

Setting/Time and Place: Where in the World Are We?



"We walked in silence down the narrow cow path which wound through the old forest to the pond. As we neared the pond, the forest gapped open into a wide, brown glade."

—Cassie, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Roll of *Thunder, Hear My Cry* is set in a specific place—the Mississippi countryside—at a specific time—1933. The setting is so realistic that we almost feel like we're walking down the dusty roads with Cassie and her brothers, smelling the sweet pine trees and listening to the buzzing of lazy bees in the hot sunshine. Let's look at the novel's time and place one at a time.

Time: When does the story take place?

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry takes place in 1933. At that time, many people did not have the rights that we have today. Even if the rights were guaranteed by law, the law was not always obeyed. This was sometimes the case in the South, where many whites did not always want to give blacks the rights they were guaranteed.

The Civil War had ended a long time ago, in 1865. That year, the Thirteenth Amendment gave black Americans citizenship. Congress passed the Fifteenth Amendment five years later, in 1870. This amendment said that all American men had the right to vote, no matter their race or color. But as you have learned, racism did not go away quickly.

After the Civil War, parts of the South that were destroyed during the war began to be rebuilt. This period is known as Reconstruction. The government sent soldiers to the South to help make sure black people were treated fairly. Many southern white people resented the troops. In 1877, the government sent all the soldiers home, but there were still very hard feelings about rights for blacks. As you read, the Jim Crow laws (see page 9) restricted the rights of black people.

The differences in schooling available to black and white children show the inequality that ran through society even in the 1930s. In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Taylor describes how the black children walk for an hour or more to get to school, but the white students have buses. This shows that society considered the black students inferior to the white students. For example, the white students have a “long white wooden building” with a sports field and rows of benches. They have new schoolbooks, too.

The school for the black students, in contrast, is “four weather-beaten wooden houses on stilts of brick.” There are only 7 teachers for 320 students. A cow is used to clip the wide crabgrass lawn, rather than having it cut. Since they are needed

in the fields, the black students have a very short school year: It runs from October to March. Even so, many of the students can't start school until December, after the last wisp of cotton has been picked.

The white children's school is named for Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. The Confederacy was a group of eleven states that withdrew from the United States in 1860–1861. This led to the Civil War. In the novel, the Mississippi flag flies over the white children's school. The design of the Mississippi state flag contains the bars and stripes of the Confederate flag. At the white children's school, the flag of the United States flies below the Mississippi flag. According to tradition, the American flag should always be the top flag. By switching the order of the flags, Taylor shows that in the South in the 1930s, racism had won out over equality.

Nearly everyone in rural Mississippi in the 1930s was poor. Many of the people in the rest of America were poor, too, because on October 29, 1929, the stock market collapsed. The country plunged into the Great Depression. Taylor suggests the deep poverty by describing how T.J. and Claude cannot afford shoes. Mama has shoes, but she patches the holes in the soles with cardboard. By 1933, one quarter of all the workers in the country were unemployed—thirteen million people. In the novel, Mr. Morrison has lost his job on the railroad. Because there were so few jobs, people took any work available. Papa, for example, works most of the year away from his family on the railroad in Louisiana.

In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Mildred Taylor also tells about the “night men” who try to kill black people in many ways. They attacked some black people and covered others in tar and feathers. They also set some black people on fire, like the Berry men. The “night riders” hanged black people, too. These hangings were called lynchings. “Night riders” was another name for members of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan (as it is often called), a secret terrorist group, started right after the Civil War. Members of the Klan believed that white people were better than black people. Therefore, they resented the rise of former slaves to positions of equality to white people. Wearing white sheets and masks topped with pointy hoods, Klan members terrorized black people. They also attacked white people who tried to help black people, especially Catholics and Jews. Talking to Mama about the Wallaces terrorizing black people, Mr. Jamison, the lawyer, says, “You’re not only accusing them of murder, which in this case would only be a minor consideration because the man killed was black, but you’re saying they should be punished for it. That they should be punished just as if they had killed a white man, and punishment of a white man for a wrong done to a black man would denote equality. Now *that* is what Harlan Granger absolutely will not permit.”

