

## **Sara Iris Ouellette, Second Place winner**

One of the most universal and overarching themes of the American dream is the idea of personal freedom and equality – an idea so integral to the fabric of America that it is cemented into the United States Constitution. Nevertheless, for much of American history the African American population was exempt from those basic inalienable rights. During the years following emancipation and the end of the Civil War, the idea of freedom became so muddled and confounded that the entire country essentially had to re-learn how to operate. Leonard Pitts, Jr.'s novel *Freeman* explores this struggle and disarray eloquently while posing the all-important question: what does freedom truly mean? The essential message of this novel is summed up by the idea that “freedom takes many forms (245),” and each of Pitts’ characters represents a demographic that falls into one of three distinct categories: those who welcome freedom with slight apprehension, those who fear the idea of freedom entirely, and those who fight vehemently for freedom.

Bonnie serves as an example of the African Americans who cautiously accepted and pursued their freedom. Although Bonnie is already free in the North, when she and Prudence leave for Mississippi, they are forced to bow to the prejudices present in the wounded South. They have little to no idea just how difficult it will be to bypass the hateful bitterness of Buford’s white population and found a school for the newly free. As Bonnie observes some of the population of the small southern town, she thinks to herself, “What is meaner and more hateful than the haughty brought low (p.20)?” In the timid eyes of the children in Buford, freedom is reflected because, “What in all their lives had ever been more frightening or unsettling than freedom (p.117)?” She endeavors to educate Prudence about the racism her idealistic mind finds

it difficult to grasp, and eventually becomes the victim of a fear-propelled lynching. To Bonnie, freedom is something to be passively, not actively pursued in order to survive.

To some of the other newly freed slaves, like Tilda, “freedom is just a word...It is a dreamy flight of fantasy (p.64).” She represents a demographic that fears freedom and what it may mean, even staying with her former master out of habit and apprehension. Tilda is afraid of freedom because she has known nothing else. To Tilda, freedom is all at once terrifying and exhilarating. It is a chance to find herself. She says on page 146, “She is...what? Maybe that’s the point of being free, she tells herself. A chance to find out.” Personal freedom, then, in this sense, is the freedom of self-discovery, a right previously reserved to white people.

While living in the North, Sam has become accustomed to freedom so the degradation he feels when traveling southward is foreign, unwelcome, and appalling. His companion, Ben, is aware of the way white people expect him to behave and uses it as a means to survive, not letting his pride get in the way of his survival, while Sam holds fast to his freedom and the pride that accompanies it. In his own words, “he was an individual, not a nameless, interchangeable part of some infernal white man’s machine (46).” As a result of his steadfast ownership of freedom, Sam encounters several racially-charged altercations, each culminating in violence. For Sam, freedom is the essence of humanity – without it, one can never hope to forge his own path.

Aside from freedom, the most striking theme of this story is love – love of country, love of humanity, love of another human being. The freedom to love is what drives the meaning of this novel from beginning to end. Without it, Sam would have never hoped to find Tilda, and Bonnie may have survived. Above all else, love and freedom are the most important aspects of

the American ideal, and though the country's journey after slavery was not an easy one by any means, it cemented the necessity of freedom in American society.