverence-and-rage-southerners-battle-over-relics-of-the-confederacy>

Who are the speakers in this poem?

How does the speaker on the left feel about the “old south?” How do you know?

How does the speaker on the right feel about the “old south?” How do you know?

“Rotten Fruit”

Who is Joe Louis? Use this link to identify him in a sentence or two. Also, why would Walker choose to include a reference to Louis in this poem? <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/joe-louis>

What can we infer about Byron De La Beckwith based on this poem? Give two inferences you can make with specific language from the poem as support for your inference.

Examine the second section of the poem. Look for language that shows violence or aggression. This section appears to be about catching a fish. Is that what it’s really about? How do you know?

“Humor Me”

Use this link to write a brief definition of mob mentality: <http://brainz.org/what-mob-mentality/>

How is mob mentality demonstrated in this poem?

What does the phrase “humor me” usually mean? Why would Walker choose this as the title of this poem? According to De La Beckwith, what is “funny?”

“The N-Word”

Who is Chuck D (see the epigraph)? Use this link to identify him in a sentence or two if you aren’t sure:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chuck_D

Watch the short video about the Little Rock 9, and write a brief summary. Who were they?
<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/central-high-school-integration>

Watch the short video about the Birmingham, Alabama church bombing that killed four children in 1963. Why did the event act as a catalyst to push the civil rights movement forward?
<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/birmingham-church-bombing>

Walker uses imagery (words and phrases that appeal to the reader’s senses) to describe how Charles Evers feels when hearing “the n-word.” Select one example of imagery you find particularly powerful, then find an image that would be a good illustration to this poem, and explain how the image captures the imagery you selected. Include the image with your written explanation.

“Southern Sports”

Walker includes many references to the song “Strange Fruit” in his poems. Listen to the song and study the lyrics at the first link, and then watch the short video that explains the history of the song using the

second link. Why would Walker include references to this song in his poems? Explain with details from the song.

Song and Lyrics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c52EIU5tQNo>

History of the Song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OudNvGIUuw>

Tone is the author's emotional perspective on a topic. What is the tone of "Strange Fruit?" What is the tone of "Southern Sports?" How are they different? In other words, how does each speaker feel about lynching?

Why would Walker title this poem "Southern Sports?"

"I'd Wish I Was in Dixie Too"

Who is the speaker of this poem? How do you know?

How does the speaker feel about the song "Dixie?" How do you know? Use details from the poem to support your response.

TURN ME LOOSE: THE UNGHOSTING OF MEDGAR EVERS

INTRODUCTION AND PART II: SOUTHERN DREAMS

“Fire Proof”

Why would Willie De La Beckwith pretend she didn’t know “what gunpowder smelled like / or why he kept his rifles so clean.” Why would she burn his clothes without asking why?

Is Willie guilty of anything? What? Why or why not?

“Listening to Music”

What is a Kodak Brownie? Why would Myrlie say that “The right song was like a Kodak Brownie of us cuddling?”

Find a recording of Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, or Bobby Blue Bland. What kind of music do they sing? How does their music set the tone for this poem?

“Life Apes Art Apes Life: Byron De La Beckwith Reflects on Birth of a Nation”

As we watch the PBS film clip explaining the controversial film *Birth of a Nation*, take notes on why the film was controversial. (*The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*, Episode Four, 34:10 – 35:17)

What is happening in this poem?

Who are the “25,000 proud hooded knights” Walker refers to in the poem?

To what historical event is De La Beckwith referring when he says, “What an electric moment it must have been / sitting in a whites only theater / being right there in the balcony, beside Booth / when that pretty little bullet kissed Lincoln on the head?” Why would De La Beckwith enjoy seeing this event?

Why would De La Beckwith enjoy the original film *Birth of a Nation*?

“White of Way”

The title of the poem is a pun on the phrase “right of way.” What does “right of way” mean? What’s the pun? Why would Walker include the pun?

The pop culture references in this poem (Amos and Andy, the dancing butler from Shirley Temple, and the Uncle Ben logo) are often considered to be tinged with racist stereotypes. Use the links below for a visual representation of the references.

Amos and Andy Radio Show: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuALwwANikk>

Shirley Temple: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtHvetGnOdM>

Uncle Ben (scroll down to see the explanation of the logo):

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/racially-insensitive-article-1.2270225>

Define the following terms, and then explain why Walker would have included them as part of the definition of “White Privilege.” Terms: Colonialism, Apartheid, Manifest Destiny

“Music, Niggers & Jews”

Define antisemitism. How is antisemitism seen in the poem?

