

## Dyson Critical Summary

Dyson's piece "Unnatural Disasters: Race and Poverty", from his book *Come Hell or High Water*, is about how one racial group, African Americans in New Orleans, became poor and were abandoned by the government. One of his main claims is that we ignore the poor, how they became poor, and we don't want the poor to bother us. We know that they exist, but as long as it doesn't impinge on our everyday moral lives, or how we see things, we don't pay attention (3).

Michael Dyson says that "we" need to worry about these problems. But who is the "we"? Who is his audience? When he says "we," he is talking about general citizens in America. He might be talking about rich people, decision-makers, or all of us as human beings. He says "we" to identify people whose lives do not "naturally" involve poverty. It's interesting to see that Michael Dyson is a professor who is from the upper class, so he must be including himself in the "we." At the same time, he is speaking to concerned, perhaps Black citizens, who might want to take action to help the poor in similar situations. He may be talking to leaders and officials who should pay attention to the plight of the poor. As a Black citizen, he also may be speaking to Black America in general because these issues are so important to the Black population.

Dyson says that this general citizenry (the "well-off brothers and sisters") blames the government or nature for problems like Hurricane Katrina, rather than seeing our own involvement in the plight of the poor. He says that when we act "outraged", we "appear compassionate." Basically, during the time of tragedy, we take notice, but only during that time. Otherwise we don't take care of the poor, or we take their lives for granted.

Dyson also provides a lot of statistics about lack of transportation, concentrated poverty, economic hardship, jobs, education, opportunities, affordable housing, segregation. This tells us such things as the people can't get access to suburban life, can't get access to good education, that the city "gets blacker and poorer". Therefore, it's a cyclical problem that gets continued because of public policies and government programs that keep the Black poor in dire straights. From his text, we learn what concentrated poverty is and how it occurs in New Orleans.

Dyson emphasizes that because of society and the government's failure to pay attention to the poor, a lot of death and destruction occurred from Katrina. But his essay also aims to show us that this is a problem that has occurred before Katrina (4). He wants America to learn from this or to start taking responsibility.

At the end of his piece, he talks about the "contract of citizenship". He says that the poor citizens were surprised that their protection, their lives was not important to the government during Katrina. So, he says that it's a serious problem that both the government and general population dehumanize and discriminate against the Black poor.