

Tolson: Who is the Judge? Debaters: God
Tolson: Why is God the Judge? Debaters: Because he decides who wins or loses
Tolson: Whose your opponent? Debaters: He doesn't exist.
Tolson: Why doesn't he exist? Debaters: Because he is merely the lonely dissenting voice of
the truth I speak.
Tolson: So speak the truth

Film Analysis: *The Great Debaters*

The quote, “We do what we have to do in order to do what we want to do.”, is one of the most memorable recurring themes in the theatrical historical drama production of the film, “*The Great Debaters*”, which was both directed by and starred, Denzel Washington, as Melvin I. Tolson, English and Speech Professor of Wiley College and Union Activist. In Washington’s rendition of *The Great Debaters* film, his primary subject matter is the development and transitioning of the four African-American team members on the 1935 Wiley College’s debate team, from amateur apprentices in word battles, into master debaters, during a time of severe injustice and inequality for African-Americans in Jim Crow’s South.

The Great Debaters, first and foremost, is an episodic plot film, which is inspired by the true story of the undefeated Wiley College’s 1935 Debate Team. The plot of the movie centers on the four main protagonists, Melvin I. Tolson, and the debaters; Henry Lowe (a composite character), Samantha Boone (a composite character) and James Farmer, Jr. (founder of the Congress of Racial Equality and a respected and formidable civil-rights movement leader); and fifth secondary protagonist’s, Hamilton Burgess, who as the film develops disappears into the role of a supporting player. The debate team against all odds rises above their circumstances, class positions, tendencies for self-destruction, self-pity and antagonistic roadblocks to success. The audience is treated to one of the greatest transitional stories depicted in recent history.

The majority of the film is filmed in Louisiana, with a few images shot on-site at Harvard College in Boston, and on-site at Wiley College in Marshall, Texas. Although Wiley College has always been located in Marshall, Texas, since its foundation in 1873, by Bishop Issac Wiley,

of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Freedman's Aid Society, as the first historically black college west of the Mississippi River, the director probably due to weather conditions and other outside restraints choose to film in Louisiana. For one, the filming of *The Great Debaters* began in early January of 2006 and wrapped sometime during the summer of that year. During this same time, Texas was experiencing an unusual spike in several severe weather and thunderstorm events which would have prevented or hindered many of the memorable images depicted throughout the film from being captured; with the same emotional intensity and with such precision and details to the thought of the film as revealed in the current production.

One does not need to know Wiley College's history and primary purpose, which was to prepare the newly emancipated African American people for the future, in order to discern the elements of the film. However, the knowledge of history does reinforce the content and other elements of the medium and observations of the artistic form developed in the film.

The opening sequence utilizes several continuity cuts that were successful in immediately drawing the audience into both the film's content and protagonists' fates, with the coinciding sound of Blues music, voice-over of James farmer, Sr., who remains for about a minute unseen on the medium embedded into the imagery of the skillful cross-cutting shots on screen that utilize a mixture of sidewise tracking shots, close-up shots, point-of-view shots, crane shots and continuity cuts. The first moving image is the greenery in the swamp, then of Tolson dressed as a poor sharecropper secretly leaving his home, which is noted by the director's decision to have Tolson check his back a few times before heading into the woods.

The camera shot then cuts back to the swamp and the audience is then introduced to an important protagonist/antagonist, Henry Lowe, who is captured flirting with a lady in a juke joint, while Blues music plays at an increasing rhythm throughout the opening sequence and

every time Lowe's character battled his tragic flaws; then the camera shot shifts to a new scene that introduces the audience to Samantha Boone, at a train station, preparing to board. The camera shot then cuts to what appears to be a church with James Farmer, Sr., delivering a lecture/sermon, at which point an establishing shot of James Farmer, Jr. is edited into the sequence. This editing choice by the editor allows the introduction of all the main characters in the film, while clearly indicating that the distinct actions by the characters are occurring in different places at the same time. As the music intensifies so does the action, Lowe has gotten into a bar fight with the juke joint lady's husband and is about to destroy his life by cutting the husband when Tolson the main protagonist prevents the character's downfall.

