

Devil in the grove: racism prompted by greed



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Brutality and racism have been a constant problem since the dawn of America. The motif of white powerful men framing innocent blacks has been a reoccurring tragedy. However, these stories are kept in the shadows of powerful racist brutes who cover their tracks with planted evidence. Gilbert King's non-fictional book, *Devil in the Grove*, tells the reader about the life of Thurgood Marshall, a civil rights activist, and details the proceedings of the Groveland Boys; four innocent black youths who were tortured and framed for rape. Though this book identifies and shows the racism in a post-Civil War South during the mid-1950s, the book really delves into how competition and greed for money between white and black men spurred an entire section of the country into committing gross crimes and misconduct, and how empowered whites persistently broke the will of the blacks to win in the competition of society and make money in the process.

Though Gilbert King's book seems to only describe how Florida's citrus business was thriving in 1949 and how the barons got rich by using cheap labor; it actually dissects how racism and cruel working conditions for the blacks instigated from the barons' greed for money and social power. Their need for cheap labor and a lower class led to them needing a strong official who could deliver results and help the barons maximize profit by terrorizing blacks into working. To maintain civil order and profits, these Barons thus turned to Sheriff Willis McCall; a fierce man who dictated the lives of Negro men in Lake County with deadly tenacity. The former USDA officer, " had strong [ties with]...Citrus Barons," who cashed on a lucrative business that relied on an almost completely Negro workforce (King 78). He would help terrorize the negro men who dared to work outside the Citrus Barons' lands

by using the sheriff's office to intimidate workers in order to drive them back to their 'cut-rate jobs,' all in violation of the law (82). The Barons needed to intimidate the workers in this way so that the terrorized men could be forced to work at petty wages. This, in turn, would forcefully create a bottom class of negro workers and would thus elevate the poorest of citrus barons into a higher social status. Sheriff Willis V. McCall knew that as long as he helped the Citrus Barons make profit, he would be able to keep his job. The Sheriff would thus focus nearly all his efforts on issues surrounding labor for the Citrus growers (79). As the greedy Barons got larger revenues and rose through a hierarchy of rank, they were prompted to spend more and more on the Sheriff's campaign which would secure larger revenues for the succeeding years and lead to larger social jumps. The previously poor, farm-working Sheriff would also gain social affluence as being a Sheriff elevated him from his poor social background and gave him power. This craving for power meant, when the barons complained about "bad crop years", Willis McCall resorted to violence to intimidate workers by "beating...pickers for vagrancy...in front of [their] wives and children" (79). Even though McCall was under investigation various times, the Barons, who had just achieved new status, wealth and political affluence, helped in disappearing the charges; a result of the new social bureaucracy McCall had helped create for them. The Sheriff's new friends had come with his elevated position, and he would cater anything to keep his position and them.

Sheriff Willis McCall murdered and terrorized African Americans because he was lost in his position as Sheriff, even though the book might suggest that his gross crimes come from his deep-rooted racism. His competitive nature

to maintain his position as acting sheriff of Lake County called for him to be a strict segregationist and a brutal law man. So, when a seventeen year-old white Lake County girl falsely called rape, McCall seized the opportunity to arrest and apprehend four young black males. The four Negro men McCall chose to convict with this violent crime, which he knew would result in a death charge, were Walter Irvin, Samuel Shepherd, Charles Greenlee and Ernest Thomas. The same young men who had the nerve to imagine a future beyond working in the rich orange groves of McCall's politically affluent friends: The Citrus Barons. Shepherd and Irvin were returning veterans and their choice to refuse to work in the whites' fields and live an " uppity Nigger," lifestyle, caused them to become victims of the alleged rape crime of Ms. Norma Padgett (133). The duo's boldness to march " in their army uniforms ... and drive around in a late-model Mercury" led them to enrage the whites of Lake County (133). Such abhorrent negligence of the social order spited the poorer whites who were scared this would lead to them drowning to a lower social status; one under the blacks. Thus McCall, prompted by his competitive nature to maintain his position as acting sheriff, and his poor farmer background, immediately charged them with rape allegations. He knew the population of his county had a strong intolerance for independent Negroes; especially those who posed a threat to the social structure which maintained that even the poorest of whites would not be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As King wrote, " resentment was general, and... [the] resentment among the [Citrus Barons] ' had been communicated to... Sheriff (Willis McCall)'" (133). Since the sheriff knew his position relied widely upon the political influence and steady stream of campaign money donated by Citrus Barons, McCall was quick to accuse the men. The