“Swamp Thing”

What is happening in Willie’s dream? What do the images remind you of? Use details from the poem to explain your answer.

Who is the real “swamp thing,” in other words the real monster, in the poem?

“Stand by Your Man”

“Stand by Your Man” Song and Lyrics: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U48VjCJkowE>

Why would Willie make a reference to the song “Stand by Your Man” in reference to her husband, Byron De La Beckwith? What is she trying to say?

Why would Willie mention that Tammy Wynette, the singer, is from Mississippi, too? What is the reader supposed to infer?

“Husbandry”

Define “husbandry.” Why would Walker select this as the title of this poem?

The previous poem examines Willie De La Beckwith's relationship with her husband, Byron, and this poem examines Myrlie Evers' relationship with her husband, Medgar. What do the two women have in common? How are their relationships different? Use language from both poems to support your answer.

"Unwritten Rules for Young Black Boys Wanting to Live in Mississippi Long Enough to Become Men"

Read the handout "Racial Etiquette: The Racial Customs and Rules of Racial Behavior in Jim Crow America." What parallels do you see between the "unwritten rules" mentioned there and the rules in the poem?

TURN ME LOOSE: THE UNGHOSTING OF MEDGAR EVERS

INTRODUCTION AND PART III: LOOK AWAY, LOOK AWAY . . .

“After Dinner in Money, Mississippi”

Watch the short video about the lynching of Emmett Till. <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-death-of-emmett-till>

Why was Till’s murder particularly shocking?

What image do the words on the left of the poem bring to mind? What image do the words on the right of the poem bring to mind? Why would the author include these two contrasting images? What is his point? Use details from the poem to support your answer.

“World War Too”

As we watch the PBS film clip about the treatment of Black World War II veterans and their relationship to the civil rights movement, take notes on what you see. (*The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross*, Episode Five, 2:50 – 11:59)

The title is a reference to World War II. Why would Walker include the pun, “too?”

What is the poem saying about the treatment of Black veterans after World War II?

“Believing in Hymn”

The title includes a pun on the word “Him.” What is a hymn? Who is “Him?” Why would Walker include this pun?

What does this poem say about the significance of faith and church in the life of Myrlie and Medgar Evers? How do you know? Use language from the poem to support your inference.

“Southern Bells”

What is this poem about? How do you know?

What does the author mean by “the mongrel evidence of their sins?”

This poem contains another pun. A southern belle is a stereotype of an ultra-feminine, high society white woman. The noise that a bell makes when it is struck is often referred to as a “peal” or “chime.” Examine the final two stanzas. Who is the “bell” of the poem? What is the difference between a southern belle and the “bell” of the poem? How do you know?

“Fighting Extinction”

Read the definition of the “one drop rule” here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One-drop_rule What reference to the “one drop rule” do you see in the poem?

Use this link to examine the figure of Aunt Jemima:

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/racially-insensitive-article-1.2270225>

Why would Walker include a reference to this figure in the poem?

What is De La Beckwith's message in this poem? (Hint – Look at the epigraph.)

“Harriet Tubman as Villain: A Ghost Story”

Brush up on your history of Harriet Tubman by watching the short film at this link:

<http://www.biography.com/people/harriet-tubman-9511430>

How does Willie's “ghost story” contrast with the real story of Harriet Tubman? Why would Harriet Tubman be a “villain” to Willie and Byron De La Beckwith?

“Legal Lynching”

What is this poem about?

Lynching is an illegal activity. Why would this poem be called “legal lynching?”

“After the FBI Searched the Bayou”

Use this link to read about Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mississippi_civil_rights_workers'_murders

Who were Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney? What happened to them? How does their story in this poem connect to the previous poem?

“Haiku for Emmett Till”

What do you think the author means by “Dixie decorum?”

What do you think the author means by “eyeball rape?”

How does this poem connect to what you’ve already learned about the lynching of Emmett Till?

“No More Fear”

Read about Reverend George Lee here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_W._Lee

Read about Lamar Smith here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lamar_Smith_%28activist%29

Why would Walker include references to these two people?

What do you think Myrlie means when she says, “Instead a seam opened up in that place / where we kept all our fears.” ?

“When Death Moved In”

Watch the historical news footage about James Meredith and Ole Miss here:

<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/ole-miss-integration>

Who was James Meredith? What did he do?

