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THE GREAT DEBATERS

FILM DISCUSSION GUIDE

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The 2007 film *The Great Debaters* shows viewers the triumphant rise of the 1935 Wiley College debate team from little-known team to national champion with a victory over the Harvard University debate team. Based on a true story, the film offers glimpses into the Jim Crow South and the Great Depression, while telling an intimate story of how a team of black college students overcame their own fears, as well as societal racism, violence, and oppression, to use their words to defeat a formidable opponent.

This discussion guide can be used to meet all Common Core ELA anchor standards for writing, speaking and listening, and language; Common Core ELA writing, speaking and listening, and language standards for grades 6-12; and Common Core ELA history/social studies standards for grades 6-12. Specific standards by code are listed on the penultimate page.

- 1.** During the film, Jim Crow laws would have been in effect in Texas. Does the film show any examples? If yes, what are those examples? If not, what might you have included?
- 2.** The film is set in the middle of the Great Depression. Does the film reflect the state of the country? How? Or, why do you think it doesn't?
- 3.** At the beginning of the film, professor Melvin B. Tolson recites "I, Too" by Langston Hughes. He also recites part of Gwendolyn Bennett's "Hatred" and "Saturday's Child" by Countee Cullen.

Consider these three poems in connection with the plot of the film and the characters. How do they reflect the broader 1930s society and Harlem Renaissance?

Then consider how the three poems connect to current conditions and politics.



Melvin B. Tolson, English Professor and Poet
Source: Humanities Texas, "Melvin B. Tolson," humanitiestexas.org (accessed Aug. 8, 2018)

4. Compare and contrast the following quotes from the film:

Debater Henry Lowe: "School's the only place you can read all day, except prison."

Dr. James L. Farmer: "We must impress upon our young people that there will be difficulties that they face. They must defeat them. They must do what they have to do in order to do what they want to do. Education is the only way out. The way out of ignorance. The way out of darkness, into the glorious light."

Also, consider the modern day implications of both quotes, including the school-to-prison pipeline, higher education, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)

5. In her first debate attempt, Samantha Booke cites one of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's fireside chats, a series of 31 talks he gave via radio between 1933 and 1944. Melvin B. Tolson, the debate coach, states she's used the faulty assumption fallacy because fireside chats are not reputable sources. Consider how you evaluate sources. Should presidential addresses be considered reputable sources for a debate? Why or why not?



