

# Prescription:

**Complaint:** No understanding of the pleasure and benefits of writing

**Prescription:** Learn more about authors to understand why they enjoy writing and how it impacts them. **Drug Prescribed:** Lillian Smith

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## **Medication information, side effects, and purpose:**

Every person has unique qualities whether it be personality characteristics, physical features, or experience, but all people are created equal. While we are each marked with distinctive attributes, we are all ultimately human. It seems definitive, but the lines are often blurred by the distinguishing qualities of people. When someone varies in some way, they are seen as foreign. Throughout *Strange Fruit*, Lillian Smith roots the work in the cultural environment of the deep South to emphasize the idea that race should not blur the lines of human equality. Written and based in a time of extreme racism in the South, Smith works against the status quo by arguing for the rights of minorities. Through her intense imagery, stereotypical Southern setting, and her audacious truthfulness, Smith reveals the tragedies of southern reality created by violence and tension amongst races. Unlike most authors of her time, Smith did not paint a pretty picture of southern life in her writing, but instead provided harsh details in order to show the horrifying reality of the daily life of minority's. The winding plot of *Strange Fruit* both enthralls and shocks its audience ultimately proving that the fruit of life is built upon truth and equality.

Equality is the underlying bond of all humans, but is often disregarded because of the diversity amongst the global population. This idea explains the vast division between whites and blacks in the South during the 1920's; people could not see past their skin color. This is how the racism and its accompanying violence, discrimination, and hatred erupted. This inequality is obvious in *Strange Fruit* because Smith intentionally illustrates the differences between blacks and whites through language and imagery. She draws clear attention to the differences in vernacular between the two races by making distinct changes to spelling, grammar, and rhythm of the language each race uses. Through sharp and proper English with proficient vocabulary, Lillian implies that the white townspeople have higher education and better diction. To contrast that, Lillian portrays the blacks as having lower education by including diction like "Sho" and "Tollable" (Page 8) instead of sure and tolerable. This juxtaposition of the two races' diction and vernacular allow Smith to force her audience into seeing the preconceived conceptions people had about blacks at the time. She continues to show the clear division and inequality between the two by including contrasting imagery for the two lifestyles: The white culture was sweet and pleasant, but the black lifestyle was rough and hard. Harsh and negative descriptions like "looked like a dirty little child who had been spanked for some badness and had cried herself to sleep" (370) are used to describe the black characters and their lifestyle, whereas, statements like "White girls in cars blew horns, ordered cokes, laughed, crossed their legs" (8) are used to create a much more pleasant and overall happy tone toward white life. The way that Smith creates these divisions through literary devices is

subtle but effective. It makes the audience float into a state of mind of that time period. Feeding the senses, the audience can hear them speak, picture them act, and is left understanding the division between whites and blacks. In a review, Anna Greene Smith claims "It is a story of two regional cultures, Negro and white, conditioned by many factors. There is the Negro group, facing the realities of cultural inheritance and limited training, seeking their share in the "American Dream"; feeling that the whites believe the Negro a Negro and nothing more... *Strange Fruit* has rich passages of the way of the folk and the folk wisdom" (Smith). Personally, I grew up in a place where as a Caucasian I was the minority. My high school was predominantly black and Hispanic which I found normal because I had never experienced anything different. We all were mixed in there together and I saw no difference between us. However, coming to UGA I have realized the world is very different. Outside my little "bubble" I was no longer a minority, but a vast majority. And shockingly to my disappointment, different races do not mix as freely as they did at home. I find myself walking into Tate Student Center and there is a section where all the black students sit and then the white students are everywhere else. Coming from where I am from, I wonder do they sit there separately by choice to embrace their similarity or do they sit separately because they feel as though they cannot intermix with the rest of the students? While this is not to the extreme that Smith writes about, the division still exists. By clearly illustrating the distinctions and divide between white and black in *Strange Fruit* Smith efficiently proves to her audience that equality is broken when people are blinded by diversity.

Truth is the ultimate healer for all misdoings. No matter what has happened, truth rids people of guilt, prevents lying, and solves complications. Throughout *Strange Fruit* there is an absence of truth which leads to the ultimate downfall of the plot. The secrecy of Nonnie and Tracy's relationship leads down a slippery slope of deceit and ultimately leads to the death of two innocent boys. The motifs of equality and truth play hand in hand with each other throughout the novel. The lack of equality leads to the need for lies; the miscegenation between Nonnie and Tracy is considered scandalous because of inequality between their races, so they lie and try to cover it up. It is interesting and noteworthy to consider how when Nonnie delivers the news of her pregnancy to Tracy she is happy about it and says, "I want it. I'll have something they-can't take away from me" (6), but Tracy is shocked and does not want to accept this truth, saying, "Glad? You can't be!" (6). Nonnie is willing and eager to expose their forbidden love because she would be "moving up" since she is loved by a white boy of class. However, Tracy is not thrilled because he would be disowned and looked down upon because he was with a black girl. This is what made the novel so enthralling to readers- its scandal. Reviews even say "The novel's treatment of miscegenation helped make it a controversial bestseller" (Brantley). On an even larger level, I believe Smith is trying to express that people need to be truthful with themselves too. Inequality only exists as long as people let it, and I believe Smith is expressing that people are lying to themselves about what they know is right. In an interview about *Strange Fruit* Smith says, "It is probably true that every reader is shocked at the book" (Smith). Her justification being that "readers who have been reared from childhood to think themselves 'superior' to Negroes, are shocked to realize that Negroes are human beings like themselves" (Smith). Smith is implying that we act based on what we are taught and follow preexisting behaviors, so people should be truthful with themselves and figure out what they actually believe.

All people deserve to be equally treated. While we are all made up of unique attributes, they all add up to be human. Lillian Smith believed this and passionately advocated for equality and truth through *Strange Fruit* as she detailed a novel about forbidden interracial love in the deep South in the 1920's. Her use of diction, imagery, setting, and motifs illustrated the devastating realities of the South and the divisions created by race. Her work shocked all, but that was her intention because it made her audience think. It made her audience think about what was wrong with society and decide it needs to be realigned to create equality by being honest about what people deserve.

#### Works Cited

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