Book Review for: *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*By: Mrs. McClelland

The historical fiction novel Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor is set in 1933 in a rural Mississippi town. The novel focuses on the Logans; an African American family that owns 200 acres of their own land and are in the process of paying off a loan for 200 more acres. It is a moving story about family and overcoming adversity that everyone should read.

While the author, Mildred D. Taylor, an African American woman, did not grow up in Mississippi herself, her father did tell her stories about her heritage and she did travel to Mississippi to visit family. When visiting her family, Ms. Taylor observed racial injustice first-hand; these observations stuck with her, as did her observations of the land itself. The lasting impact of these stories and observations are obvious as soon as one begins reading Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry because they feel like they are in 1933 rural Mississippi, too. Descriptions such as, “[b]efore us the narrow, sun-splotched road wound like a lazy red serpent dividing the high forest bank of quiet, old trees on the left from the cotton field, forested by giant green and purple stalks, on the right” help put the reader right into the story (Taylor 6). While the setting seems picturesque, the reader is also quickly introduced to an example of racial prejudice as the “white” children’s school bus attempts to run the Logan children off the road as they walk to school. Taylor describes, “[h]e ran frantically along the road looking for a foothold and, finding one, hopped onto the bank, but not before the bus had sped past enveloping him in a scarlet haze while laughing white faces pressed against the bus windows” (13). This is just one of the many heart-breaking moments when the reader is exposed to the racism that was common during the time.

After setting the scene, Taylor gives the reader some background information about the Logan land and the Logan family. The Logan family is comprised of: Papa (David), who is absent for the majority of the novel due to his job working on a railroad; Mama (Mary), a teacher at the local African American school; Big Ma (Papa’s mother), the original owner of the Logan land; Stacey, the eldest child in the family; Christopher John, a cheerful and chubby seven-year-old; Little Man, the youngest Logan child; and Cassie Logan, age 11, the narrator of the story.

Cassie Logan, our narrator and main character, is opinionated, willful, and strong. Cassie does not back away from a challenge and (like her Uncle Hammer) she has a bit of a temper. These traits can sometimes lead to disastrous consequences, though. For example, there’s a moment in the town of Strawberry where Cassie initially refuses to “get in the road” for Miss Lillian Jean Simms, a moment which quickly spirals out of control (Taylor 114). Cassie grows up throughout the course of the novel and it is through her experiences that the reader is shown the racial injustices of the period; as her eyes are opened, so are the reader’s.

Another key character in Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is named T.J. Avery. Even though T.J. is not a Logan, he is central to the story. T.J. is a friend of the family and he’s always hanging around the Logan kids. His behavior tends to baffle the Logan children (and the reader) because he makes terrible life choices, he’s sneaky, and he’s manipulative. We watch T.J. and wonder just how long the Logan children are going to befriend him. Whether or not the reader likes him, though, does not matter, because T.J. is extremely important to the plot. It is through one of T.J.’s dreadful choices, that the racial tensions in the novel come to a head.

Mildred D. Taylor does an excellent job of painting a picture and getting the reader to care about the Logan family. As the children walk down the dirt road and struggle to stay clear of the “white” school bus, the reader walks and struggles with them. When the children successfully put the “white” school bus out of commission, the reader celebrates, too. We find ourselves wondering, much like Cassie, why Stacey is friends with T.J. Avery and we collectively shake our heads at T.J.’s regretful choices. We wonder, just like the Logan children, at Jeremy Simms’s desire to befriend the Logans at the risk of daily beatings from his father. When Cassie’s eyes are first opened to racism through a series of (what could be considered) small moments, our eyes are opened as well. And when the family decides to take a stand against racism by boycotting a local mercantile, we cheer for their bravery. However, the reader’s euphoria quickly turns to fear when the local “night men” ride and threaten the Logans, their land, and their friends.

There are a few themes that could be argued for Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, however, the main theme is overcoming adversity. The Logan family is “attacked” on all sides because of their race, and that injustice is something they battle at work, at school, and in the town. Through it all, though, the Logans stay dignified, united, strong, and compassionate. They overcome adversity by working together and leading by example.

While it may seem as if I have revealed a great deal of the story of Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, I’ve barely scratched the surface. There are many other instances of heart-breaking racism highlighted in the story, there are moments that take the reader back to their own childhood, and there are moments of such love and determination that it makes the reader’s heart swell. This is definitely a rich novel that needs to be read by everyone.