

Notes on Pilgrimage by Natasha Trethewey: by Cynthia Wolfe

Of all the poems in this reading assignment, I most related to "Pilgrimage". I suppose it is because I am a huge history buff and would have declared History as my major, would it have been a choice at AVC. In this poem, you not only get a sense of history at Vicksburg, Mississippi, but the struggle and emotional toll the Civil War had on the south. This poem seems to combine many things, and recall a time gone by with memory and history to bring the reader to it.

Vicksburg is a city that has known many conflicts throughout history. It has been occupied by Native Americans, French, Spanish, and white settlers. Even since the white settlers have been present, there have been frequent and violent skirmishes; before and after the war that is alluded

to. In 1863, the Siege of Vicksburg served as one of the most pivotal points of the Civil War, when the Union Army's victory allowed them to gain control of the entire Mississippi River and contributed to a Confederate surrender.

The Mississippi River Delta was an extremely busy waterway for many years before the Civil War and she is setting up a sense of perspective, that in this setting no one really 'won', and the effect it had on the soul of the land. In this land no matter what was happening with its tenants, there was the mighty Mississippi still as wild and untamed as it had always been. The area was well known for a bustling steamboat trade in the 1800's. Goods came down from the northern factories where cotton from the south had been recycled into textiles and finished goods.

Vicksburg was a major trade partner with neighboring states as well, because of its major shipping port. As one could imagine, there were physical and figurative "skeletons of sunken

riverboats” from years gone by (line 4). We, in all our arrogance man thinks he is master over his

domain, while the river silently does as she wishes. In reality man cannot tame nature completely

and we must accept that fact. During a notorious flood in 1876, the river changed course. The new path was away from the city and the port. The United States Army Corps of Engineers had to come in and divert the nearby Yazoo River in 1903, to return water to the port (line 9).

The role women played in the Civil War was large and varied. They were the ones who bore the brunt of what the war really meant. The menfolk marched valiantly off to war, which was viewed as Crusaders fighting a holy war, sacrificing life and limb for the cause. In the south, women mostly stayed at home, trying to run large plantations with little or no help. White men were gone and slaves had either been pressed into service or had run away in the commotion.

Between troops and marauders, food was in extremely short supply. They had more than their share of angst, terror, and worry and yet they had to hold onto what they could. They had little time for sorrow and the memory of the glory days of the south, they had to deal with today. The poem compares the river to that of the women’s experience in that all they could do was to move

forward. (line 5).

Here, the dead stand up in stone, white marble, on Confederate Avenue (line 10) gives a sense of

soldiers standing in silent testimony to the horrors they witnessed and the reminder of the reality of war. Lines 14 to 18 refer to the bomb shelters that the citizens hid in. Basically, they were waiting for their lives to end with an explosion they would never hear, or a bright light that would signal the end. They pondered what would happen if they died, but also what would happen if they lived. Their whole way of life had disappeared in this war, the south was dead.

Now, we come into the present with the rest of the poem. The author is apparently visiting a bed and breakfast in Vicksburg, and is making the pilgrimage to commemorate the battle. The living don't understand the real lessons from the story. The author infers (lines 20-24) that the dead are like Prometheus, dying over and over, but we cannot see or hear it, and the despair they

must feel. She goes to a museum to see pictures from the times. How strange we think museum displays are, as in their clothing (line 25-28). How strange they would think we are. Do we realize the juxtaposition of the past and present? For a moment, we share the same time.

Why do we go to these historical sights? Do we feel there is a piece of our present lives we've left back there? Or does it say something about us, that we visit them to actually learn something? All we usually get is a city that had something famous or infamous happen in its past, and therefore the 'powers that be' are going to exploit (line their pockets) it by having the prerequisite 'Interpretive center', which shows a blurb of history (but you have to go through the gift shop in order to exit)? Is this what has become known as 'living history' (lines 28-33); nothing more than manipulation? The brass plate which someone has glued to the outside door of

the b&b room (line 34) is merely an attempt to insinuate the guest into the lifestyle they are selling here.

Does this person "get it"? Do the ghosts of the battlefield haunt (her) dreams? The 'ghost of history' must reveal to her the solemnity and gravity that the 'Interpretive center' could not. Now, the weight of her 'Pilgrimage' feels like to heavy a burden to accept. Almost like going to the back lot at Disneyland, the façade is better than the reality. Never look behind the curtain. All the while, the Mississippi rolls along as a silent witness to the endeavors of man; smiling at us with a knowing look of indifference.