In 1924, about three million people claimed to belong to the Ku Klux Klan. During the 1930s, when *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* takes place, the Klan was weaker but still had enough members to terrorize people across the South. Klan members were rarely

stopped, as Mama says when she tells the children about the Wallaces burning the Berry men: “Everyone knows they did it, and the Wallaces even laugh about it, but nothing was ever done.” Brave Mr. Jamison steps in to help members of the black community, but other people in the South in the 1930s believed that it was all right to attack blacks. Some were too terrified to stop the Klansmen.

As black people sought their civil rights in the 1950s, the Klan continued to strike. Klan members used bombs and other violent means to try to prevent black people from getting their rights. Because of First Amendment rights, which guarantee everyone’s freedom of speech, the Klan still exists today although law enforcement officials closely monitor their activities.

Place: Where are we?

As a child, Mildred D. Taylor spent summers in Jackson, Mississippi, so she knows firsthand about the beautiful southern countryside. She knows about its soft beauty and its simple joys. She described her visits to Mississippi this way: “Running barefoot in the heat of the summer sun, my skin darkening to a soft, umber hue; chasing butterflies in the day, fireflies at night; riding an old mule named Jack and a beautiful mare named Lady; even picking a puff of cotton or two—there seemed no better world.”

Taylor paints the beauty of Mississippi in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by using vivid sensory details and descriptions. These are

words that appeal to the five senses: sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing.

Cassie loves going into the family's woods and fields. In March, Cassie says, "I was eager to be in the fields again, to feel the furrowed rows of damp, soft earth beneath my feet; eager to walk barefooted through the cool forest, hug the trees, and sit under their protective shadow."

It's not always nice weather in the Mississippi countryside, however. Taylor also helps the reader picture the scene by describing the heat, dust, and rain. "At the end of October the rain had come, falling heavily upon the six-inch layer of dust which had had its own way for more than two months," she writes. The rain turns the dust into "a fine red clay that oozed between our toes and slopped against our ankles as we marched miserably to and from school."

Taylor also helps readers imagine the setting by having her characters speak in the *dialect* of the Mississippi countryside. Dialect is the way people speak in a certain area. In a dialect, certain words are spelled and pronounced differently. For example, Little Man tells Cassie: "Y'all go ahead and get dirty if y'all wanna." "Y'all" is southern dialect for "You all." The dialect helps us hear how the characters sound so we can visualize how they look and act, too.

The characters also use the word "ain't," instead of "is not," "are not," or "am not." The characters might say, "He ain't going." This is part of the dialect. Long ago, the word "ain't" was accepted as

a contraction for “am not.” However, the word “ain’t” should not be used today in everyday speech or formal writing. We would say, “He isn’t going.”

Thinking about the setting

- When and where does *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* take place?
- How does Taylor use dialect to make the setting come alive?
- Do you think the events of this book could take place in a different setting? Why or why not?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"Then if you want something and it's a good thing and you got it in the right way, you better hang on to it and don't let nobody talk you out of it. You care what a lot of useless people say 'bout you and you'll never get anywhere, 'cause there's a lotta folks don't want you to make it."

—Uncle Hammer, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

The theme of a literary work is its main idea. It's a general statement about life. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* has three main themes: the importance of family, the importance of owning land, and the importance of self-respect and the respect of others.

The importance of family

No one has to teach Cassie that family comes first: She knows it like she knows the fresh smell of the forest air or the soft touch of cotton. Nonetheless, the lesson is reinforced often. She learns

how important family is from her papa, mama, and grandmother, Big Ma.

