

"the 1959" by thulani davis essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



“ The 1959” By Thulani Davis Essay Sample

On the surface, the novel “ 1959” by Thulani Davis narrates the custom of passage of Katherine “ Willie” Tarrant. By using a first-person narrator, Thulani Davis presents a suggestive description of a young African American teenager living in the 1950’s, which was a period weighed down by injustice and increasing ethnic conflict. The novel starts with the destruction of Turner, Virginia. Over the noises of bulldozers echoing over what were once reticent wooden bungalows, the adult Willie Tarrant ponders over the history of the town. She visualizes the coming of an African woman three hundred years before. This woman, deserted by a slaver because she is sick and thus not a profitable commodity, has no value. Willie chose to call her “ Gambia.”

A woman of extreme self-esteem and courage, Gambia does not die. (Davis, 1993) By her very endurance, she becomes the progenitor of Turner’s African American community. Afterwards, Willie considers Gambia as her divine family. Even though the town has been leveled and the imaginary Gambia lives only in Willie’s thoughts, Willie the adult has come back in victory. What follows is her narrative told in retrospect. On the same day in July, 1959, Willie Tarrant turned twelve and Billie Holiday died. Willie’s world is the world of most teenagers, one differentiated by obsession with music, clothes, and the opposite sex. When her father, a college lecturer, informs her that twelve is the age of reason, Willie perceives this as the chance to have her juvenile braids cut off in preparation for her very first date.

Willie reveals that her interests transcend the teenage world of boys, clothes, and music. She is mesmerized by the exploits of prominent dictators

in the news, among them Fulgencio Batista, Papa Doc Duvalier, and Fidel Castro. Willie's fascination with dictators and guerrillas stems from the white community's concern over Cuban affairs, which she equates with the furor over the civil rights struggle in Little Rock, Arkansas. Interspersed within Willie's narrative is the story of Willie's dead Aunt Fannie. What Willie cannot glean from her father's family stories about Fannie, she imagines. Thus Fannie becomes a mythic figure within the novel. Fannie, Willie has learned, often sneaked out of the house to see minstrel shows, in defiance of her parents' wishes. Her niece shares her fascination with the Tambo/Mr. Interlocutor routines. Willie often begs her father to recount what his older sister had told him.

Dixon is wary about re-creating the old routines for his precocious daughter. He does, however, tell her that the minstrel shows " were in a different language. It was a hungry language and all the words were a complicated code that grew more and more intricate. And all the words said, ' I'm a fool, but I'm not a fool,' or ' I'm just here and I don't understand but I know exactly what is going on' " (Davis, 1993). The linguistic code of turn-of-the century minstrel shows becomes the code of the town when the school integration issue is raised. Many parents, including Dixon Tarrant, are concerned with what might happen if selected students from Ida B. Wells Junior High were to be sent to the all-white Patrick Henry Junior High. Fearing for their children's safety, the parents call a town meeting to discuss the issue. Eventually, they decide to send the top six students if the desegregation issue is forced. One of those students is Willie Tarrant.

Willie's remarkable teacher, Mae Taliaferro, rigorously prepares her students for the possible move. She refuses to teach the erroneous and biased material covered in the out-of-date textbooks that the all-white board of education has provided for the Wells students. One of the board members, Herman Shaw, is outraged by what he, a white supremacist, views as Mae's teaching of communist thought, and he calls for her dismissal. The African American community, however, stands behind Taliaferro, and Shaw's edict is dismissed. That winter, eight African American college students openly oppose segregation laws when they sit at the lunch counter of the local Woolworth's. Jailed and beaten several times, the students do not give up and return daily to the counter. The African American community is galvanized by this event. Dixon Tarrant becomes the leading spokesperson for the desegregation movement. Other community members, heretofore apolitical and passive, engage in the fight. The changes affect all members of the community, particularly Willie. No longer is her world a pedestrian one. She has been exposed to the evils of racial injustice and becomes an activist. At the age of reason, Willie Tarrant becomes a tireless worker for civil rights, responding reasonably to an unreasonable system.