Personification is a literary technique wherein objects or ideas are given human qualities. How does Walker personify death in this poem? Give three examples of language from the poem that show personification.

TURN ME LOOSE: THE UNGHOSTING OF MEDGAR EVERS

INTRODUCTION AND PART IV: GALLANT SOUTH

“After Birth”

What is your personal reaction to the quote from Byron De La Beckwith that is used as an epigraph?
What does it tell us about how De La Beckwith feels about his crime?

Pregnancy and birth are a metaphor in this poem. In the speaker, the poem is “pregnant” with what? To whom does he “give birth?” What details support your inferences?

According to the poem, how are life and death alike? What do you think the author means in this comparison? What makes you think so?

“Sorority Meeting”

What is a sorority? Why would the author select this title for the poem?

How are Myrlie, the widow of the murdered Medgar Evers, and Willie and Thelma De La Beckwith, the wives of Evers’ murderer, “sisters?” What do they have in common, according to the poem?

“One-Third of 180 Grams of Lead”

In this poem, the author uses personification to describe the bullet that killed Medgar Evers. Give three examples of personification from the poem.

“Arlington”

Why would this poem be titled, “Arlington?”

What do you think Myrlie means when she says, “I was holding his future / and what we were burying / was only his past.”?

“Cross Examination”

Why would the author title this poem “Cross Examination?”

What connection do you see between this poem and what you read about De La Beckwith’s trial in the Evers biography activity you completed?

“Bighearted”

How does Thelma De La Beckwith feel about what her husband did? Use specific language from the poem to support your inferences.

“Anatomy of Hate”

In this poem, De La Beckwith lists several things he hated about Medgar Evers. What do these things symbolize? What did De La Beckwith really hate?

“What They Call Irony”

Watch the short video about the song “Mississippi Goddam” using this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=De0JKNsi58g>

What does the song refer to or mean? Why would Walker include a quote from the song as an epigraph for this poem?

Who was Judas? Why would De La Beckwith refer to the jury who convicted him as “Judases?”

“On Moving to California”

Use this link to read about Fannie Lou Hamer: <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fannie-lou-hamer>

What does Myrlie mean when she says that “Surviving Mississippi took Fannie Lou Hamer / strength?”

TURN ME LOOSE: THE UNGHOSTING OF MEDGAR EVERS

INTRODUCTION AND PART V: BITTER FRUIT

“One Mississippi, Two Mississippis”

Who is “you” in this poem? Who is “we?” How do you know? Use language from the poem to support your answer.

“A Final Accounting”

Define “accounting.” Why would Walker title this poem “A Final Accounting?”

What does the speaker mean by, “You can fill all the libraries with your version / of facts, call it history, and still not own the truth.”? How do you know?

“Now One Wants to be President”

Who is the “one” from the title?

Why does Thelma De La Beckwith think it took so long for the United States to have a Black president?

“Epiphany”

What do you think the epigraph from Woody Guthrie means?

Define “epiphany.”

What does Willie suddenly realize?

“Last Meal Haiku”

Whose “last meal” is described in this poem?

What does Myrlie mean when she says, “but when he looks up / at God’s burnt brass face he thinks / he has gone to hell?”

“White Knights”

Who are the “white knights” Walker refers to in the poem?

What is the tone of this poem? How does Myrlie Evers feel about the future?

“Evers Family Secret Recipe”

This poem is written in the form of a recipe. Based on the ingredients and steps of the recipe, what is Myrlie trying to create? What makes you think so? Use language from the poem to support your answer.

“The Assurance Man”

Review what you learned about Medgar Evers in your biography assignment. What connections to Evers’ life do you see in this poem?

Define “assurance.” Why would Walker title this poem “The Assurance Man?”

“Gift of Time”

How is time a “gift” to Myrlie Evers? What has she been able to realize with the passage of time? Explain two things, using language from the poem as support.

“Heavy Wait”

This title includes a pun on the words “wait” and “weight.” What is intended by this pun? What is the author trying to convey?

Why would the author choose the symbol of an elephant to represent Mississippi? (Hint: think about the elephant as an animal, but also as a political symbol.)

The poem includes the phrases “keloid skin” and “Braille history raised on her spine.” To what do these images refer? (Look up a definition of “keloid scars” if you aren’t sure of the meaning.)

According to the poem, what does Mississippi need to do in order to move forward from her past of racial violence?