



Activity 5: 'Strange Fruit'

In this activity we will be looking at 'Strange Fruit' by Abel Meeropol and Billie Holiday.

A New York poet, songwriter and teacher called Abel Meeropol originally wrote 'Strange Fruit' with the title 'Bitter Fruit' in 1930, after being 'haunted' by a photograph of the lynching of two African American men, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, in Marion, Indiana.¹⁵ He wanted to express his disgust and horror. Later he turned the poem into a song, which was performed, most famously, by Billie Holiday, and became a touchstone in the Civil Rights movement. Below are the original poem, 'Bitter Fruit', next to the final lyrics of the song:

Bitter Fruit

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

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

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

By **Abel Meeropol** (1930)

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By **Billie Holiday & Abel Meeropol** (1939)

Glossary

Pastoral: associated with farmland, specifically with herding sheep and cows. A Christian preacher can also be called a 'pastor', because they are supposed to tend their church congregation, or 'flock', like a shepherd

Gallant: heroic, brave

Magnolia: sweet-smelling tree with large pink or white flowers



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Tasks

1. Why describe the bodies of these men as 'strange fruit'? What is the effect of defamiliarising what is happening in the poem?
2. Why was the title changed? Would the song have been as successful if it was called 'Bitter Fruit'?
3. What is the effect of the parentheses, the brackets in the poem?
4. What happens to a poem when it is turned into a song? If you know that the lines are song lyrics, do you read them differently? Do you expect different things from them?

Explore More...

See a video of Billie Holiday performing 'Strange Fruit' [here](#).

For another poem on this theme, read [Audre Lorde's 'Power' \(1978\)](#).