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ENG 101-016

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11/16/2016

 “Analysis of an Exhibit that Details the Development of the Relationship between Blacks and the KKK in the South”

With the KKK’s recent endorsement of Donald Trump, and the uproar that it caused among the majority of Americans, I was interested in discovering the roots and beliefs of the KKK, thinking that this would help me understand the profundity of today’s political atmosphere. Having heard about an exhibit that explores the relationship between blacks and the KKK, I immediately decided on venturing to the museum to learn about the historical origins of the KKK and why their endorsement of Donald Trump is so divisive.

When I arrived at the exhibit, I approached the first slide, which was marked by a large red title that read, “KKK versus Blacks in the South: A Visual History of the Development of Race Relations from the Reconstruction Era through the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960’s”. The title started as a general statement, but the subtitle following the colon provided more specificity as to what the exhibit wanted to convey. Additionally, through the use of “versus”, I understood that the Ku Klux Klan and blacks were often at odds with each other, and that the exhibit would take me on a visual tour of how their relationship developed. In this way, I found this title captivating and informative, as it insinuates that there was tension between the two groups, while also explaining what the exhibit would depict.

Approaching the “Introduction” of the exhibit, I saw a slide that I expected would give a general overview of the relationship between the KKK and blacks. From the three paragraphs, I discovered essential background information that outlined the motives and incentives of the KKK: to restore white supremacy after the abolition of slavery. To do this, the KKK used violence and intimidation, hoping that they would scare blacks from exercising their rights, especially their right to vote. Furthermore, the introduction provided me with insight of the relationship progression between the KKK and blacks, beginning after the Civil War and continuing through the Civil Rights Movements. From this, I extracted that the exhibit would detail the evolution and development of the KKK’s actions that provoked black activists, like Yusef Iman, whose work is vital to the exhibit, to retaliate against and protest the KKK’s injustices.

The third slide, labeled “The Foundation of the Klan”, provides the first image of the exhibit, a black-and-white image that shows a Klan in white, hooded robes, with what appears to be their leader in the middle. Their crossed arms, anonymity, and weapons are undoubtedly intended to intimidate blacks. To the left of the image lies a description of typical Klansman: white Confederate veterans, who want to preserve white supremacy in the South. This information helped me understand the roots of their conflicts and tension with blacks because if I had not know the backgrounds and beliefs of the men in the Klan, it would leave a void as to why they were in conflict with blacks. In this way, I think the designer of the exhibit chose the right place to start in history, as knowing why and when the Klan formed is essential to understanding their actions and the evolution of their organization.

The following slide of the exhibit, highlighted by the header, “KKK Inhibits Blacks’ Right to Vote through Intimidation and Violence”, emphasizes that this slide would explore how the KKK patrolled and controlled in southern politics. After reading the bolded red header, my eyes were drawn to the picture of two white men holding pistols to a black man’s head at the election polls. Although the citation mentions that the image is a cartoon, the image nevertheless depicts the intimidation that the KKK would use to influence black voters. To the left of the picture, a caption explains that the KKK would use threats to force blacks to vote for the politicians, typically Democrats, that the KKK wanted in office. This information reveals the sarcasm of the title of the picture, which reads “Of Course He Wants to Vote the Democratic Ticket,” showing that the KKK did, in fact, turn the politics of the South in their favor through intimidation. Furthermore, the caption connects and intertwines the KKK’s political intimidation, shown in the picture, to Yusef Iman’s *Praise the Lord, But Pass the Ammunition* by describing a scene from the play in which KKK members beat and kill a black family because the father had tried to vote. Through this, the exhibit and Iman both show the real threat and danger that the KKK posed to blacks trying to exercise their right to vote. In turn, the picture, caption, and play work together to show how the KKK maintained white supremacy in politics. The result of this intertwining is an informative and cohesive slide that relates the KKK’s ferocity in politics in the South after the Civil War to a more contemporary artistic representation of that ferocity.