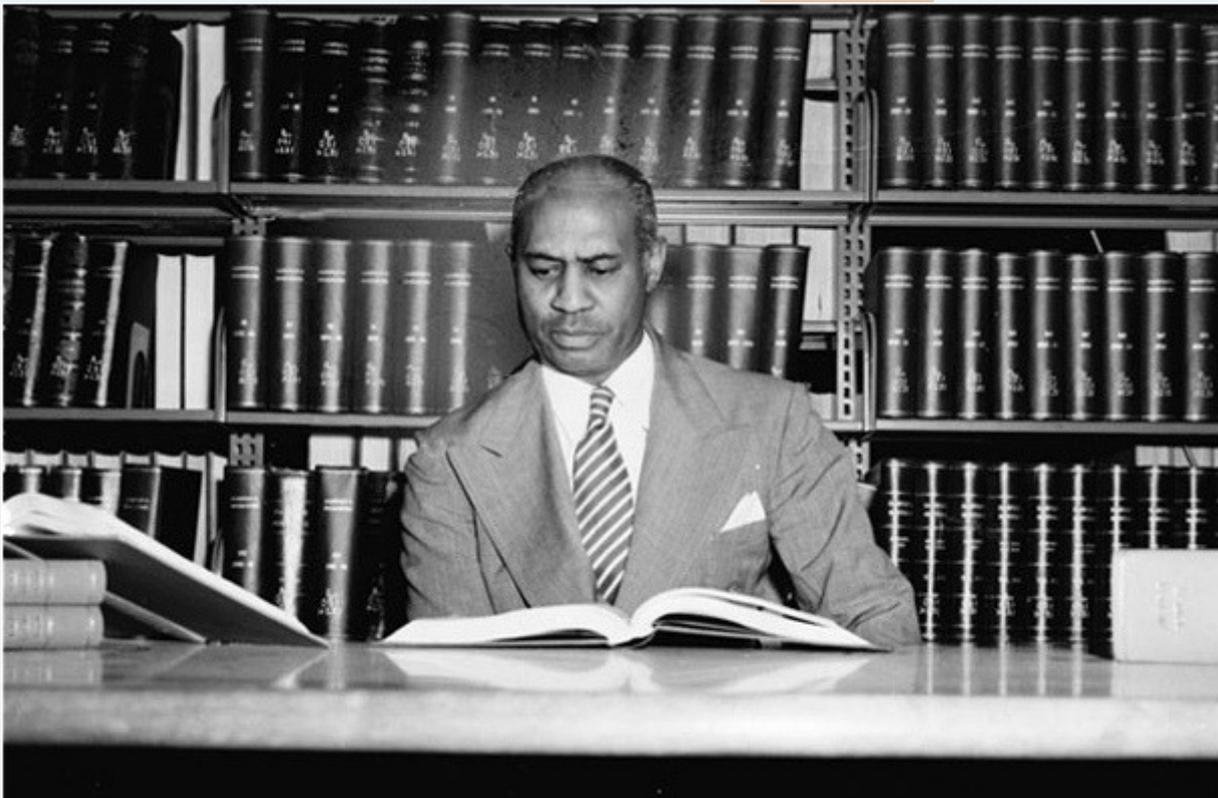
President Franklin D. Roosevelt gives a fireside chat on Jan. 11, 1944

Source: National Archives and Records Administration, "Photo of Franklin D. Roosevelt at the White House in Washington, D.C., Delivering a National Radio Address," wikipedia.org, Jan. 11, 1944

6. James L. Farmer, Sr. earned his PhD from Boston University and was the first black person to hold a PhD in the state of Texas. The movie contrasts Dr. Farmer's educational accomplishments with the racist realities of 1935, especially in the scene in which he hits the pig with the car. How might his education otherwise affect Dr. Farmer's life? Do these sorts of biases continue to affect educated black people today?

7. In the film, Dr. Farmer frequently says, "We do what we have to do, so that we can do what we want to do." How does this apply in the film? How does it apply to your own life? To your larger community?

8. The character, Melvin B. Tolson states: "Debate is bloodsport. It's combat. But, your weapons are words." Is debate bloodsport? Combat? Are words weapons? Should they be? Explore and explain your reactions to these words.



Melvin B. Tolson

Source: Houston Public Media, "Poet Melvin Tolson," houstonpublicmedia.org, Aug. 8, 2015

9. Of Tolson, Langston Hughes said, "But Melvin Tolson is no highbrow. Kids from the cottonfields like him. Cowpunchers understand him. He is a great teacher of the kind of which any college might be proud ... And the likes of him is found no where else but in the great State of Texas - because there is only one Tolson!" Consider Tolson's multifaceted life: professor, debate coach, poet, organizer, father, and husband, among other roles. How might each of those roles affect his debate coaching and his own ability to debate?

Source: Gail K. Bell, "Melvin B. Tolson- Texas Radical," East Texas Historical Journal, Mar. 2002