Papa tells Cassie that the family is like the fig tree that grows in the yard. The big oak and walnut trees almost overshadow the little fig. “But the fig tree’s got roots that run deep,” Papa says, “and it belongs in the yard as much as the oak and walnut. It keeps on blooming, bearing good fruit year after year, knowing all the time it’ll never get as big as them other trees. Just keeps on growing and doing what it gotta do. It don’t give up. It give up, it’ll die. There’s a lesson to be learned from that little tree, Cassie girl, ’cause we’re like it. We keep doing what we gotta, and we don’t give up. We can’t.” The family fights on to do what is right and to stay together.

At Christmas, Mr. Morrison tells the Logans how he lost his family to “night men,” the Ku Klux Klan (see page 23). Mr. Morrison’s mother thought first of saving her children—not herself. “She tried to get back into the house to save the girls, but she couldn’t,” Mr. Morrison explains. “Them night men was all over her and she threw me—just threw me like I was a ball—hard as she could, trying to get me away from them. Then she fought. Fought like a wild thing right ’side my daddy.” This sad story shows us how Mr. Morrison’s parents put their children first.

Mr. Morrison also puts family first. He risks his life by staying to protect the Logans against the Wallaces and others who hate people because of their skin color. He saves Papa’s life when the Wallaces attack. He treats Stacey like a son. He teaches Stacey

right from wrong when Stacey goes to the Wallace store and fights with T.J.

The importance of family is also shown in the Logans' support of one another. For example, when Mama is fired from her teaching job, Papa tells her that everything will be fine. The family depends on Mama's salary to survive, but still Papa comforts Mama. As he gently pushes a stray hair back over Mama's ear, he says, "We'll get by. . . . Plant more cotton maybe. But we'll get by." Papa's voice is quiet and calming.

Big Ma's stories show the importance of family, too. In Chapter 4, for instance, Big Ma tells Cassie how the family started. We can tell that Big Ma admires her late husband Paul Edward's courage, hard work, and talent as a carpenter.

Paul Edward had a good job, but he wanted to be a farmer on his own land. Paul Edward bought two hundred acres from a white man, Mr. Hollenbeck, and settled on the land with Big Ma. They had six children. Only Pa and Hammer lived.

When Paul Edward paid off the first two hundred acres in 1910, he wanted to buy more land. Then his children and their children would have their own land. They could be independent. In 1918, Mr. Jamison sold Paul Edward another two hundred acres. "I can see my Paul Edward's face the day Mr. Jamison sold him them two hundred acres," Big Ma recalls. "He put his arms 'round me and looked at his new piece of land, then he said 'zactly the same thing he said when he grabbed himself that first two hundred

acres. Said, 'Pretty Caroline, how you like to work this fine piece of earth with me?' Sho' did . . . said the 'zact same thing."

Big Ma tells Cassie the story over and over so Cassie will remember it and tell it to her children. Cassie knows the story so well that she can tell it along with Big Ma. We know that Cassie will be able to pass on the stories of her family.

The importance of the land

"I asked him once why he had to go away, why the land was so important. He took my hand and said in his quiet way: 'Look out there, Cassie girl. All that belongs to you. You ain't never had to live on nobody's place but your own and as long as I live and the family survives, you'll never have to. That's important. You may not understand that now, but one day you will. Then you'll see.'"

—Cassie, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Family is the most important part of the Logans' life, but the land helps the family survive. Over and over, Big Ma, Mama, and Papa tell their children that the family will hold on to their land. Given the history of slavery in the southern states, owning land

comes to stand for freedom for the Logans and many other families.

Because they own land, the Logans can grow and sell their own crops. They are not sharecroppers. They do not have to work on someone else's land as most of their friends and neighbors must do. They don't have to pay rent to a landowner for farming his land. As a result, they can keep most of the money they earn. The Logans have a mortgage on some of their land, but they have enough money so they don't need any other loans and other credit from the white landowners. As a result, they can shop wherever they want. Because the Logans own their own land, they have opportunities that other black families do not have.

Mr. Granger sees the land as a way to control black people and a way to make money. The Logans, in contrast, see the land as another way to be independent and keep the family together. Cassie recalls how Papa reached out and softly touched her face in the dark: "If you remember nothing else in your whole life, Cassie girl, remember this: We ain't never gonna lose this land. You believe that?" he says.