The exhibit proceeds to a slide titled, “Ben Johnson Interview”, however, the viewer’s attention is immediately turned to the image of two black men hanging from a tree with a crowd of whites gathering around them. This image captures the violence that the KKK used to scare and threaten blacks, and it simultaneously invokes emotion for its viewer, as it is difficult to believe that crimes like these were commonplace a century ago. In the caption on the left of the image, the exhibit explores an interview of Hillsboro, North Carolina native Ben Johnson, who endured seventeen years of slavery, but may have arguably experienced more emotional trauma after slavery was abolished. His accounts of his good friends that were hunted, beaten, and often killed by the KKK, forced me to look at the atrocities that the KKK was responsible for on a more personal level, inciting sorrow and sadness in me. While a viewer of this image may be moved to grief and anger, emotions were certainly stronger and more overwhelming for blacks, who witnessed their neighbors, friends, and relatives hanging from trees, smeared in blood. This slide was more striking and emotional for me compared to the others, as the designer of the exhibit almost intends for this slide to evoke sympathy and sorrow towards blacks, and anger towards the KKK for committing heinous crimes like this. I found that the two sources used in this slide, the interview and the image, reflect off of each other to create a portion of the exhibit that is not solely focused on informing the viewer, but rather focused on compelling and intriguing the viewer through evoking the viewer’s emotion.

Next, the exhibit explores black retaliation to the KKK, proposing the question in the slide’s title, “Violent Retaliation or Peaceful Protest?” Although this slide does not have an image, it compares how Luke, a black character in Iman’s play who is the embodiment of violent retaliation against the KKK, responds to KKK violence in the play versus how blacks responded to KKK violence in reality. The comparison reveals that Luke’s desire to retaliate against the KKK with violence was an unrealistic method of retaliation, as KKK influence was widespread and blacks were largely still associated with low social standing, meaning that violent retaliation from blacks would not resonate with the general public. This comparison between retaliation in the arts and in reality clarifies the discrepancies between both: while Iman wanted to empower blacks through Luke’s desire to fight back against the KKK, this was not as feasible in reality because Americans generally still held their racist and white supremacist ideals, exemplified by the KKK and the social and political advantages that whites held.

The exhibit continues with a slide labeled, “The Resurgence of the Klan in 1915”, insinuating that the Klan that dominated the early 1870’s diffused. Beneath the heading, the exhibit explains that the first Klan lost a significant amount of power for two reasons: new legislation prevented them from executing their typical acts of intimidation and the fact that the Klan had accomplished their primary goal by electing Democratic officials that supported their beliefs. In this way, because they insured that Democrats controlled local and state governments in most southern states, the Klan did not have a large presence from the end of the 1870’s until the 1910’s, when their resurgence began. Through the use of an article from a Georgia newspaper, the exhibit provides evidence for the revival of the Klan beginning in 1915, as an essential quote reads, “Proof that the noble spirit that actuated the members of the famous Ku Klux Klan in the reconstruction period still lives among the sons is shown in the remarkable growth of the organization…” This excerpt offers its reader concrete proof from a reliable source that the Klan was coming back into power very quickly; this is important because rather than just telling the viewer that the Klan was regaining power, it shows that it did instead.

While the previous part of the exhibit states that the Klan was resurgent in the 1910’s, it does not show how it was resurgent, which is the primary focus of the following portion of the exhibit. The heading of this slide reads, “The Klan Establishes Political Power Across the Country”, making it clear to me that the slide will show how the Klan reestablished its dominance. The layout is effective in that my eyes were initially drawn to the picture of a Klan parade through Washington D.C. in 1925, with white, robed men monopolizing the image from foreground to background. From there, I read the first paragraph, directly to the left of the picture, which informed me that the Klan’s influence had spread northward by 1920, resulting in a large number of members in states like Ohio and Pennsylvania. In this way, the image and first paragraph work together to reveal that the Klan was in full force once again, perhaps even more powerful with its northern expansion. After the first paragraph follows a paragraph explaining and elaborating on how the Klan resurged, noting that it used a political plan called the “decade” to ensure that Klan politicians were in local and state governments. The Klan did this through requesting that each of its members recruit at least ten people to vote for Klan politicians, which, in turn, helped the Klan control state governments across the country and form an “invisible empire.” Interestingly, this slide is effective in that the viewer learns how the Klan altered its political tactics from using violence and intimidation to using less violent, and more diplomatic tactics to control politics across the country.