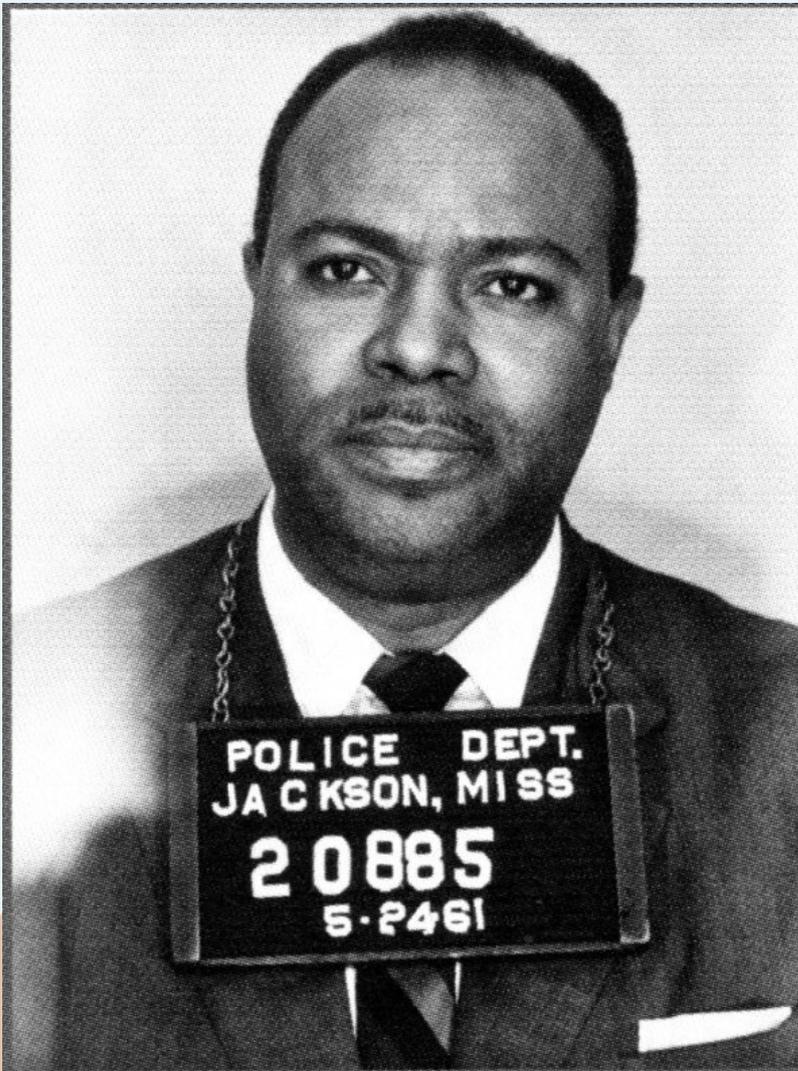


Poets at a 1945 Jackson State College festival. Back row, left to right: Poet Arna Bontemps, Melvin B. Tolson, fifth President of Jackson State University Jacob Reddix, Queen Dodson, and poet Robert Hayden. Front row, left to right: professor Sterling Brown, an unidentified woman, poet Margaret Walker, and poet Langston Hughes.

Source: Kathy Lou Schultz, "To Save and Destroy: Melvin B. Tolson, Langston Hughes, and Theories of the Archive," flashpointmag.com (accessed Aug. 8, 2018)

10. In the film, Dr. Farmer says some people call Tolson a “radical” and says he’s “concerned about your [Tolson’s] methods.” In particular, Tolson was unionizing sharecroppers into the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union. Consider how those not in power go about creating or preventing change in 1935 and in modern society. Include examples.

11. During the protest scene in which Tolson is released from jail, Sheriff Dozier says, “This is what happens to a town when you let the unions in. Starts trouble. People get all riled up over nothing.” Consider how established power feels about change. Consider how those in power go about creating or preventing change in 1935 and in modern society. Include examples.



12. In reality, James L. Farmer, Jr. was on the 1934 Wiley debate team and later worked alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement. Does the film show any indication that Farmer may go on to work in Civil Rights as an adult? In which scenes? How might being a debater in his youth have helped his Civil Rights career?

James L. Farmer, Jr.'s 1961 Mug Shot

Source: Jackson Mississippi Police Department, “Booking Photo from 1961,” wikipedia.org, May 24, 1961

13. Compare and contrast Samantha Boone's statement after her first debate performance-- "I didn't need a gun. I didn't need a knife"--to the situation Henry Lowe finds himself in at the beginning of the movie when the husband of a woman he's been flirting with threatens him with a knife, and, in turn, Henry threatens the man with the knife.