Themes and Meanings

Dixon Tarrant, when trying to convey to his young daughter the feelings within him during a meeting or a march, sums up the main themes of the novel: " Sometimes it's like when I hear spirituals I heard when I was a child. Kind of a consoling feeling and sometimes, like the other day with the dogs, it's like standing in the middle of a storm, but it's not blowing around you, it's like it's coming from inside. Power, it's a feeling of power." (Davis, 1993)

The movement from powerlessness and even despair to power and hope shapes the novel. Davis expands on this theme through the growing complexity of Willie's narrative, which eventually becomes a meta-narrative for the African American community.

The passage above concisely draws in the various devices and references deployed throughout the novel to emblazon the theme of power. Within Willie's chronologically retold personal history are various family histories that deal with the national shames of slavery and Jim Crow laws. The elder Tarrants try to bury these histories, believing that to dredge up the darker aspects of the African American experience is harmful. For example, Dixon's father forbids the discussion of his parents' bondage, and Dixon is uneasy re-enacting the routines of minstrel shows. Ironically, Dixon finds some remnants of slavery, notably the singing of spirituals, to be comforting. The reluctant retelling of the Tarrant history serves as a caustic reminder of the legacy of slavery. This dark legacy is most effectively exemplified in the story of Ralph Johnson, the holder of a college degree in engineering who, because of his race, is unable to earn a living as an engineer and instead works as a barber.

The brutal killing of Jack Dempsey, a local black boy, explores the issue of racial injustice in the 1950's. Dempsey is shot in cold blood by a nervous white youth, but his murder is ignored by the justice system. Unlike the great white prizefighter for whom he was named, Jack Dempsey represents the powerlessness of humanity in an inhumane system. His story is one of despair, not of triumph. The storm itself becomes the controlling metaphor in

the novel. Many times Dixon Tarrant, an amateur meteorologist, takes his young son and daughter out to observe hurricanes. His matter-of-fact explanations of weather phenomena make the storms less threatening than interesting to Willie.

Dixon correlates the natural storms that buffet the Virginia coast with the social storms raging throughout the town, particularly the confrontation of the police and their attack dogs with the peaceful women demonstrators. (Davis, 1993) Because of the social storm surrounding these people, they have finally become empowered. Consequently, Willie and her family's activism makes the events swirling around the tiny community of Turner less frightening, as opposed to the novel's beginning, when just the thought of Little Rock and the desegregation issue makes the African American community uneasy. The cycle becomes complete when Willie, who as an adult has never forgotten the lessons of power and hope the Turner desegregation efforts of 1959 taught her, becomes a journalist and activist. As a survivor, she sees her role as being continually engaged in the struggle, lest others forget.

Critical Context

Overall, the novel " 1959" has received positive reviews, being favorably compared with the works of James Baldwin and Carson McCullers. Critics have found correlations between Davis' first novel and the works of a more established contemporary writer, Toni Morrison. Both Morrison and Davis have chosen to address social issues by filtering them through events centered in small African American communities. These communities

ultimately become micros-cosmic studies of national and social concerns.
(Davis, 1993)

In addition, " 1959" is often praised for its fusion of the historic and the fictional. The use of the juvenile narrative voice places the novel within the tradition of the female Bildungsroman. Drawing upon her own experience as an African American who grew up in the era she is writing about, Davis has created a synthesis of autobiography, history, and fiction. As a work of fiction and as a social document, " 1959" addresses a multitude of issues, including civil rights on a broad scale and the psychological implications inherent in the civil rights struggle on a more personal level. Davis has presented an affirming view of the African American experience. The story of Willie Tarrant and her community serves as a testament to the power of the community that band together. The endurance and fortitude of the people of whom Davis writes had been tested and tempered.

References

Davis, Thulani (1993). *1959*. Publisher: Harper Perennial ISBN-10: 0060975296.