prosperous black individuals became such a threat for the Barons, that greed prompted them to make their “resentment” present to the sheriff; leading to the Negroes conviction as McCall knew discontent between the Citrus Barons would result in his eviction as sheriff (133). The four men had made the grave mistake of envisioning a future which would guarantee them social mobility and raise them in wealth and status, a dream that would cause the less privileged whites to lose some of their status. And so to secure the whites’ social level, McCall imprisoned them and charged them with rape. The rape case of the Groveland Boys had become Sheriff Willis McCall’s way of doing some “heavy housekeeping with regard to black troublemakers” (133). They were the example needed to keep Groveland segregated and dominated by whites, and their conviction would help ensure more terms as acting sheriff for McCall. King writes that “McCall’s shooting of Shepherd and Irvin (and their prosecution)... guaranteed [the sheriff] three more terms in office” (357). The ‘excellent’ work McCall did on the case by swiftly obtaining confessions from all of the convicts (which were forced by brutal beatings) also helped publicize his position in a positive light amongst the people of Florida as the populace believed that the sheriff had done so fairly. This further allowed him to gain critical ‘wins’ in his competitive career as sheriff (233). Thus, the sheriff’s very nature and yearning to keep, and strengthen his career, became the root of the enforced brutality in Lake County.

This competition and greed that created the segregated and racist environment of Groveland and led to the four innocent men being charged with rape, also led to their prosecution and conviction. Even though Gilbert

King introduces the state lawyer as a level headed man who seeks to preserve justice, the prosecuting attorney, Jesse Hunter, was actually motivated to fight the case because he wanted to win. The prosecutor's competitiveness is flared because of his thinking of the entire case as a game. This idea is first introduced to the reader when Hunter remarks he "liked to take down a proper adversary (referring to Thurgood Marshall the defendant's attorney)" (295). From Hunter's statement, it can be inferred that the attorney had a clear intent to win against his "adversary", not prove the guiltiness of the defendants. These actions result in him acting to win against the lawyer instead of laying facts for the jury to decide the fate of the convicted. In trying to win against the defendants, the lawyer thus resolves to all sorts of methods; many of them wildly inappropriate for court. Marshall, the defending lawyer, had counted "more than twenty errors in the prosecutions [handling of the case]" (335). The obscene behavior Jesse Hunter displayed in court, such as "giving the Masonic distress call to the [jurors]," shows that the lawyer was driven enough by competition to act out of accordance to the law (327). The result of this behavior was a favorable outcome for the prosecutor and the systematic denial of a fair trial for the Negro defendants. The game-like structure of the court proceeding is also seen in the way Hunter taunts the defense attorney by publicly criticizing that he would be willing to "[try] the defendants 'before an all-Negro jury'" (223). The way Hunter scoffs the defendant's case shows his wish to "take down a worthy adversary" instead of trying to uphold the law (295). Hunter's disregard towards upholding the law is another clear sign that he was aiming towards reaffirming his own career rather than present facts to a jury. When testimony disregarding Norma Padgett's rape story surfaced before the

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attorney, he quickly “obliterated the [attester’s] bearing” so as to advantage the prosecution’s case, an act punishable under law (225). The prosecutor was so caught up in trying to prove his worth as a lawyer that, even after confiding to his friend that he thought the “attack was staged... and deliberate”, he continued to prosecute and even ask for the death sentence of the defendants (239). Hunter’s obsession towards condemning the boys as rapists and sentencing them to death was aroused from his will to dominate in the courts and have a good case record. He believed he had a “sacred duty that compelled him...to win his last capital case in Lake County [even] at the cost of Walter Irvin’s life” (346). After the conviction was completed, with the jury favoring the prosecution, Hunter was seen dejected as he realized the game had finished. With the conviction in place, he succumbs to guilt for systematically being in contempt of court to win against his competition. He wrote letters to the then current Governor of Florida to decrease the convict’s sentence clearly evidencing that he had prosecuted against the men purely for the intent of winning at court. Mr. Jesse Hunter was so engrossed by competition and his personal greed to win his last case that he subjugated four innocent men and condemned them to their deaths; an allegory that would ring throughout the South for the rest of the century.

The greedy environment of Lake County and the competitive nature of both its justice officers and prosecuting lawyers resulted in the systematic brutalization and suppression of African Americans in the Groveland area. The Citrus Barons need for cheap labor forced the local sheriff to keep the Negroes of the area fearful and demoralized as their broken spirits would

allow for cheaper labor on the fields. Even the justice system, where lawyers avow to protect the sacred right of clients to live freely and with liberty, was compromised in this sadistic strive for competition. This resulted in the county becoming a reversion to the slave era. Gilbert King's non-fiction novel reminds readers that behind every racially instigated police attack lays a very intricate and corrupt judicial system that discriminates and demoralizes men in order to maintain a white supremacy social pyramid; lasting embers of an unfair ideal that haunts and singes the red, white and blue threads of equality, liberty and justice which make our flag.

Works Cited

King, Gilbert. Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America. New York: Harper, 2012. Print.