

# **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry Themes**

by Mildred Taylor

## **Major Themes**

### **The importance of family**

There is one lesson Cassie need not learn throughout Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry because it is already second nature to her: that there is nothing more important than family. Cassie's shock when Jeremy says that he does not like his older brothers demonstrates her firm belief that family is more important than anything else. From Big Ma's stories about her husband and sons to Mr. Morrison's willingness to risk his life to protect the Logans, it is clear that love of and devotion to family is the motivation that drives the majority of the characters in this novel to act as they do. Those who behave like TJ and abandon their families ties are lost, but those like Papa, who is willing to risk even death to protect his family, triumph.

### **Land as a symbol of independence**

Repeated again and again throughout the book is a refrain spoken by Big Mama, Mama, and Papa: "we won't lose the land." In a culture where the memory of slavery is still strong, land is a symbol of independence and autonomy. Because they own land, the Logans can afford to shop in Vicksburg and are not beholden to the whims of landlords as sharecroppers are. Unlike Mr. Granger who sees the land as a symbol of his family's "rightful" domination over blacks, for the Logans, the land is intrinsically linked to family. Cassie says that it doesn't matter whose name the deed is in because it will always be "Logan land." It is only when she realizes the seriousness of the threats to her family and their land that she cries "for...the land" at the end of the book.

### **Weather as echo of human emotions**

Weather is more than a meteorological phenomena. As the words to Mr. Morrison's song suggest, weather is a sentient entity capable of hearing his cry and empathizing. The dust, rain, and mud emphasize the white degradation of the black school children, and the physical barrier posed by walking to school in the rain echo the barriers erected to the black children's education by the school board. The climax of the book occurs simultaneously with a massive thunder storm, and the approaching storm cannot be separated from the approaching violence. Ultimately, however, this weather is empathetic. The rain which comes and puts out the fire helps to bring about an end to both the physical and emotional storm.

### **Hope in the face of destruction**

Throughout the book, situations occur from which no escape seems possible and in which the loss of land or life, seems inevitable. When faced with the worst, however, Taylor's

characters ultimately pull through their troubles. Uncle Hammer, when called upon to pay the bank note, does not lose his temper or threaten violence but instead willingly sells his beloved Packard car. Most illustrative of this theme is the scene in which black and white men and women work side by side to put out the fire. These are the same people who had been previously threatened each others' lives and livelihood. When faced with a common threat, they cease to see the differences of race and identity between them.

### **Passage of time as a cycle**

Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry fills the course of a year, beginning with the cotton harvest and ending with another approaching harvest. The time periods in the book are delineated more often by cycles of weather than by real time: dusty, hot fall; rainy, muddy winter; beautiful, green spring; and carefree summer. Big Ma always reassures Little Man that the rains will end and the sun will shine again. This theme of hope and change is reflected in Cassie's final thoughts in the book. She and her brother will resume their normal life, but TJ will not. This emphasis on time as a cycle is usually a source of hope because it offers a promise that whatever hardship is occurring will eventually cease. At the same time, it is a source of constant fear in a racist and often violent society. The tensions that grew and erupted with the beating and arrest of TJ will calm down, but will eventually grow and erupt again.

### **Coming of age through experience and pain**

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is a coming of age story for Cassie, as she realizes the extent of racism in the South over the course of her tenth year. At the same time, Cassie learns the importance of love, family, and self-respect. For Cassie, it is through personal humiliation during an incident in Strawberry that she must learn that life is not fair; through the pain of watching TJ's destruction she learns that even the smallest offense by even the youngest black person can bring about irrevocable punishment; from her parents' worries about losing the land she learns that nothing is truly secure. Stacey, like Cassie, must learn from similar experiences. But for both, these realizations are significant only in that they spark newly mature reactions of responsibility, love, and caring. To respond in a more foolish manner, as TJ did, would be to seek to be treated as a man while acting like a boy and therefore be unfairly meted the punishment of a man.

### **Friendship as risk**

It is no accident that the Logan children's closest friends are each other, for they share the same values and know that they can trust one other. Papa tells Stacey that friendships between blacks and whites are a risk, as TJ's friendship with RW and Melvin later demonstrates. At the same time, Jeremy's persistence in seeking TJ's friendship shows him to be a true friend, and the impossibility of their friendship is a sad circumstance of their environment. Despite his anger at TJ for his previous wrongs, Stacey shows himself to be a true friend when he is most needed, risking his own safety to try to save TJ.

### **Doing what you "gotta do"**

Papa talks to his children about the fig tree which has just as much right to grow in the ground as the other, bigger trees, and just keeps on growing, "doing what it's gotta do." For Papa, this philosophy does not excuse excessive cruelty or violence but rather speaks to the necessity of sacrifice. Papa sacrifices his own cotton and puts himself in danger when he starts the fire to save TJ's life. Sacrifices sometimes include doing distasteful things to ensure survival, for example, when Big Ma must force Cassie call Lillian Jean "Miz." But according to Papa's philosophy, self-respect, not necessity, inspires doing what you gotta

do. Papa urges his children to be true to themselves, and to do both what they must do to survive and to respect themselves at the same time.

### **Greed as a cause of hatred**

The lesson that Mama is in the middle of teaching when the school board fires her is a particularly apt one. She is not just teaching of the cruelties of slavery but also of the economic benefits that led whites to enslave blacks in the first place. Harlan Granger and Kaleb Wallace, who fire Mama, both make a great deal of money from white subjugation of blacks--Granger from sharecroppers and Wallace from customers without cash who have no choice but to shop at his store. The hatred felt and acted upon by Granger, Wallace, and others feeds this greed. By ensuring through acts of violence that they can pressure and control blacks, they also ensure the continuance of an economic system that benefits them. Granger's desire to buy the Logan land is intertwined and inseparable from his hatred of blacks. Even his actions in calling to mob off to go put out the fire are inspired by his greed. Papa recognizes and capitalizes upon this greed when he comes up with the strategy of setting the fire in the first place.

### **Independence and self-respect**

Mary and David Logan instill self-respect and independence in their children. It is a testament to Cassie's self-respect that she is utterly shocked by Mr. Barnett's treatment of her in his store. The same self-assurance explains Little Man's reaction to the derogatory statements in his textbook. In the course of the story, the children must learn to balance survival with self-respect. Hammer, with his short temper, has difficulty doing so. TJ, because he has so little self-regard, ends up ruined. For all of the characters, self-respect is born of independence, of choosing freely and accepting the responsibility for their choices. Examples of this responsibility include when Mr. Morrison leaves it up to Stacey to confess going to the Wallace store or, more seriously, when Papa weighs the risks and still chooses to go to Vicksburg.