14. Consider the different battles Samantha Boone would have faced being the first woman on the debate team, and, later, as a black female lawyer in 1930s Texas.

15. According to the Equal Justice Initiative's Museum and Memorial, "[m]ore than 4400 African American men, women, and children were hanged, burned alive, shot, drowned, and beaten to death by white mobs between 1877 and 1950." On the way to a debate, the team encounters a white mob that has hanged and burned a black person. Compare the reactions of each of the debaters and Professor Tolson. How do you think this sort of violence affected black communities in the South? Is there anything comparable today?

Source: Equal Justice Initiative Museum and Memorial, Homepage, museumandmemorial.eji.org (accessed Aug. 9, 2018)



The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) has collected soil from lynching sites in Alabama and displayed it in jars in EJI's Montgomery, Alabama office. Each jar bears the name, if known, of the victim, the location, and date of the lynching.

Source: Equal Justice Initiative, "History of Racial Injustice: Healing from the Legacy of Lynching," eji.org (accessed on Aug. 8, 2018)

- 16.** At one point, Tolson says “Black is always equated with failure. Well, write your own dictionary.” What words do marginalized communities have to redefine for themselves and society as a whole? What word might you redefine? How has your generation redefined words (slang, etc.)?
- 17.** Consider how each of the characters reacts to stressors, such as presenting a debate speech. How do these characters react to confrontation with overt and dangerous racism?
- 18.** The debaters are given a \$5 per diem, worth about \$92 in 2018 dollars. What do you think each of them bought? What might you buy?
- 19.** Take the affirmative for the final debate topic: Civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice. Conversely, take the negative for the final debate topic: Civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice.



James Farmer during a civil rights meeting in the cabinet room of the Johnson White House taken by Yoichi Okamoto

Source: Humanities Texas, “James Farmer, a Pioneer in Civil Rights Movement,” houstonpublicmedia.org, Jan. 9, 2016

20. Consider what the character James L. Farmer, Jr. states in the final debate as his closing statement: "Saint Augustine said, 'An unjust law is no law at all,' which means I have a right, even a duty, to resist--with violence or civil disobedience. You should pray I choose the latter." What do those words mean in 1935 Texas? How might those words apply today?

21. How would you evaluate the arguments given by the debaters in the final debate? How would their arguments be judged in a modern debate?

22. Each of the debate questions in the film is about justice in some way. What questions would you choose to have the team debate today?

23. What obligation does a film "based on a true story" have to tell a completely accurate historical account? For example, the Samantha Boone character is based loosely on Henrietta Bell Wells, who was on the 1930 Wiley debate team and became a social worker, not a lawyer as the movie indicates. The 1935 team was actually composed of James Farmer, Hobart Jarrett, and Henry Heights.

