

## The Writings of Ida B. Wells

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*Instructions:* Below are excerpts from Ida B. Wells's work. Read the quotes carefully and complete the questions that follow. Be prepared to report back to the class. Note that section A is made up of quotations from white newspapers that Wells included in her publication. Sections B, C, and D are Wells's original writing.

### A. Southern White Newspapers

*Wells's work challenged popular beliefs about the causes and justifications for lynching. Below, she quotes two Southern newspaper articles that express widely held views about the need for lynching at that time. The "crimes" that lynching victims were accused of were often not things that we would consider crimes today. The accusations of more serious offenses, such as rape or murder, were often false.*

*From Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases 1892*

[The Memphis *Daily Commercial*, May 17] "Nothing but the most prompt, speedy and extreme punishment can hold in check the horrible and bestial propensities of the Negro race.... The generation of Negroes which have grown up since the war have lost in large measure the traditional and wholesome awe of the white race which kept the Negroes in subjection.... There is no longer a restraint upon the brute passion of the Negro. What is to be done? The crime of rape is always horrible, but [for] the Southern man there is nothing which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outraging of a white woman by a Negro...."

[The Memphis *Evening Scimitar*, June 4] "Aside from the violation of white women by Negroes... the chief cause of trouble between the races in the South is the Negro's lack of manners. In the state of slavery he learned politeness from association with white people, who took pains to teach him."

*Questions:*

1. The second paragraph describes how whites "took pains to teach" enslaved people "manners" and "politeness." How does this racist perspective differ from what you know about race relations and the effects of slavery?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. According to the newspapers that Wells cites, what are two justifications for the lynching of African Americans?

## B. Lynching Cases

*Wells wrote detailed accounts of lynching that occurred throughout the country and challenged the widespread belief that lynching victims were men who had committed violent crimes. She documented many attacks targeting successful African Americans or those who attempted to participate politically in their communities. Wells also described cases of women and children being lynched.*

### Case 1

*From Mob Rule in New Orleans 1900*

“Feb. 22d, 1898, at Lake City, S.C., Postmaster Baker and his infant child were burned to death by a mob that had set fire to his house. Mr. Baker’s crime was that he had refused to give up the post office, to which he had been appointed by the National Government. The mob had tried to drive him away by persecution and intimidation. Finding that all else had failed, they went to his home in the dead of night and set fire to his house, and as the family rushed forth they were greeted by a volley of bullets. The father and baby were shot through the open door and...were burned to death. The remainder of the family, consisting of the wife and five children, escaped with their lives from the burning house, but all of them were shot, one of the number made a cripple for life.”

### Case 2

*From A Red Record 1895*

“At Moberly, Mo., February 18th and at Fort Madison, S.C., June 2d, both in 1892, a record was made in the line of lynching which should certainly appeal to every humanitarian who has any regard for the sacredness of human life. John Hughes, of Moberly, and Isaac Lincoln, of Fort Madison, and Will Lewis in Tullahoma, Tenn., suffered death for no more serious charge than that they ‘were saucy to white people.’ In the days of slavery it was held to be a very serious matter for a colored person to fail to yield the sidewalk at the demand of a white person, and it will not be surprising to find some evidence of this intolerance existing in the days of freedom. But the most that could be expected as a penalty for acting or speaking saucily to a white person would be a slight physical chastisement to make the Negro ‘know his place’ or an arrest and fine.... After being charged with their offense and apprehended, [the men] were taken by a mob and lynched. The civil authorities...did not feel it their duty to make any investigation after the Negroes were killed.”

### Questions:

1. According to Wells, why were the individuals in Cases 1 and 2 lynched?

Case 1:

Case 2:

2. How do these cases provide a different perspective on lynching than the newspaper excerpts that Wells cites in Part A?

### C. Message to African Americans

*Although any challenge to white violence was incredibly dangerous, Wells called upon African Americans to use a variety of methods to stop lynching.*

*From Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases 1892*

“To Northern capital and Afro-American labor the South owes its rehabilitation. If labor is withdrawn capital will not remain. The Afro-American is thus the backbone of the South.... The Afro Americans of Memphis denounced the lynching of three of their best citizens, and urged and waited for the authorities to act in the matter and bring the lynchers to justice. No attempt was made to do so, and the black men left the city by thousands, bringing about great stagnation in every branch of business. Those who remained so injured business of the street car company by staying off the cars.”

*From Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases 1892*

“Of the many inhuman outrages of this present year, the only case where the proposed lynching did *not* occur, was where the men armed themselves in Jacksonville, Fla., and Paducah, Ky., and prevented it. The only times an Afro-American who was assaulted got away has been when he had a gun and used it in self-defense. The lesson this teaches and which every Afro American should ponder well, is that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and it should be used for the protection which the law refuses to give.... The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs...the more he is insulted, outraged, and lynched.”

*Questions:*

1. Based on the excerpt and Part I of the reading, why did Wells describe African Americans as “the backbone of the South”?
2. According to Wells, how can African Americans use their economic power to put an end to lynching?
3. Why does Wells argue that African Americans should defend themselves with force?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## D. Appeal to a Broader Audience

*Wells hoped to reach readers throughout the United States and around the world with her writing. She believed that a U.S. failure to resolve the issue of lynching would be a failure of the nation.*

*From A Red Record 1895*

“The Negro does not claim that all of the one thousand black men, women and children who have been hanged, shot and burned alive during the past ten years, were innocent of the charges made against them.... But we do insist that the punishment is not the same for both classes of criminals. In lynching, opportunity is not given to the Negro to defend himself against the unsupported accusations of white men and women. The word of the accuser is held to be true and the excited bloodthirsty mob demands that the rule of law be reversed and instead of proving the accused to be guilty, the victim of their hate and revenge must prove himself innocent. No evidence he can offer will satisfy the mob.”

*From A Red Record 1895*

“‘Equality before the law,’ must become a fact as well as a theory before America is truly the ‘land of the free and home of the brave.’... It is the white man’s civilization and the white man’s government which are on trial. This crusade will determine whether that civilization can maintain itself by itself, or whether anarchy shall prevail; whether this Nation shall write itself down a success at self government, or in deepest humiliation admit its failure complete.”

*From A Red Record 1895*

“[W]e demand a fair trial by law for those accused of crime, and punishment by law after honest conviction.... Surely the humanitarian spirit of this country which reaches out to denounce the treatment of the Russian Jews, the Armenian Christians, the laboring poor of Europe...will no longer refuse to lift its voice on this subject.... Can you remain silent and inactive when such things are being done in our own community and country? Is your duty to humanity in the United States less binding?”

*Questions:*

1. Wells writes, “‘Equality before the law,’ must become a fact as well as a theory before America is truly the ‘land of the free and home of the brave.’” According to her writing and last night’s reading, in what ways were African Americans *unequal* before the law during this time period?
2. What does Wells believe African Americans are entitled to? (See the third excerpt.)
3. According to Wells, why should readers care about the issue of lynching? (Each excerpt provides a different reason.)