English Core

Context: On May 31, 1889, a catastrophic flood that decimated the town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania led it to be called the Great Flood of 1889. The waters of Lake Conemaugh breached the walls of the South Fork Dam as a result of a powerful storm that dropped six to ten inches of rain in a 24-hour period. Unlike many other minor floods that plagued Johnstown, the water from the Great Flood of 1889 moved into the valley “with the force of Niagara Falls” as a wall of water 50 feet high enveloped the town. The flood ripped buildings off their foundations and caused roughly 2,200 people to perish as a result. Friedrich and his Aunt are two immigrants who had members of their family vanish in the Johnstown Flood. In the story, they are witness to a court proceeding involving the victims of the flood placing charges upon the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club for poor maintenance of the South Fork Dam’s walls. The courts determined the disaster to be “an act of God" instead of blaming human error; consequently, no compensation was given to the families of victims or any survivors of the flood. Outrage soon arises in the courtroom as the families try to seek justice for their deceased loved ones.

 As I glanced around the courtroom, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the events that happened days prior. The bare white walls, dark wooden frames, and piercing cries from sobbing families helped to replay the horrific images, images I’ve been trying so hard to escape from, that were burned inside my head,. Dreams of an empty town, a husk of its former self, littered with the debris of what used to stand there only moments before. But, it wasn’t a dream. I was there; I watched my home, my family, washed away by the raging waters as I stood on the hillside of the valley, helpless. Soon enough, fantasies of my mother and my sisters were flooding my vision. I tried to repress the tears that were slowly rolling down my face.

My Aunt Frieda dabbed at my eyes with the sleeve of her frayed shirt and squeezed my hand.

She cried, “We’ll be okay, Friedrich. I know that we’ll be okay.”

Only a few days ago, her sister, the only person she knew in this new world, disappeared in an instant. Tears were also rolling down her cheeks, but I couldn’t hear her weeping over the cries of hundreds of others in the room that masked her own. Grasping my hand tighter, she tried to say something else but her words were caught in her throat.

The sudden creaking of a door in the back corner of the room was now the center of everyone’s attention. A charred American flag, salvaged from the wreckage in Johnstown, was hidden behind the door as it opened. I looked to the members of the jury who were filing into the courtroom, their faces stolid and unemotional. The muffled cries in the room were slowly silenced until the only sounds echoing in the room were the faint squeaking of floorboards.

The judge spoke with a sense of superiority that warranted our attention: “The foreman of the jury will now state the verdict of the trial.”

The audience’s eyes became transfixed on the man who will decide the fate of their dead family members. Men who lost their loved ones, widowed women, and orphaned children anxiously waited for the announcement that would place the blame on the individuals responsible for all their suffering and agony. While the rest of the audience gazed on, I couldn’t bear to watch. A different emotion was pulsing through my mind at the time. I was mystified as I tried to wrap my mind around why someone would cause us all of this pain. Who would do such a thing?

Time seemed to slow down as the foreman spoke. “The South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club of Pennsylvania is found not guilty. The damage and deaths in Johnstown that were caused by floodwaters on May 31st, 1889 are found to be an act of God. No legal compensation will be paid to the victims of families or survivors of the flood.”

A wave of grief washed over the courtroom. Women burst into sobs while children looked around sullenly for a sign of reassurance. A resurgence of hopelessness swept over their broken hearts. In the chaos that had erupted, my mind was racing in different directions. Why would God kill so many innocent people? I was certain that the jury had made a mistake.

 In the courtroom, grief soon turned to anger. Aggression spread with the force of a raging fire. The once dark and menacing courtroom now sparked with emotions of anger and outrage. As the onlookers started to destroy the courtroom, sounds of splintering wood from the enraged destruction and infuriated yells sought justice for our loved ones.

The judge slammed his gavel down, with each crack splicing the air of the courtroom trying to gain authority over the growing defiance. Fiery emotions continued to consume the room; I couldn’t help but be engulfed by the flames.