To help make sure the land stays in the family, Big Ma gives the land to her sons, Papa and Hammer. Cassie says that it doesn't matter which family members own the land because it will always be "Logan land."

Cassie loves the land. But no matter how much the family loves the land and the freedom it brings, people always come first.

Papa sets his cotton fields on fire to save T.J.'s life. This is Cassie's most important lesson. Cassie realizes this when she says: "Papa had found a way, as Mama had asked, to make Mr. Granger stop the hanging: He had started the fire."

When Cassie realizes the seriousness of the threats to her family and their land, she cries, "What had happened to T.J. in the night I did not understand but I knew that it would not pass. And I cried for those things which had happened in the night and would not pass. I cried for T.J. For T.J. and the land." Now that she is becoming more mature, Cassie is starting to understand the hard choices that adults must often make.

Self-respect and the respect of others

"You have to demand respect in this world, ain't nobody just gonna hand it to you. How you carry yourself, what you stand for—that's how you gain respect. But, little one, ain't nobody's respect worth more than your own. You understand that?"

– Papa, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

The Logan family stays together through bad times. They hold on to their land when powerful people try to rip it away. Most of all, the Logans keep their pride and earn the respect of people who

know them. Papa, Mama, and Big Ma teach their children the values that make their dignity and success possible.

Early on, Mama pastes over the hateful book pages that show the black students are getting the books the white students have thrown out. When Cassie's teacher tells Mama that she's spoiling the students, Mama says, "Maybe so, but that doesn't mean they have to accept them [the books] . . . and maybe we don't either." This shows us that Mama has self-respect and works to ensure her students' self-respect as well.

Mr. Morrison helps Stacey protect his pride when he lets Stacey tell his parents about the fight with T.J. in the Wallace store. When Stacey's eyes meet Mr. Morrison's eyes, we can see the respect between them. Cassie notices that "the two of them smiled in subtle understanding, the distance between them fading."

Cassie learns that racism is something to fight when possible, and something to put up with for safety's sake when necessary. She sees how wise her family is when they stop shopping at Mr. Wallace's store and help their neighbors fight injustice. She sees how smart her father is to set the fire in the cotton field to stop the mob from hanging T.J. Cassie learns the lesson about pride and respect Mama teaches her: "Everybody born on this earth is somebody and nobody, no matter what color, is better than anybody else."

Thinking about the themes

- Of the three themes, which do you think is the main one?

Why?

- How important is land to you? Explain how you feel about the places where you have lived.

- What makes you feel good about yourself? How do you earn the respect of others?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



"I loved to help Mama dress. She always smelled of sunshine and soap."

—Cassie, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry focuses on Cassie Logan, the nine-year-old African-American girl who tells the story, and her family. Here's a brief overview of the characters.

The Logans (African-American landowning farmers)

Cassie Logan	the nine-year-old narrator
Stacey Logan	Cassie's twelve-year-old brother
Christopher-John	Cassie's seven-year-old brother
Little Man (Clayton Chester)	Cassie's six-year-old brother
Papa (David Logan)	Cassie's father
Mama (Mary Logan)	Cassie's mother
Uncle Hammer	Papa's brother
Big Ma (Caroline Logan)	Cassie's sixty-year-old grandmother
Mr. Morrison	the tall, big man who lives with the Logans; not a relative

The Averys (African-American sharecroppers)

T.J.	Stacey's thirteen-year-old friend
Claude	T.J.'s younger brother
Mr. Avery	T.J. and Claude's father
Mrs. Avery	T.J. and Claude's mother

The Simmses (white neighbors)

Jeremy Simms	an eleven-year-old white boy
Lillian Jean	Jeremy's twelve-year-old sister
Melvin	Jeremy's older brother
R.W.	Jeremy's older brother
Charlie Simms	the children's father

The Wallaces (white general-store owners)

Kaleb	store owner
Dewberry	Kaleb's son
Thurston	Kaleb's son

Other Characters

John Henry Berry	a sharecropper burned to death by white men
Samuel and Beacon Berry	sharecroppers badly burned by white men
Mr. Jamison	a lawyer
Harlan Granger	a plantation owner

Let's get to know the main characters a little better.