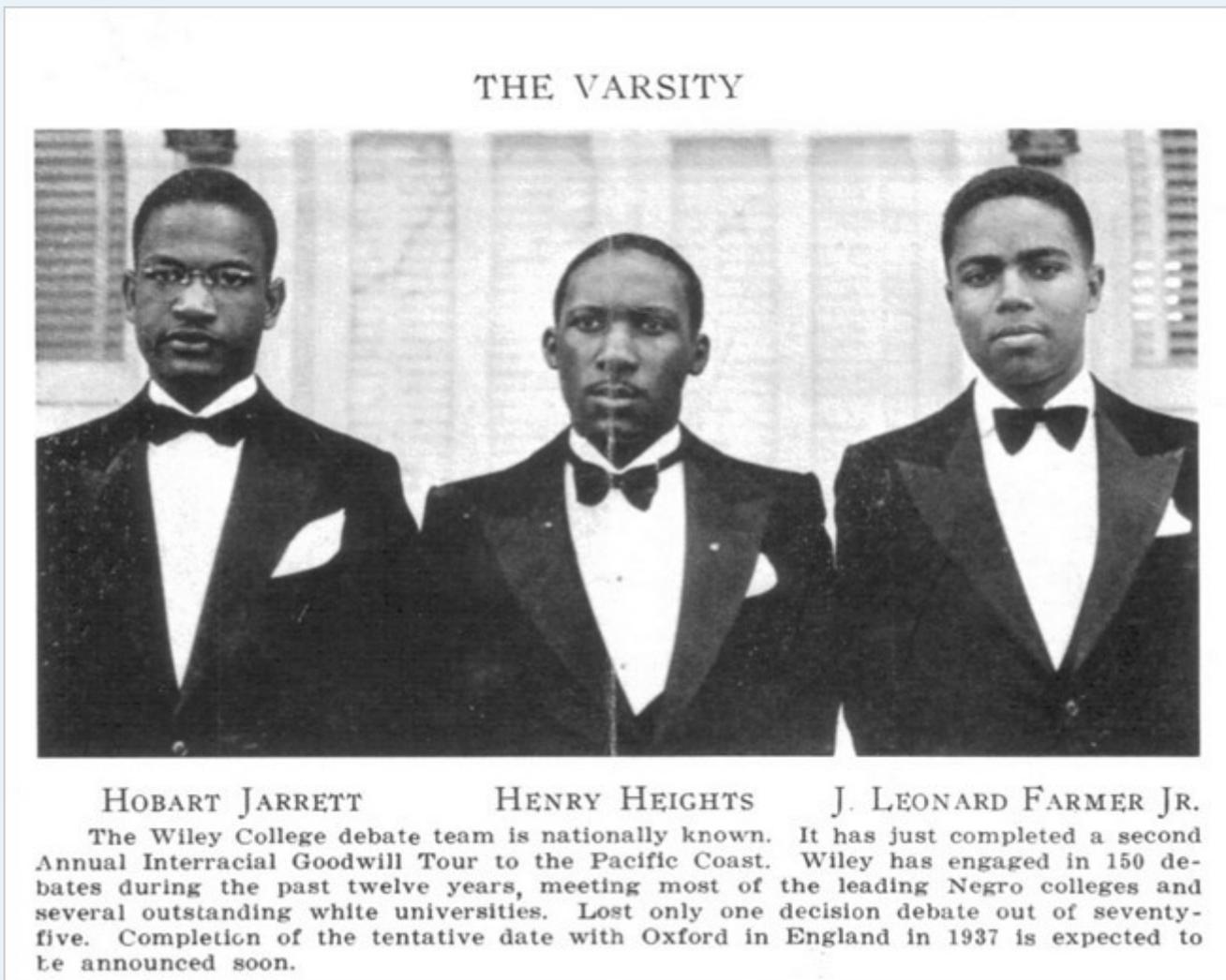


Henrietta Bell Wells (center) and the 1930 Wiley College debate team. Coach Melvin B. Tolson stands at her right, in the light suit.

Source: Wikipedia, "The 1930 Wiley College Debate Team..." wikipedia.org, Oct. 14, 2017

24. Consider why the movie ended with the debate at Harvard University while, in reality, that debate took place at the University of Southern California. What might Harvard represent to a movie audience that USC does not? How might the movie change if the final debate were held at USC in the film?

25. Pi Kappa Delta (ΠΚΔ), a national speech and debate organization, was founded in 1913 and remained segregated until after World War II. Because of this, the Wiley debate team, though they won against the University of Southern California, could not officially claim the victory. Consider the effects this segregation may have had on the debate team and other aspirational debate teams at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Also, consider why the film ended on the high note of the victory, rather than exploring the fact that it was an unofficial and conditional victory.



The 1935 Wiley debate team defeated the University of Southern California but the victory was not officially acknowledged.

Source: Laura Beil, "For Struggling Black College, Hopes of a Revival," nytimes.com, Dec. 5, 2007

This discussion guide can be used to meet the following Common Core standards:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.8.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.10
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.6
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.1-CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.6
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