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Reflective Essay 2

William Grant Still's composed "And They Lynched Him on a Tree" in 1940. William Grant Still is an American classical composer and orchestra conductor. William Grant Still was born in Woodville, Mississippi on May 11, 1895 and died on December 3, 1978. Still's is the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra by the New York City Opera. Due to Still's links to prominent African American figures in this time period he is a part of the Harlem Renaissance movement. The poet is Katharine Garrison Chapin. Katharine Garrison Chapin was born in Waterford, Connecticut on September 4, 1890 and died on December 30, 1977. This piece is important because it was composed when an anti-lynching bill was trying to be passed through Congress. Still's purpose for writing this piece was to bring attention to the tragedies African Americans faced in the deep south and call for change against lynching. Still's wants to use this piece to acknowledge the pain African Americans faced as a result of lynching, understand the suffering families face, and bring about social harmony.

In the year this piece was made the United States was at war on both foreign and domestic fronts. On the home front African Americans faced segregation, discrimination, and racial stereotypes. Also, African Americans faced socioeconomic barriers put in place by Jim Crow laws and social codes. Jim Crow laws required the segregation of schools, public restrooms, water fountains, neighborhoods, transportation, churches, parks, restaurant, effected

the workplace/labor force, and led to inferior health services. This was a fearful time for African Americans due to the increased violence against blacks, such as lynching. The increase in violence against African Americans led to the tragic death of Emmett Till, following the years after this piece was composed. The lynching death of Emmett Till sparked the Civil Rights Movement and started the gradual change of relations between African Americans and Caucasians in the fight against systematic racism. Also, during this time period the United States was fighting in World War II. African Americans influence in World War II also played a role in the Civil Rights Movement. Although, during the war African Americans were still segregated by race in military units. As the war continued, there was a shift in roles and African Americans started serving as officers, ground troops, and fighter pilots. At first African American soldiers were not allowed to fight alongside white troops, until President Truman signed an executive order desegregating armed forces in 1948. During the 1940s and the years following African Americans began to gain more rights and freedoms in their fight for racially and social equality.

The piece portrays a white chorus that sings the part of a white mob. Then a black chorus that portrays the lynched man's friends and family. The theme of this piece depicts race relations, social injustice, and racial inequality. The music starts off in almost a warning tone. The white chorus portrays high anticipation, in a dark and gloomy tone. The music then transitions to a soft and airy tone to reflect sadness, grieve, and anguish towards the white mob. The shift between the white chorus and black chorus creates a dynamic contrast in the music as the black chorus is more expressive and they create more movement in this composition. Also, when the black chorus is singing the music produces dissonance tones of tension and unrest while the chorus gives the feeling that a resolution is needed to move forward. However, even though there is a sad tone the music sort of gives a hopeful undertone for better days to come. As

the chorus sings “Oh Lord! Have mercy on me” it gives off the feeling that the man’s family and friends are begging for redemption. The lead singer is being overpowered by the music when she recounts the good memories of her son. “Oh Sorrow, sorrow, you’ve taken my hand to the promise land” depicts the heartbreak the mother feels as she has lost a piece of herself due to the murder of her son. There are many biblical references in this symphony. The lead female vocalist performance is very powerful and well-articulated. As the male vocalist sings “he was a man” is shows the demeaning aspects of a black man in the United States during this time period. It depicts how black men in America were inferior. His father is sing that his life had significance and that he was a human being the deserved better than to be left hanging for the world to see. The texture of this piece is thick with many layers of sound. The tonality of this piece is dark and mysterious. There are moving parts in this piece starting with the white mob, and then his family and friends singing about their grieve, next is the female and male vocalists part, and lastly it all comes together at the ending of the piece to make a powerful statement. This statement is about racial segregation and the ideas of an inferior race that will continue to divide our nation. This is an amazing body of work that depicts the need for justice and peace regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.