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English 269

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The Strength of *The Red Record*

When an activist uses such accurate facts, it is impossible to dispute them. Ida B. Wells' *The Red Record* was written in order to bring attention to the issue of Lynch Law in the US and prove its existence with detailed facts and statistics. Ida B. Wells was born on July 16th, 1862, in Mississippi. She was born into slavery, but had a chance to go to school, and became a teacher. Her editorial campaign against lynching began in 1892, after some of her friends had been violently lynched by a mob.¹ *The Red Record* was published in 1895 after she spent years recording and traveling to gather information. This happened to be the year of Frederick Douglass' death. Ida B. Wells also was the secretary of the National Afro-American Council from 1898-1902. She was very involved in multiple movements, including founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Negro Fellowship League, and the Alpha Suffrage Club. She involved herself in government as well in order to further bring attention to the cause. In her work *The Red Record*, her evidence disallows readers to disregard her claims. Ida B. Wells' use of strong diction and facts contributes to the overall effect of her argument.

Wells starts *The Red Record* with a brief background of the history of black people in America, but swiftly moves on from this into her argument. She barely wastes any time before stating facts and calling people out for their wrongdoings. Wells then explains three different types of excuses that Southern white men use when explaining why a lynching took place. The

¹ "Ida B. Wells-Barnett." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ida-B-Wells-Barnett>.

three excuses are: It is necessary to kill black people in order to prevent race riots, white people are angry over black men given the right to vote, and so-called ‘rapes’ that black men commit against white women.² With each excuse, Wells gives a stronger argument against it. For the first excuse, she says that many colored people were killed for being a part of these alleged riots, but no one was ever formally proven guilty in court. For the second, she explains that white people did not respect black people, and they were killed while trying to vote. The government was also unable to protect them, despite promising them protection along with the right to vote. For the third excuse, she explains that there “could be framed no possible excuse more harmful to the Negro and more unanswerable if true in its sufficiency for the white man” (Wells Chapter 1). Any sort of interaction between a black man and a white woman could be devised as a rape in order to justify a lynching. This opening chapter sets the serious and straightforward tone of the rest of the essay.

Wells moves on in the succeeding chapters to formally list out all the statistics that she had collected over the years. She scatters her arguments throughout, but all of them tie in with the specific records that she has in each segment. The second chapter, *Lynch Law Statistics*, includes statistics from only 1893. Most of the recorded lynchings are done with bad reasoning and no actual proof of crime. In chapter three, *Lynching Imbeciles*, Wells tells of a few instances where the lynching victims were all likely guilty of some sort of crime, but the law of punishment was not properly followed. The next few chapters include lynchings of innocent men, or lynchings done to those who have done minor crimes. Chapter six, *History of Some Cases of Rape*, argues that any black man could be lynched if a woman says that he raped her, despite there being no proof. In these chapters, Wells acknowledges that not all black people

² Wells, Ida B. “The Red Record.” *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Red Record*; by Ida B. Wells-Barnett., <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm>.

were perfect. She understands that some of the alleged crimes that they were being lynched for were actually committed. However, she is arguing for those accused of a crime to be given a fair trial, and it so happens that most crimes were made up in the first place.

In the next few chapters, Wells addresses the other side of the argument in a tactical way. It is common knowledge that a good essay should include an address towards the opposite argument. Wells uses the chapter titled *Crusade Justified* in order to do so. She calls out those who have insulted the movement to end Lynch law, and she says that the cause is needed due to lack of care by the government. Journalists, specifically those in Britain, are against the movement and make fun of it. In the next chapter, Wells calls out Miss Francis Willard, the President of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, for stating things without the facts. She disputes a few things that Miss Willard has claimed that she has said. The significance of this is the strong language and specific quotes that she uses in order to prove her argument as true.

Chapter 10 of *The Red Record* concludes the points that Wells has made, and gives the reader no option to discount her claims. She structures this chapter in an organized and straightforward way. She explains her demands, and gives reasons for each request. She at first writes in an almost speech-like style, and then moves on to write a list of each point she has. Her evidence is listed in previous chapters, and she strongly states multiple times to "let the facts speak for themselves" (Wells Chapter 10). Wells is straight to the point in terms of tone, since she has the backup of the facts, and the strength of the facts is enough for her to write in a simple yet clear way. She further explains that every wrongdoing has some sort of remedy, and lists her demands of how to fix the issue. This chapter is named *The Remedy* for this very reason. Wells is focusing on proving white politicians wrong in this, and drawing conclusions from the previously listed facts that readers obviously cannot deny. Wells understands that not all who

were lynched were innocent, but she demands that punishments should be the same for all races and a opportunity to defend oneself in the fair trial of law.

The Red Record is a powerful piece of literature that leaves little room for those who claim that lynching does not exist to argue against it. Ida B. Wells knew how to prove her argument, which was by working extremely hard to record her own evidence. She knew that her work was going to be powerful, and change a lot of people's opinions on the matter of lynching. The language that she uses throughout the work reflects this. A longer version of this essay would include more in-depth analysis of specific examples, rather than an overview of the strengths of the piece of literature. If Wells had not put so much effort into gathering facts and researching, the essay would have reflected that and have been weaker. Her experiences and facts are what makes the essay as strong as it is, and her efforts allowed for the beginning of the end of Lynch Law.

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