"Bowling for Columbine" is an alternately humorous and horrifying film about the United States. It is a film about the violent soul of America. Why do 11,000 people die in America each year at the hands of gun violence? It also was the first documentary film accepted into competition at the Cannes Film Festival in 46 years. The Cannes jury unanimously awarded it the 55th Anniversary Prize. The following excerpt is a cartoon pointing to America’s past as a clue as to why the American pursuit of happiness is so riddled with violence.

Now it’s time for a brief history of the United States of America.

Hi, boys and girls! Ready to get started?

Once upon a time there were these people in Europe called “pilgrims” and they were afraid of being persecuted. So they all got in a boat and sailed to the New World where they wouldn’t have to be scared ever again.

But as soon as they arrived they were greeted by savages and they got scared all over again! So they killed them all.

Now you’d think wiping out a race of people would calm them down but no! Instead they started getting frightened of each other! They burned witches.

In 1775 they started killing the British so they could be free – and it worked!

But they still didn’t feel safe so they passed a second amendment which said every white man could keep his gun, which brings us to the genius idea of slavery!

You see, boys and girls, the white people back then were also afraid of doing any work, so they went to Africa, kidnapped thousands of black people, brought them back to America and forced them to work very hard for no money – and I don’t mean “no money” like “I work at Walmart and make no money”, I mean zero dollars, nothing, not a zip!

Doing it that way made the USA the richest country in the world!

So did having all that money and free help calm the white people down? No way! They got even more afraid! That’s because after two hundred years of slavery the black people now outnumbered the white people in many parts of the South! Well, you can pretty much guess what came next: the slaves started rebelling! There were uprisings and the old masters’ heads got cut off, and when white people heard of this they were freaking out and going: “Oh! I wanna live! Don’t kill me big black man!”

Well, just in the nick of time came Samuel Colt, who in 1836 invented the first weapon ever that could be fired over and over with having to reload. And all of a sudden the whites were like “Yea! Ha!”. But it was too late! The North soon won the Civil War and the slaves were freed. Yup! They were free now to chop all the old masters’ heads off! And everybody was like “Oh! No! We’re gonna die!” But the freed slaves took no revenge. They just wanted to live in peace.

But you couldn’t convince the white people of this! So they formed the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and in 1871, the same year the Klan became an illegal terrorist organization, another group was founded – the National Rifle Association (NRA).

Soon politicians passed one of the first gun laws, making it illegal for any black person to own one! It was a great year for America, the KKK and the NRA – of course they had nothing to do with each other and it was just a coincidence: one group legally promoted responsible gun ownership and the other group shot and lynched black people.

And that’s the way it was all the way to 1955, when a black woman broke the law by refusing to move to the back of the bus. White people just couldn’t believe it! Hell broke loose. Black people everywhere started demanding their rights and white people had a major freaking feeling and they were all like: “Run away! Run away!”, and they did! They all ran fleeing to the suburbs where it was all white and safe and clean. And they went out and bought a quarter of a billion guns and put locks on their doors, alarms in their houses and gates around the neighborhoods. And finally they were all safe and secure and snug as a bug.

And everyone lived happily ever after.

Bowling for Columbine, Michael Moore, 2002

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1 Columbine: Two senior students at the Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, murdered 14 students and one teacher; they also injured 20 students. The perpetrators were 18 and 17. After the killing rampage, on the 20th of April 1999, they committed suicide.
2 Walmart: leading American chain of discount department stores.
3 wanna (informal): want to
4 gonna (informal): going to
The violent soul of America

1. What is the main topic of this cartoon?
2. Describe the genre of this piece.
3. What groups of people did the Americans kill in 200 years of national history?
4. How are fear, racism and violence connected here?
5. What are the “suburbs” like in the US, as opposed to “inner cities”?
6. “And everyone lived happily ever after.” Is the end ironic?
7. Do you think this account is fair? Is this an objective history of the US?

THE KU KLUX KLAN

Watch and fill in the gaps. Then recap.

A hate-filled climate reaches its paroxysm. The times belong to the Ku Klux Klan, a secret society from the …………………. of the United States dedicated to depriving the ………………… of their rights. Ultra-reactionary, anti-Semitic, violently against …………………., it has …………………… members in ……………………… and organizes a tremendous manifestation in Washington that same year.

