

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection

Note: This week's AoW consists of two articles: one written 50 years ago and one written this week.

Blast Kills Four Children; Riots Follow Two Youths Slain; State Reinforces Birmingham Police

Source: excerpt from WashingtonPost.com/United Press International/September 16, 1963

Birmingham, Sept. 15 -- A bomb hurled from a passing car blasted a crowded Negro church today, killing four girls in their Sunday school classes and triggering outbreaks of violence that left two more persons dead in the streets.

Two Negro youths were killed in outbreaks of shooting seven hours after the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, and a third was wounded.

As darkness closed over the city hours later, shots crackled sporadically in the Negro sections. Stones smashed into cars driven by whites.

Five Fires Reported

Police reported at least five fires in Negro business establishments tonight. A official said some are being set, including one at a mop factory touched off by gasoline thrown on the building. The fires were brought under control and there were no injuries. [...]

City police shot a 16-year-old Negro to death when he refused to heed their commands to halt after they caught him stoning cars. A 13-year-old Negro boy was shot and killed as he rode his bicycle in a suburban area north of the city.

Police Battle Crowd

Downtown streets were deserted after dark and police urged white and Negro parents to keep their children off the streets.

Thousands of hysterical Negroes poured into the area around the church this morning and police fought for two hours, firing rifles into the air to control them.

When the crowd broke up, scattered shootings and stonings erupted through the city during the afternoon and tonight. [...]

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. wired President Kennedy from Atlanta that he was going to Birmingham to plead with Negroes to "remain non-violent."

But he said that unless "immediate Federal steps are taken" there will be "in Birmingham and Alabama the worst racial holocaust this Nation has ever seen."

Dozens of survivors, their faces dripping blood from the glass that flew out of the church's stained glass windows, staggered around the building in a cloud of white dust raised by the explosion. The blast crushed two nearby cars like toys and blew out windows blocks away.

Negroes stoned cars in other sections of Birmingham and police exchanged shots with a Negro firing wild shotgun blasts two blocks from the church. It took officers two hours to disperse the screaming, surging crowd of 2,000 Negroes who ran to the church at the sound of the blast.[...]

The bomb apparently went off in an unoccupied basement room and blew down the wall, sending stone and debris flying like shrapnel into a room where children were assembling for closing prayers following Sunday School. Bibles and song books lay shredded and scattered through the church. [...]

One of the dead girls was decapitated. The coroner's office identified the dead as Denise McNair, 11; Carol Robertson, 14; Cynthia Wesley, 14, and Addie Mae Collins, 10. [...]

Fourth in Four Weeks

It was the fourth bombing in four weeks in Birmingham, and the third since the current school desegregation crisis came to a boil Sept. 4.

Desegregation of schools in Birmingham, Mobile, and Tuskegee was finally brought about last Wednesday when President Kennedy federalized the National Guard. Some of the Guardsmen in Birmingham are still under Federal orders. Wallace said the ones he alerted today were units of the Guard "not now federalized."

The City of Birmingham has offered a \$52,000 reward for the arrest of the bombers, and Wallace today offered another \$5,000.

Dr. King Berates Wallace

But Dr. King wired Wallace that "the blood of four little children ... is on your hands. Your irresponsible and misguided actions have created in Birmingham and Alabama the atmosphere that has induced continued violence and now murder."

Dead Girls and the Lives They Might Have Lived

Source: MiamiHerald.com/Leonard Pitts Jr./September 14, 2013

This is for four women who are not here.

It is for grandchildren who never existed and retirement celebrations that were never held. It is for Sunday dinners that were never prepared in homes that were never purchased. It is for children who were never born and fathers who never got to walk daughters down the aisle. It is for mortarboards that were never flung into the air, for first kisses that were never stolen, for dreams that ended even as they still were being conceived.

This is for four little girls who died, 50 years ago today.

Died. It is, in this context, a misleading word. Makes it sound as if maybe 11-year-old Denise McNair and Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson, all 14, succumbed to some disease. Hearing it, you might not realize they died because terrorists planted a bomb beneath an exterior stairway of their church and that it exploded while they were in the basement preparing for Sunday School. You might not realize that a chunk of concrete embedded itself in one child's skull or that another child's head was torn from her body.

Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., had been the nerve center of a human rights campaign that made the city notorious the previous spring, the place from which nonviolent armies poured to face snarling dogs and high pressure hoses under the command of police commissioner Bull Connor. Because this was what you had to do if you were African American and wanted to drink from a clean public fountain, try on clothes in a department store or buy a hamburger at a lunch counter in Birmingham.

The marchers won that battle and their movement was at a summit of hope by the time it convened in Washington to march in support of federal legislation. "I have a dream today!" the great man roared and it must have felt, on that transcendent day, as if that dream shimmered at the very verge of reality.

Eighteen days later, the bomb exploded at 16th Street Baptist, where the Sunday School lesson was to have been "The Love That Forgives." And the summit of inspiration gave way to a yawning abyss of despair.

At a funeral for three of the little girls — Carole's family buried her separately — the great man sought to find the message in their deaths. This tragedy, he said, should challenge preachers who meet hatred with silence, politicians who use it to buy votes, a federal government that compromises with conservative hypocrisy and African Americans who passively accept status quo.

He preached against despair and loss of faith. But he also let slip something that suggested how deeply even he, Martin Luther King, a mighty preacher of the Christian gospel, was shaken by this event. "Life is hard," he said, "at times as hard as crucible steel."

Indeed. Just when you think you know the depths to which people can sink, the extremes to which they can go in their sheer, pathological hatred, something happens that takes your breath away.

That's what that day did. The martyrdom of four little girls made a nation question its conscience — What kind of people kill children in church? — and so, helped turn the tide toward freedom. Congress said as much last week in awarding them its Gold Medal.

But to consider America 50 years later, still swathed in its tribalism, proud in its manifold hatreds, righteous in its denials, is to be reminded that tides are not permanent. They ebb and flow. And the battle to make America live up to the first sentence of its founding document — the one about the "self-evident" truth of equality — is ever ongoing.

"Change" King once said, "does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle." Such struggle is the price of freedom.

And a debt we owe four women who are not here.

Possible Response Questions:

- Explain the differences in the authors' purposes in the two articles.
- Has there been a significant change when it comes to equality in America in the last 50 years? Explain.
- What current events come to mind that parallels the events in the article from 1963?