We learn later in the film that this will be a recurring interaction between the two characters. As this situation is resolved, the camera shot cross-cuts to James Farmer, Sr., where the audience learns that they were actually viewing a lecture at Wiley College and James Farmer, Jr. looks on in awe or admiration of his father's speaking and motivation abilities. The camera shot then cross-cuts back to Boone, who has since boarded a train headed for what the audience now learns is Marshall, Texas.

The opening sequence ends with the voice of Farmer, Sr. stating, "We do what we have to do in order to do what we want to do. Education is the only way out of darkness into a glorious light". The sequence of Boone headed out of her desolate town at night symbolizes the darkness referred to in the voice-over, by editing in Point-of-view shots of the environment she is leaving behind. This environment includes African American carpetbaggers and homeless people living in tents on the side of the road who are clearly in a state of despair as the time period was also during the great depression. The final camera shot of the opening sequence and one of the more memorable scenes of the movie is that of Boone's arrival at her destination,

Marshall, Texas. As the bus leaves the screen, the audience sees a white bench, which represents purity, with the words, 'For Whites Only' in black, which is always a representation of evil/sinister connotations, behind Booke, before the image dissolves into the next sequence of events. The audience is immediately jolted again as to the times and issues the protagonists would be up against throughout the film medium.

As discussed in class, I found that there were several protagonists in the film. One obvious one was the Anglo-Saxon's bigotry the protagonists had to overcome at every level of progression and growth into their transformation into master debaters. One interesting antagonist's was Lowe, himself, also a previously identified protagonist. Lowe was both an antagonist to own character transformation and to the other protagonists in the film. Lowe's story was irrelevant as he was a composite character and thus had no true background per se. The relevance came in the form of Lowe's character flaws and virtues that became a hindrance to both his personal growth and that of the other protagonist's, achievement, and transformation. A recurring instance was in the interpersonal relationships of Booke and Farmer, Jr. Lowe's character was a constant thorn in the characters archetype quest for self-confidence of Booke and the self-identity of Farmer, Jr.

Washington focused more on the type character of the tragic hero with a weakness for booze and women with a twist. The twist being that the character, Lowe, was actually a multidimensional character that at the surface appeared one-dimensional. Lowe however developed in a character with both a hard exterior and soft interior, which noticeable battles the demons within. This battle continued until the end of film, at which point his character is transitioned into a true hero without the tragic fate most tragic heroes are subjected to. By providing images of Lowe's transformation into a mentor/coach in the final debate in the film

against Harvard, allowed the audience to accept the redemption of his character. Lowe's shedding of pompous self-importance for the stake of the team reinforces another theme in the film,

It bears noting that it is telling of Washington's thought process on Lowe's character evolution, that the pre-production ending of *The Great Debaters*, was to have Lowe's character simply disappear, which would have further reinforced his tragic flaw, leaving the audience to wonder if Lowe suffered the inevitable consequences of his tragic flaw. However, the choice by Washington to not have Lowe suffer the consequences deviated in a way from reality adding to the escapism element of the film. Others that lived as Lowe and watched this film may actually idealize the negative attributes of the torn character in direct denial of their own tragic flaws.

Another interesting interpersonal relationship between type characters, were those of Farmer, Sr. and Farmer, Jr. James Farmer, Sr. was an over-achieving scholar, with a son, James Farmer, Jr. acting the role of the child desperate to please the iron-fist, ruling father. The relationship hits a snag when while the Farmer family is happily driving along a country road, playing games and singing amongst each other. Abruptly, Farmer, Sr. accidentally hits the pig of an Anglo-Saxon Pig Farmer, the type character of the southern, uneducated and ignorant redneck. It is the first time the audience sees Farmer, Sr. do something he has to do, which is pay an exorbitant amount for the dead pig, to the pig farmer, in order to leave with his life and his family's lives intact. Farmer, Sr.'s overly exaggerated apology and submission to the racist pig farmer and the pig farmer's gun brandishing friend, for the accident, strikes a chord with his son. Farmer, Jr. later throws the already demeaning incident in his father's face during a rare

moment of rebellion by Farmer, Jr. after returning home from an inadvertent encounter with Tolson, his union cohorts, and the sharecroppers, which resulted in a raid by the sheriff's posse.

