

Onwucheka Jemie: On "The Bitter River"

The most prolonged and deeply moving of Hughes's lynch poems is "The Bitter River," a dirge for two black youths lynched in Mississippi in 1942. Hughes conceives of the lynch terror as a bitter, poisonous river flowing through the South, a river at which black people have been forced to drink too long. Its water galls the taste, poisons the blood, and drowns black hopes. The "snake-like hiss of its stream" strangles black dreams. The bitter river reflects no stars, only the steel bars behind which are confined numberless innocents--the Scottsboro Boys, sharecroppers, and labor leaders. The bitter river makes nonsense of liberal rhetoric:

"Work, education, patience

Will bring a better day."

The swirl of the bitter river

Carries your "patience" away.

Patience is useless, the hope in work and education a slim and distant one. The poem ends in bitter complaint, weariness and gloom:

I'm tired of the bitter river!

Tired of the bars!

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