Cassie Logan: Nine-year-old Cassie is the novel's main character. She's smart, sassy, and self-confident. She's not afraid to speak her mind, too. Like her uncle Hammer, Cassie has a quick temper and strong sense of justice. We see this when Miss Crocker, Cassie's teacher, gives her students the tattered books the white students have thrown out. Cassie tells Miss Crocker how bad this makes her feel, even though she knows she can get whipped for talking back. Cassie says, "See, Miz Crocker, see what it says. They give us these ole books when they didn't want 'em no more." When Miss Crocker can't understand Cassie's pain, Cassie refuses to accept the textbook: "Miz Crocker," she says, "I don't want my book neither."

Cassie loves her parents, Uncle Hammer, and grandmother Big Ma. Like them all, Cassie is proud, hardworking, and deeply attached to the family's land. Unlike the adults in her family, however, Cassie doesn't understand the racial attitudes of her time and place. She doesn't understand that in Mississippi in the 1930s, African Americans did not have the same chances as whites.

The lessons about racial problems in the South come from many sources. Cassie's experiences with Lillian Jean Simms show her that white children her own age can judge people on their color. Cassie is shocked when Lillian Jean orders her off the sidewalk by saying, "You can't watch where you going, get in the road. Maybe that way you won't be bumping into decent white folks with your nasty self."

The owner of the mercantile store in Strawberry, Jim Lee Barnett, gives Cassie a cruel lesson in hate when he refuses to wait on her. Cassie sees real violence and injustice when her neighbors are burned to death and hanged. She also sees hate when she's told that T.J. could be sent to a chain gang. Cassie knows that if that happens, T.J. would be chained to other prisoners and forced to work along the roads and in the fields. Cassie learns that race does matter in Mississippi in the 1930s. She learns that the difference between black and white can sometimes be the difference between life and death.

Cassie grows up during the year described in the book. As Mama tells Cassie after she runs into hatred in Strawberry: "Baby, you had to grow up a little today. I wish . . . well, no matter what I wish. It happened and you have to accept the fact that in the world outside this house, things are not always as we would have them be." As she learns the sad truths about her world, Cassie also comes to cherish her family's deep strength, unity, and love.

Stacey Logan: Cassie's twelve-year-old brother is the oldest Logan child. Stacey likes to boss his brothers and sister around. They look up to him because he is a leader. Also, his parents trust and respect him. Stacey comes up with many of their most dangerous projects, like creating the huge ditch that wrecks the school bus. Stacey also disobeys his parents' order to stay away from the Wallace store when he chases T.J. there and beats him up. Stacey is rebellious enough to disobey his parents. However, he is not mature enough to fully understand the bad things that can happen if he does not obey.

Stacey is also proud, loyal, and honest. Stacey refuses to cheat with T.J. on the test. After Mama catches T.J. cheating, Stacey doesn't turn T.J. in, even though it means that he gets a public whipping from his mother.

Like Cassie, Stacey grows up during the year described in the book. Stacey becomes aware of the hatred that blacks faced in the South in the 1930s. This leads him to make tough choices. For example, he pushes away his white friend Jeremy because it can be dangerous for blacks to be friends with whites. Stacey also ends his friendship with T.J. because T.J. gets into too much trouble. However, in the end, Stacey proves his maturity, bravery, and loyalty by helping T.J. Cassie thinks, "As far back as I could remember, Stacey had felt a responsibility for T.J. I had never really understood why. Perhaps he felt that even a person as despicable as T.J. needed someone he could call 'friend,' or perhaps he sensed T.J.'s vulnerability better than T.J. did himself."

