

**PRIMARY SOURCE** from “Lynching and the Excuse for It” by Ida B. Wells

*Ida B. Wells crusaded against lynching throughout the United States and Europe. In this article, which she published in the magazine Independent in 1901, she attacks the assumption that lynching resulted from a desire for justice. As you read, consider the conclusion she draws about the cause of lynching.*

It was eminently befitting that the *Independent's* first number in the new century should contain a strong protest against lynching. The deepest dyed infamy of the 19th century was that which, in its supreme contempt for law, defied all constitutional guarantees of citizenship, and during the last fifteen years of the century put to death 2,000 men, women, and children by shooting, hanging, and burning alive. Well would it have been if every preacher in every pulpit in the land had made so earnest a plea as that which came from Miss Addams' forceful pen.

Appreciating the helpful influences of such a dispassionate and logical argument as that made by the writer referred to, I earnestly desire to say nothing to lessen the force of the appeal. At the same time, an unfortunate presumption used as a basis for her argument works so serious, though doubtless unintentional, an injury to the memory of thousands of victims of mob law that it is only fair to call attention to this phase of the writer's plea. It is unspeakably infamous to put thousands of people to death without a trial by jury; it adds to that infamy to charge that these victims were moral monsters, when, in fact, four-fifths of them were not so accused even by the fiends who murdered them.

Almost at the beginning of her discussion the distinguished writer says: “Let us assume that the Southern citizens who take part in and abet the lynching of Negroes honestly believe that that is the only successful method of dealing with a certain class of crimes.”

It is this assumption, this absolutely unwarrantable assumption, that vitiates every suggestion which it inspires Miss Addams to make. It is the same baseless assumption which influences ninety-nine out of every one hundred persons who discuss this question. Among many thousand editorial clippings I have received in the past five years 99 percent discuss the question upon the presumption that lynchings are the desperate effort of the Southern people to protect their women from black

monsters, and, while the large majority condemn lynching, the condemnation is tempered with a plea for the lyncher—that human nature gives way under such awful provocation and that the mob, insane for the moment, must be pitied as well as condemned. It is strange that an intelligent, law-abiding, and fair-minded people should so persistently shut their eyes to the facts in the discussion of what the civilized world now concedes to be America's national crime.

This almost universal tendency to accept as true the slander which the lynchers offer to civilization as an excuse for their crime might be explained if the true facts were difficult to obtain; but not the slightest difficulty intervenes. The Associated Press dispatches, the press clipping bureau, frequent book publications, and the annual summary of a number of influential journals give the lynching record every year. . . .

A careful classification of the offenses which have caused lynchings during the past five years shows that contempt for law and race prejudice constitute the real cause of all lynching. During the past five years, 147 white persons were lynched. It may be argued that fear of the “law's delays” was the cause of their being lynched. But this is not true. Not a single white victim of the mob was wealthy or had friends or influence to cause a miscarriage of justice. There was no such possibility; it was contempt for law which incited the mob.

from Ida B. Wells, “Lynching and the Excuse for It,” *Independent*, May 16, 1901.

## Discussion Questions

1. How many lynching victims were there in the last 15 years of the 19th century?
2. What does Wells say actually caused lynching?
3. Why do you think Wells risked her own life to speak out against lynching? Cite evidence from your textbook to support your opinion.