Channel 1, The American Dream

BLACK NIGHTMARE

My father believed, as did Marcus Garvey, that freedom, independence and self-respect could never be achieved by the Negro in America, and that therefore the Negro should leave America to the White man and return to his African land of origin. Among the reasons my father had decided to risk and dedicate his life to help disseminate his philosophy among his people was that he had seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, including one by lynching. […] 5

It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared. […] My father had begun to lay away savings for the store he had always wanted to own when, as always, some stupid local Uncle Tom Negroes began to funnel stories about his revolutionary beliefs to the local white people in Lansing. This time, the get-out-of-town threats came from a local hate society called the Black Legion. They wore black robes instead of white. Soon, nearly everywhere my father went, Black Legionnaires were reviling him as an "uppity nigger" for wanting to own a store, for living outside the Lansing Negro district, for spreading unrest and dissension among the "good niggers". My mother was pregnant again, this time with my younger sister. Shortly after Yvonne was born came the nightmare night in 1929, my earliest vivid memory.

I remember being suddenly snatched awake into a frightening confusion of pistol shots and shouting and smoke and flames. My father had shouted and shot at the two white men who had set the fire and were running away. Our home was burning down around us. We were lunging and bumping and tumbling all over each other trying to escape. My mother, with the baby in her arms, just made it into the yard before the house crashed in, showering sparks. I remember we were outside in our underwear, crying and yelling our heads off. The white police and firemen came and stood around watching as the house burned down to the ground. […]

After the fire, I remember that my father was called in and questioned about a permit for the pistol with which he had shot at the white men who set the fire. I remember that the police were always dropping by our house, shoving things around, "just checking" or "looking for a gun". […]

Two years later, the father walked off to town one afternoon, in an atmosphere of tension because of Black Legion threats.

When my father was not back home by our bedtime, my mother hugged and clutched us, and we felt strange, because she had never acted like that.

I remember waking up to the sound of my mother's screaming again. When I scrambled out, I saw the police in the living room; they were trying to calm her down. She was taken to the hospital, and to a room where a sheet was over my father in a bed. My father's skull, on one side, was crushed in, I was told later. Negroes in Lansing have always whispered that he was attacked, and then laid across some tracks for a streetcar to run over him. His body was cut almost in half.


uppity (informal): presumptuous
The violent soul of America

WATCH

1. From what you just saw, what is the text going to be about?
2. Describe the fire scene.
3. Sum up the ideas of Malcolm X's father.

ANALYSIS

1. How many parts are there in this passage? Find a title for each.
2. Explain Malcolm X's father's political reasoning.
3. What objective factors motivated him?
4. What type of reactions did his beliefs generate among blacks and among whites?
5. Explain how Malcolm X's father was in fact very much like any average American, believing in the American Dream.
6. What reactions did that elicit in the black neighborhood?
7. What is the "Black Legion"? Why does Malcolm X say "this time" (l. 9)? Who is referred to in the expression "instead of white" (l. 10)?
8. What age was the narrator when the fire incident occurred?
9. Describe the fire scene. At least how many people were in the house when the attack took place? What was the name of the baby in the mother's arms? At least how many assailants took part in the attack?
10. The young boy was bombarded by information from all of his senses. Classify these in terms of sight, sound, smell and touch.
11. How do you feel about the attitude of the police?

JUDGING / ADVISING

➢ JUDGING A PARTICULAR EVENT

1. Instead of
   Rather than doing this, they should have done that…

2. If they had (not) done that, they would have appeared less racist.

3. They were wrong / right to do this / so.

➢ ADVISING ABOUT ANY FUTURE ACTION

4. Instead of
   Rather than doing this, they'd better should ought to do that, otherwise violence will spread.

5. Unless they do something about it, there's trouble ahead.

6. If the police should keep doing this, they will end up having more riots in their streets.

12. Altogether how many people in Malcolm X's family were assassinated?
WORDS

1. List from the text all the expressions used to designate black people. In all cases, analyze whom they are used by, and what they mean.

