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William Tomlinson

Cedarville University, wbtomlinson@cedarville.edu

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Racism in the 1960s: America's Great Failure

William Tomlinson

We often feel assured that our nation will perform its duties and protect us from harm. Yet, through history we realize that the United States has not always fulfilled this role. One particular area of failure is civil rights. The exhibits in the John E. Fleming Gallery of the National Afro-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio bring to light much of America's failures to protect both past and present civil rights. The gallery features silhouettes of black victims from the 1960s, to present day standing side by side. By showing these victims of racism together, the gallery effectively connects the issues of the past with the present. To illustrate the struggle for civil rights, the museum displays several photographs from that time period echoing the message of African Americans. One photograph, a 1965 archival print in the John E. Fleming Gallery, portrays America's failure to protect civil rights and the hopeless plight of the black life through an effective setting, evocative text, and a powerful appeal to pathos.

The photograph depicts five black women picketing in front of the White House. Despite peacefully standing there, their signs scream a message louder than they could ever vocalize. The signs read, "Negroes are Americans too, Protect them", "Stop Brutality in Alabama" and, "Mr. President, How many must die before you act?" In addition to the disheartening messages, the photograph's setting induces a sense of solemn hopelessness. Though the photograph is black and white, it captures the bleak feeling of a harsh winter day. Adding to this impression, the photograph captures one of the women walking away as though she has given up on her leader. Behind the women, stands the White House arrayed in all its glory, with the American flag flying high above the protestors. These women who face the photographer send a message: "Mr. President, do your duty."

The photograph's layout effectively amplifies the women's

message. Because they are standing in front of the White House, the photographer captures an effective setting. Due to the symbolism of both the White House and the American flag, the setting appears ironic. While the White House symbolizes strength and power, these women protest inaction and weakness. While the American flag symbolizes freedom and equality, these women protest brutality and discrimination. The perspective of the photograph gives the impression that although the viewer wishes to view the beauty and symbolism of the White House and the flag, she must first confront the image of these women standing resolutely in front of the White House protesting inequality. Because the American flag is so high in the sky and the White House so lofty, they almost appear inauthentic compared to the visceral display below.

Though the angle of the photograph is powerful, its influence would be lost without the evocative text. The photograph's text compels the viewer towards empathy for the women's plight. The women portrayed hold three different signs that produce a unique effect. The sign, "Negroes are Americans too, Protect them" evokes sadness within the viewer. He realizes the failure of the American President to recognize these black individuals as Americans. "Stop Brutality in Alabama" not only causes sadness but also stirs up anger on behalf of these women. The last sign climaxes the viewer's emotions with a powerful message to the President: "Mr. President, how many must die before you act?" In addition to encompassing grief, sorrow, and anger, this last message fully forces the viewer's world into perspective. Any American would have declared inaction to be scandalous after September eleventh, yet the photograph informs the viewer that back in the 1960s, Americans were murdered and the President did nothing. Though the women stand silent, their signs carry messages louder than they could ever scream.

Because of the effective layout and compelling text, the photograph powerfully appeals to pathos—the emotion or humanity of a person. Specifically, the photograph forces the viewer to reflect on his responses and apply them to life. In addition to the printed signs, the women in the photograph tell a story. They tell a story of grief, anger, and hopelessness. One of the women is shown walking out of the photograph, away from the White House. The photograph that freezes the woman mid-walk makes her seem without hope, without purpose, and without options. Though she once stood for equality,

she now walks in grief, realizing no one will help. Because of the layout of the picture, the scene forces us to reflect on the failures of America. Coupling the layout with the text, the photograph elicits a powerful and uniquely American desire to help African-Americans in their plight.

Through an ironic setting, a memorable message, and a powerful emotional appeal, the photograph engraves itself on the viewers mind. The layout, incorporating the symbolism of the White House and the American flag, urges the viewer to consider the failures of America through the desolate scene below. The signs, protesting the racial discrimination in the United States, compel the viewer to empathize with the predicament of the five black women. The actions of the women, the layout of the photograph, and the text on the signs, masterfully appeal to the viewer's humanity and emotion, triggering an eagerness to help. While the story ends there for many tourists, the impassioned American can glean much more. Because of the context of the photograph in the John E. Fleming gallery, the exhibit makes a point: Racism is alive and well. The silhouettes of victims past and present side by side require us to ponder how we will respond. Will we be the next President failing to protect our fellow Americans? Or will we have the courage to stand up and fight for what we know is right?