Next, in an organized and clear progression, the exhibit displays a slide with a title that reads, “Blacks Attempt Peaceful Protests.” On the right side of the slide, two images of blacks protesting, one that shows a confrontation between blacks and the KKK and one that shows a black teenager sitting at the counter of a “whites only” drugstore, grasped my attention because of their profundity. The confrontations that are captured in each image are both compelling and provoke sympathy for blacks, who were oppressively marginalized during the first half of the 20th century because of discriminatory laws. Accompanying the images on the right is an explanation of how blacks combatted and protested segregation and racism prior to the signing of the Civil Rights Act. This explanation reveals that, because the NAACP was ineffective in negotiating for laws that would protect blacks from the KKK and hate crimes, blacks were forced to resort to peaceful protests and sit-ins to fight segregation and racism. While a large portion of the exhibit centers on how the KKK oppressed blacks, especially in the South, this slide reveals how blacks were finally able to retaliate and protest against the ideals that the KKK and white supremacists believed in. The placement of this slide is indicative of how long blacks were physically oppressed and vocally suppressed, as this slide falls near the end of the exhibit. In this way, the designer of the exhibit reveals how long blacks endured silence and the repression of their voices, as they only began openly protesting towards the end of the 1920’s.

The following slide opens with the heading, “The Decline of the Resurgent Klan,” implying that despite the Klan’s growing political influence, the organization faced conflicts that hindered its growth and expansion. In a concise, yet informative slide, the exhibit demonstrates how the Klan lost its power once again. Attributed to its constant violence and an incident in which one of the Klan’s Grand Dragons raped and murdered a white schoolteacher in 1925, many people began to see through the faults and wrongdoings of the Klan. Along with increased opposition to the Klan, these incidents prompted members to dissociate from the Klan and their ideals of white supremacy. Although its rise to power during the 1910’s was quick and effective, ultimately, the Klan was unsuccessful in retaining a long-term reign largely because of their public violence and cruelty, which was gradually counteracted by more progressive and liberal beliefs. Through this slide, the exhibit details the short spurts of power and influence that the Klan had, revealing that they were unable to hold onto power for long, largely due to their recurrent violent crimes.

In the penultimate slide, the exhibit explores the “Klan’s Final Phase,” as the heading states, and provides an image of a destroyed building with pictures of four children in the top right corner. While the image does not make clear what affiliation the children had with the wreckage of the building, one can infer that they were victims of its destruction, as they appear too young to be capable of demolishing a building of that size. To the left of the picture, there is a caption describing how the Klan tried to restore its power during the 1950’s and 60’s through pure violence, including bombings of black people’s homes throughout Birmingham, Alabama. Then, the caption describes that the image of the crumpled structure had been a Baptist Church, in Birmingham as well, before the Klan bombed it, leaving four children dead. Together, the image and explanation evoke sorrow and anger from me, as I was enraged that the Klan would kill innocent children to convey their horrid message of white supremacy.

The final slide, labeled “Conclusion”, clearly and concisely summarizes the information that was presented in the exhibit. Additionally, to conclude the exhibit, the designer shows how Yusef Iman advanced and helped the Civil Rights Movements through his playwriting, as he created a visual history of the violence that defined the relationship between the Klan and blacks in the South. In its entirety, the exhibit provides a comprehensible and clear timeline of this relationship from the end of the Civil War through the Civil Rights Movements, and succeeds in captivating its viewer by intertwining primary sources effectively and appropriately. Moreover, one of the more useful components of the exhibit is that the designer utilized primary sources to show how this relationship developed, instead of just telling its viewer how it developed. The selected sources give firsthand accounts of interactions between blacks and the KKK, which, in turn, evoke emotion from the viewer, as the crimes that the KKK committed are disgusting and horrifying. In this way, the designer’s use of primary sources, in correspondence with the exhibit’s detailed research, shows that this exhibit is a credible source regarding the development of the relationship between blacks and the KKK in the South.