

ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY

Historical • Ethical • Cultural Context Packet

CENTRAL IDEA

What does it take to hold onto something when the entire system around you is built to take it — and what does holding on cost the people who manage it?

Novel: Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor

Setting: Rural Mississippi, 1933, during the Great Depression and under Jim Crow

Designed for: Advanced readers in grades 6–8, with adaptable supports

TEXT USE

Use a teacher-approved copy of the complete 12-chapter novel. This resource supplies original prompts and no reproduced passages.

How to Use This Packet

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry invents a family and places them inside a legal and economic system that was entirely real. Almost every instrument used against the Logans — the mortgage, the credit line, the teaching contract, the school bus route, the threat of violence with no prospect of prosecution — has a documented history. Your task is to identify those instruments accurately and to notice how much of the novel's pressure comes from institutions rather than from individuals.

ACCURACY SAFEGUARD

The Logan family, Harlan Granger, the Wallaces, and the events of the plot are invented. The sharecropping economy, the segregated school funding, the Jim Crow statutes, and the pattern of racial terror violence including burnings and lynchings are real, documented history. Mildred D. Taylor has said she drew on her own family's stories and on her family's land in Mississippi. Treat the history with the seriousness it deserves, separately from the invented plot.

Source Routine

- Identify the authoring institution and its expertise.
- Separate fact, interpretation, and speculation.
- Ask what the source can establish and what it cannot.
- Record access date and exact URL.

1. School Funding and the Hand-Me-Down Textbook

Southern states operated dual school systems and funded them at sharply unequal rates, with per-pupil spending for Black schools often a fraction of that for white schools in the same county. Shorter school terms, longer walks, and no transportation were routine. The practice of transferring worn textbooks from white schools to Black schools once they were too damaged for further use is documented, and school districts kept records of those transfers. The chart Little Man sees in Chapter 1 corresponds to real record-keeping.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What does the real funding record establish about the Logan children's school that the novel shows but does not explain?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

2. Racial Terror Violence in the American South

Between the end of Reconstruction and the mid-twentieth century, thousands of Black Americans were killed by mobs in acts of racial terror, frequently with the knowledge and sometimes the participation of local authorities, and almost never with any prosecution. Organizations that document this history, including the Equal Justice Initiative, have compiled county-level records of these killings. The Berry burnings and the night riders in this novel correspond to that documented pattern, not to the author's imagination.

INQUIRY QUESTION

How does the documented absence of prosecution change your reading of what the Logan adults do and do not do?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

3. Jim Crow: Law, Custom, and Enforcement

After *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) upheld state-mandated segregation under a “separate but equal” standard, southern states wrote extensive segregation into statute. But much of the system operated through custom backed by the threat of violence rather than through written law — which sidewalk a person stepped off, whose order was taken first, what a child could say to an adult. *Brown v. Board of Education* did not come until 1954, two decades after this novel’s setting.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Sort the humiliations in the Strawberry chapters: which were required by statute, and which were enforced by threat alone? What difference does the sorting make?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

4. Sharecropping, Credit, and Black Landownership

After emancipation, most Black farmers in the South worked as sharecroppers or tenants rather than owners, receiving a share of a crop against advances of seed, tools, and supplies obtained on credit from a landowner or store. Because the creditor kept the accounts, debt frequently carried forward from year to year. Black landownership in the United States reached its peak around 1910 and declined steeply across the following century. The Logans own four hundred acres, which places them in a small and precarious minority — and explains why the novel is structured around keeping it.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Trace the mechanism: how does controlling credit let one family determine where another family is permitted to shop?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

5. The Great Depression in the Rural South

Cotton prices collapsed in the early 1930s, credit tightened, and rural southern families of every description lost land and work. Federal relief programs of the era were administered locally, and Black farmers and laborers frequently received less, later, or not at all. The novel is set in 1933, at the deepest point of the collapse. The Depression did not create the instruments used against the Logans; it sharpened every one of them.

INQUIRY QUESTION

Which pressures on the Logans exist because of the Depression, and which would have existed in any year?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

6. Mildred D. Taylor and the Family Record

Taylor was born in Mississippi in 1943 and raised in Ohio, and has said in interviews and in her own author's notes that the Logan books grew out of stories told by her father and other relatives, and out of her family's own land ownership in Mississippi. This raises a real question about historical evidence: a great deal of what happened to Black families in this period was never entered into an official record, and family oral history is often the only account that exists.

INQUIRY QUESTION

What can family oral history establish that court and county records cannot — and what are its limits as evidence?

Novel Connection

Context Evidence / Source Note

Limit or Complication

Curated Starting Sources

Source	Use	Caution
A university or state archive project documenting segregated school funding in the South	Per-pupil spending figures and term lengths from primary records	Figures vary widely by state and county; do not generalize from one
The Equal Justice Initiative's documentation of racial terror violence	Authoritative, sourced county-level history	A serious historical archive; preview before independent student use
The text of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) via a public court archive	The actual legal reasoning that authorized segregation	Dense and dated language; requires framing
USDA or university agricultural-history data on Black farm ownership over time	Documented figures on ownership and its decline	Definitions of ownership and tenancy changed across census years
A Library of Congress or National Archives collection on the Depression-era South	Primary photographs, interviews, and records	Collections were assembled with their own purposes; read the framing
An archived interview with Mildred D. Taylor or her published author's notes	The author's own account of her sources	An author's account of her own work is testimony, not corroboration

Source Evaluation & Synthesis

Source / Access Date	Authority & Purpose	Claim Supported	Limit / Corroboration

Fact–Inference–Judgment Check

FACT I can verify:

INFERENCE I draw:

JUDGMENT I defend:

Historical Accuracy & Ethics Audit

- ☐ I treat the Logan family, the Grangers, the Wallaces, and the plot as invented.
- ☐ I treat sharecropping, segregated school funding, Jim Crow statutes, and racial terror violence as documented history.
- ☐ I name a specific instrument rather than referring only to prejudice.
- ☐ I describe Black landownership figures accurately and do not overstate a single statistic.
- ☐ I distinguish what was required by law from what was enforced by threat.
- ☐ I treat family oral history as a real source with real limits, not as either proof or hearsay.
- ☐ I distinguish empirical claims (what happened, what is measurable) from ethical claims (what should be done).
- ☐ I cite exact sources and access dates.

Synthesis Question

Which context lens most changes your view of what the Logans are actually fighting — and at what point does the novel stop being evidence about that history and start being only an argument about it?