Papa (David Logan): Cassie's father is hardworking, brave, and wise. To earn the money the family needs to keep their land, Papa works for much of the year on the railroad. Papa's wisdom and caring are shown when he brings Mr. Morrison to live with the Logans.

Papa also stands up for himself and his family. His actions show his bravery and self-respect. For example, Papa risks his life to stop people from shopping at the Wallace store. He does this because Mr. Wallace burned a black man to death. The Wallaces

shoot at Papa's head and his leg is broken in the fight, but he does not stop fighting hatred.

We see Papa's values most of all at the end of the book. Papa is willing to use his shotgun to protect T.J. but instead uses his brains: He sets the cotton fields on fire. Everyone runs to fight the fire. This stops the men who want to hang T.J. Papa burns his crops even though he loses a quarter of his cotton. This shows that Papa values family and friends more than money.

Mama (Mary Logan): Cassie's mother is a teacher. She loves her job and is very good at it. "She's born to teaching like the sun is born to shine," Papa says with love. Mama is proud of being black and very aware of hatred against black people. To help her students' self-esteem, she covers the pages of the textbooks that show the white students threw out the books the black students are now using. Mama also fights racism by teaching her students about the evils of slavery. Mama's bravery gets her fired from her teaching job.

Mama is wise. She tells Cassie, "Baby, we have no choice of what color we're born or who our parents are or whether we're rich or poor. What we do have is some choice over what we make of our lives once we're here." Mama looks deep into Cassie's eyes and says, "And I pray to God you'll make the best of yours."

Mama doesn't complain when the family runs low on money. She does the best she can to keep the family running smoothly. For this, her husband and children love and respect her very much.

Uncle Hammer (Papa's brother): Like Cassie, Hammer has a quick temper and is not willing to accept hatred against black people. He moved to Chicago to have more chances to be successful and to get ahead. When he comes back home to Mississippi, he gets angry about the racism. "A black man's life ain't worth the life of a cowfly down here," he says bitterly. Hammer tries to attack Charlie Simms for the bad way he treated Cassie. Mr. Morrison stops Hammer before he hurts Charlie Simms or himself.

Hammer is very generous and loyal to his family. He visits his family every Christmas and brings fine gifts. Like the rest of his family, Hammer thinks the Logans' land is very important. We see this when he sells his fancy car to pay the loan on the land. The children know he is a fine man, and they love him very much.

Big Ma (Caroline Logan): Papa's mother, Big Ma, runs the Logan farm. Wise, kind, and loving, Big Ma passes on the family stories to Cassie. We see that Big Ma is smart when she gives the land to her sons. This protects the land from Harlan Granger, who wants to take it from them. Big Ma is good at helping sick people, too. She helps many people, especially those hurt by white violence, including the Berrys. She is very religious.

Mr. Morrison: He is a very tall and strong black man who comes to live with the Logans when he loses his job. Mr. Morrison helps farm the Logan land and becomes an important part of their family. Since he is so strong, Mr. Morrison helps protect the Logans while Papa is away working on the railroad. He also helps

the children think about what is right and wrong His family was killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan when he was just six years old.

T.J. Avery: T.J. gets into a lot of trouble. He fails the seventh grade, cheats on tests, gets Mama fired, and hangs out at the Wallace store. His poor choices lead Stacey to break off their friendship. T.J. shows bad judgment many times, especially when he teams up with the older, white Simms brothers. T.J. is with the Simms brothers when he steals a gun from the store. Then, he is in the room when the Simms brothers beat the store owners. As a result, T.J. is nearly hanged. At the end of the book, he is sent to jail. Mr. Logan thinks T.J. might even be put on a chain gang and forced to work hard in the fields. A judge will decide T.J.'s punishment.

Thinking about the characters

- Would you like to be friends with Cassie? Why or why not?
- How does Cassie change during the novel?
- Which character in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* do you admire the most? Why?
- Why do you think T.J. gets into so much trouble? What help could you give him?