

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry

by Mildred D. Taylor



ABOUT THE READING Mildred Taylor is the author of the Newbery Medal-winning children's book, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. The story is told through the eyes of Cassie, an African American girl growing up in Mississippi during the Great Depression.

VOCABULARY

dismal gloomy, drab

merely only, simply



As you read the passage below, think about how racism affected education in the 1930s.

The Great Faith Elementary and Secondary School, one of the largest black schools in the county, was a **dismal** end to an hour's journey. Consisting of four weather-beaten wooden houses on stilts of brick, 320 students, seven teachers, a principal, a caretaker, and the caretaker's cow . . . the school was located near three plantations, the largest and closest by far being the Granger plantation . . . Because the students were needed in the fields from early spring when the cotton was planted until after most of the cotton had been picked in the fall, the school adjusted its terms accordingly, beginning in October and dismissing in March. But even so, after today a number of the older students would not be seen again for a month or two . . . and eventually most would drop out of school altogether. Because of this the classes in the higher grades grew smaller with each passing year . . .

. . . Kaleb Wallace was standing in front of the seventh-grade class building talking to Mr. Wellever and two white men whom I couldn't make out from where I stood. When the men entered the building,

Why did classes in Cassie's school grow smaller every year?

Source: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor.
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I turned and sped to the rear and . . . I peeked cautiously through a broken window into Mama's classroom. The men were just entering, Kaleb Wallace first, followed by a man I didn't know and Mr. Harlan Granger.

Mama seemed startled to see the men, but when Mr. Granger said, "Been hearing 'bout your teaching, Mary, so as members of the school board, we thought we'd come by and learn something," she **merely** nodded and went on with her lesson . . .

Mama was in the middle of history and I knew that was bad. But Mama did not flinch . . . to make matters worse, her lesson for the day was slavery. She spoke of the cruelty of it; of the rich economic cycle it generated as slaves produced the raw products for the factories of the North and Europe; how the country profited and grew from the free labor of a people still not free.

Before she had finished, Mr. Granger picked up a student's book, flipped it open to the pasted-over front cover, and pursed his lips. "Thought these books belonged to the county," he said, interrupting her. Mama glanced over at him, but did not reply. Mr. Granger turned the pages, stopped, and read something. "I don't see all them things you're teaching in here."

"That's because they're not in there," Mama said.

"Well, if it ain't in here, then you got no right teaching it. This book's approved by the Board of Education and you're expected to teach what's in it."

"I can't do that."

"And why not?"

Mama, her back straight and her eyes fixed on the men, answered, "Because all that's in that book isn't true."

Mr. Granger stood. He laid the book back on the student's desk and headed for the door. The other board member and Kaleb Wallace followed. At the door Mr. Granger stopped and pointed at Mama. "You must be some kind of smart, Mary, to know

Harlan Granger is a wealthy landowner who runs a plantation where many sharecropping families work.

What emotions do you think Mama feels when she tells Mr. Granger she can't teach the approved material?

more than the fellow who wrote that book. Smarter than the whole school board, I reckon.”

Mama remained silent, and Mr. Wellevor gave her no support.

“In fact, Mr. Granger continued, putting on his hat, “you so smart I expect you’d best just forget about teaching altogether . . . then thataway you’ll have plenty of time to write your own book.” With that he turned his back on her, glanced at Mr. Wellevor to make sure his meaning was clear, and left with the others behind him.

What is Mr. Granger’s meaning?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

1. Main Ideas Why does Mr. Granger want Mama to teach the approved book?

2. Critical Thinking How does knowing the setting and location of the story help you understand this passage? Explain.

ACTIVITY

3. Imagine you are a young person living in the South during the Depression. Write a journal entry describing a day at school or working to help support your family.