Overall, there were several type characters in the film. The Sheriff was the typical southern Anglo-Saxon authority figure of the south during the time period of the film and the primary antagonist for protagonist, Tolson. To reinforce his character the audience was treated to an encounter that shows the after effects of his illegal interrogation and brutal beating of two African American sharecroppers, for information on who the union activist's identity belonged too. It is obvious that the beating was severe as the camera shot begins with the Sheriff talking to the Texas Ranger's on the phone about the investigation and then the camera shot provides a point-of-view shot of the sharecroppers' swollen eyes, lips, and blood flowing from several different open wounds on their faces. Who themselves were a type character of the old, Uncle Tom Negro prevalent in the Jim Crow South during that time period.

The most memorable type characters appeared briefly in the most memorable moment of the film, which was preceded by an emotionally charged scene between Tolson and Burgess, lead debater, of the 1935 Wiley College Team. In light of Tolson's extra-curricular activities and rumor of being a communist, Burgess, is forced by his parents to quit the team after Tolson refuses to comment on his political beliefs and/or off-campus actions. The protagonists debaters are informed during the confrontation at Tolson's home that they have received their first invitation to debate an Anglo-Saxon College, Oklahoma City University, which sets the stage for the memorable lynching point-of-view shots that immediately follows after a .

Tolson, Lowe, Booke and Farmer, Jr. are traveling on a dirt road when then inadvertently drive into a mob of racist who have hung a Negro on a cross and burned him alive. The graphic image of the tracking camera shot of the burned body is seared into the eyes of the audience as

are the faces of the victimizers. The Negro's crime are not addressed, as the protagonists, after escaping the mob with their lives are shell shocked from the experience, as are the audience. Washington's ability to invoke such catharsis responses are only achieved through skills editing of the intense and emotionally charged collection images.

The diction in the film was exceptionally. Booke was often the deliverer of much of the more powerful arguments. Washington achieved this by having Booke deliver all, but one of the most moving speeches during the debate against the University of Oklahoma City. However, all of the protagonists exhibited an amazing ability to infer emotion and feeling that conveyed and reinforced the audience's belief in the plot and dialogue of each individual character.

The spectacle was quite appropriate for his time period. Men wore wool or cotton suits, white shirts, accessorized with bow ties and padded leather shoes. The cars were that of the old Model T, which would have been the car of choice during that time period. The choice to film in Louisiana, allowed for beautiful swamp scenery, with the rich greens, oranges, and yellows found in nature. Washington's detail on the elements in spectacle only added to the audience's believability about plot and character developments resolved in the film.

Overall, Washington's ability to provide such a moving episodic plot was culminate with the final sequences of the film, beginning with the Debater's arrival to Boston without Tolson, because of the parole restrictions on his release from jail. The audience is immediately shown the stark contrast, progress, and transformation of the Debater's acceptance amongst the majority. The Debater's are informed that unlike the University of Oklahoma debate, not only will they be debating on campus; they will be residing on campus. Only further adding to the setting of the film and contrasting the North/South's positions and beliefs about Negroes.

Unlike during the camera shots in University of Oklahoma, which utilized point-of-view shots of the debaters, and segregated audience, reinforcing the values of the society; the Harvard debate camera shots utilized a sidewise tracking camera shot of the debaters that encompassed the diversity audience, which only reinforced the team's arrival of public acceptance.

The content is first introduced during the opening sequence and supporting images follow throughout the medium building on the plot. The content of the film which is, the spoken word and education is a greater weapon against injustice/inequality, then guns or knives could ever be, solidifies the audiences' participative experience, drawing out the audiences' identification with the plight of the protagonists, and their triumphant disposition. Washington's direction of the film, although directed most likely for the African American youth of today, is truly universal and can be participative for many different nationalities. It speaks to the character of men and the weaknesses of society. Probably one of the less frequently utilized quotes, "An unjust law is no law at all", by St. Augustine, only reinforces another one of Washington's intents of the film, which I perceived as being if injustices exist then equality has been eroded.

