

Strange Fruit

Billie Holiday

The lyrics of this song describe the crime of lynching, committed by white supremacists in the American South to terrorize African Americans. The words and music were written by Abel Meeropol.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

5 Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck,
10 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What does the title refer to, and what is the effect of this way of describing it? Consider secondary meanings of *strange* and metaphorical meanings of *fruit*. In what sense(s) is blood “on the leaves” and “at the root” (line 2)?
2. What idealized feelings and images do the song’s references to “swinging in the Southern breeze,” poplar trees, the scent of magnolia, and the “gallant South” convey? What rhetorical and emotional effects does their juxtaposition with images of violence have?
3. Why do you think the author chose to include the description of the elements and the aftermath of the lynching in the third stanza—what rhetorical and emotional effects does this description have?
4. Discuss the double meaning of *bitter* in the last line.
5. Discuss the significance of works of art like this one. Why are they important? What do they reveal about human nature?

Lyrics and Discussion Questions for “Strange Fruit”