2. List all the words belonging to the following semantic fields:
   a. political ideas;
   b. violence;
   c. fire.

   Say if they are nouns, verbs or adjectives.

L'ASPECT HAVE - EN AU PRESENT ET AU PASSE

Rewrite the following sentences, using the prompts.

1. My father said he had begun to lay away savings.
   My father said: "I ………………………………………………………………………….…………………….."

2. It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence.
   In his autobiography, Malcolm X wrote that ………………………………………………………….………… .

3. The next day, my father was questioned about the pistol with which he had shot at the assailants during the night.
   My father said: "The police ………………………………………………………...……………………………"

   a. I have done all that I can to be prepared (l. 6).
      1. Quelle est la marque de temps portée par l'auxiliaire have qui permet d'affirmer que Malcolm X considère tout ce qu'il a fait jusqu'à présent d'un point de vue présent ?
      2. S'intéresse-t-il à ce qu'il a fait (aux événements eux-mêmes) ? Quel temps aurait-il fallu pour cela ?
      3. Déduisez de cet énoncé l'état résultant présent dans lequel il se trouve face à la mort.
      4. Quelle est la marque d'aspect utilisée permettant cette déduction ?

   b. We felt strange, because she had never acted like that (l. 28).
      1. Qu'est-ce qui a été à l'origine de l'inquiétude des enfants ?
      2. Utilisez le contenu de la subordonnée afin de reformuler en anglais ce qu'ils se sont dit ce soir-là à propos de leur mère,
      3. Déduisez l'état de la mère à ce moment-là.
      4. Had -en signale-t-il une simple antériorité ou la même chose que have -en au présent, mais dans un contexte passé ?

   c. …the white men who set the fire (l. 21).
      Contrairement à ce qui figure à la ligne 15 (had set the fire), où l'on s'intéressait au résultat de l'acte en soi (= maison en feu), seul compte ici l'acte criminel lui-même. Quel temps est alors utilisé ?

LE GERONDIF APRES REMEMBER

I remember being suddenly snatched awake… (l. 14).

   1. Le verbe en -ing renvoie-t-il ici à un événement passé ?
   2. Quel mot permet de l'affirmer ?
   3. Comment traduirait-on cet énoncé ?
   4. La structure de ces énoncés est comparable à celle de : I remember something. Ainsi, sur le plan grammatical, par quoi peut-on remplacer un gérondif ?
RELATIVE CLAUSES

1. **Rewrite the sentences below using linking devices, especially relative pronouns.**
   
a) The Ku-Klux-Klan is a hate group. The Ku-Klux-Klan advocates violence against virtually all minorities.

b) Malcolm X was the most radical of black American leaders. Most black American leaders lost their lives in their fight for Civil Rights.

2. **Fill in the blanks with the appropriate relative pronoun. Put it in brackets when it can be omitted.**

   Malcolm X, …………. story was made into a film, was a man …………. made few compromises. Like many of his young black friends, he went through the ordeal of prison, in ………………… he met Black Muslims …………………

   saw in him a potential leader ………………… intelligence could be useful to their movement. After a while, though, the Black Muslim hierarchy, ……………….. feared his growing influence on the young, took their distance. One day in a Harlem hall, three black men ……………… were sitting in the front row for a lecture ………………Malcolm X was to deliver, suddenly stood up, took out the guns …………… they had been hiding under their overcoats, and opened fire on the black leader. In the commotion ………………… followed, the murderers escaped unchallenged. It was then said, quite plausibly, that it was the Black Muslim leadership ………………… had masterminded the assassination.

3. **Complete the sentences below with a suitable relative pronoun. Then rewrite the sentence, placing the proposition at the end of the clause and omitting the relative pronoun when possible, as in the example.**

   The leader to whom Martin Luther King often referred was Gandhi.  
   *The leader ⃯ Martin Luther King often referred to was Gandhi.*

   1. Malcolm X, with ……………… they had an interview that day, was assassinated two months later.

   2. The man with ……………… they had an interview was assassinated two months later.

   3. The group by ……………… they were attacked was part of the KKK.

   4. The murderers for ……………… the police were looking were never seen again.

   5. The rights for ……………… these men fought are still threatened today.
The violent soul of America