

Date 2 / 10 PV Log: (circle one) Poem / Movie / Picture / LyricTitle "The Witnesses"Author / Director / Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Context (Where Found / Viewed / Read?)

I was given "The Witnesses" by Mr. Shakely because it is relevant to the novel *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson, which is what we are currently reading to honor Black History Month.

Content / CD / Summary / Precis (Say? "Plot? Setting/Situation? Key lines/phrases scenes, etc? )

"The Witnesses" begins with imagery of a vast ocean, which hides various items in its murky depths, such as "Skeletons in chains, / With shackled feet and hands" as well as "Ships, with all their crews." Here the poem is obviously referencing all of the slavery ships that have sunk due to storms in the seemingly bottomless pit of the Atlantic during triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the New World, particularly during the Middle Passage. The cruelty and harsh living conditions on these ships were not known by most people except the slave traders themselves, and so the injustice could never be confronted; nevertheless, the skeletons of the slaves in the poem, "glar[ing] from the abyss" metaphorically cry, "We are the Witnesses!" because they are the ones that actually experience the gruesome and horrendous journey known as the Middle Passage. Moreover, the poem reiterates the fact that these suffering slaves were treated like nobodies, members of an entirely different species, both nameless and now untraceable in their "unknown graves."

Content / CM / Meaning? / Theme(s)?

"The Witnesses" obviously speaks of the injustice and cruelty of the slave trade, prominently referencing the fact that it essentially degraded native Africans and blacks for that matter to an inferior species of organisms lacking all of the innate liberties of Man. Even the individuality and distinctness that defines a human being was stripped away from these brutally abducted innocents, let alone that they faced significantly severe, physical and psychological abuse and humiliation. Nevertheless, despite this gruesome recollection of human rights abuses ever so present within the "The Witnesses," the poem possesses a somewhat decent attitude aimed at equality and justice, as if it promises the abused and maltreated, voiceless victims eventual righteousness and compensation for their pain and suffering. Not everyone then knew how slaves were treated aboard slave ships, and some who did most likely refused to believe it, but the dead slaves knew it all and wouldn't be the slightest bit afraid to profess their terrible experiences for the sake of justice.

Form (Diction? Construction Terms? Symbolism?)

"The Witnesses" is a historically based poem, consisting of eight stanzas with the rhyme scheme ABAB. In the poem, "the witnesses" are literally the slaves who faced the gruesome and freedom depriving journey generalized as the Middle Passage. The skeletons of these slaves at the bottom of the ocean, so distant from any form of human life, symbolize the voicelessness and powerlessness of the innocent slaves sold into slavery, their abuses unheard and overlooked. The powerful imagery makes it seem like the slaves are calling for justice, only to be drowned out by the ocean of white greedy white people who use them for profit.

Commentary (What do you want to say? Why like? Questions? Synthesis / Allusions-Connections / Relevance to personal experience, to literature, 20Q's? etc.)? "Poetic" Traits?

Although quite a shocking poem about the horrific realities of a slave trip, "The Witnesses" truly brings to life and necessarily confronts a sensitive topic in human history. Slavery, as brutally unjust and unfair as it was, could not even compare to the horrors and atrocities experienced first hand by the innocent Africans out at sea, where the law was unenforced and horrendous crimes left unpunished. No witnesses, except the slaves themselves, who probably spoke no English at all, possessed the ability to stand up for the rights of the Africans, and that is why this poem, as well as any other historical recollection of the Middle Passage, is so eye opening and relevant. Throughout human history, so many crimes against human rights have been committed, but they have been known and perpetrated intentionally, whereas the slave trade was hidden and concealed from common view, making the dispersal of its occurrences ever more necessary. Although wealthy plantation owners in the New World participated in the heinous human rights crime known as slavery, I'm sure they would at least reject the awful conditions and brutalities the slaves faced as they sailed had they been more informed. One of these novels that attempts to bring to life the harshness of the slave trade is *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson, doing so in a somewhat epic and adventurous way rather than getting down to the gruesome facts. Another piece of work on the slave trade in the movie *Amistad*, which optimistically turns out for the best interest of the Africans, as they are deemed free people and left alone to continue their own lives rather than illegally and innocently being sold into slavery. "The Witnesses" significantly parallels *Amistad* in that it seems to promise justice to the Africans once and for all by making the evil and wicked deeds of the crew among slavery ships known to the public. Even though we live in a pretty equal and fair society today, the poem is poetic because back then it seemed to offer hope for Africans in that the Europeans would finally come to their decent senses and stop the abuse of members of their fellow species. The poem is optimistic by seeking out a transformation for the better in times of bad, and the fact that it almost promises a better, eventually free life for enslaved Africans back then makes the poem so poetic.

over (do not mix logs; e.g., no poem log in front, and movie log on back)

