

# THE GREAT DEBATERS :

## BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF WORDS

*Inspired by a true story, **The Great Debaters** chronicles the journey of Professor Melvin Tolson, a brilliant but volatile debate team coach who uses the power of words to shape a group of underdog students from a small African American college in the deep south into a historically elite debate team. A controversial figure, Professor Tolson challenged the social mores of the time and was under constant fire for his unconventional and ferocious teaching methods as well as his radical political views. In their pursuit for excellence, Tolson's debate team receives a groundbreaking invitation to debate Harvard University's championship team.*

**Pre-Movie Task:** On a separate sheet of paper define the following terms and draw a picture that reflects the meaning of the word.

- |              |                     |               |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------|
| •Syllogism   | •Conjecture         | •Labor Union  |
| •Premise     | •Rebut              | •Sharecropper |
| •Proposition | •Civil Disobedience | •Jim Crow     |
| •Fallacy     | •Anarchy            |               |
| •Faulty      | •Tyranny            |               |

**Scene I: "Debate is combat, your weapons are words."**

- The *proposition* is the idea, also known as the \_\_\_\_\_.
- The *affirmative* is when you argue \_\_\_\_\_.
- The *negative* is when you argue \_\_\_\_\_.

•Which persuasive techniques that we have talked about in class do the debaters use when in the "hotspot"? List as many as you can recognize.

**Scene II: Debate vs. Paul Quinn College**

**Proposition (resolve): "Unemployment relief should end when the Depression ends."**

- List all the persuasive techniques you recognize during the debate verses Paul Quinn College.

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**BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF WORDS****Scene II: Debate vs. Paul Quinn College Continued**

• *Read the following passage from Henry Lowe's portion of the debate and answer the following questions:*

"A brilliant young woman I know was asked once to support her argument in favor of social welfare. She named the most powerful source imaginable: the look in a mother's face when she cannot feed her children. Can you look that hungry child in the eyes? See the blood on his feet from working barefoot in the cotton fields. Or do you ask his baby sister with her belly swollen from hunger if she cares about her daddy's work ethics?"

• Who is the "brilliant young woman" to whom Henry Lowe is referring?

• Do you think Henry is *appealing* to the audience's *logic* or *emotion*? How do you know? Support with examples from the speech.

• What persuasive technique does Henry use in his last 3 lines of his quote?

**Scene III: Debate vs. Oklahoma City University**

**Proposition (resolve): "Negros should be admitted to state universities."**

• How does Samantha appeal to the logic of her audience during her speech?

• The opposition (white debater) accounts a personal example and quote from whom during this portion of the debate?

• Henry Lowe refutes the opposition by stating that:

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### Scene III: Debate vs. Oklahoma City University Continued

• *Read the following excerpt and underline all the instances Samantha uses repetition.*

“As long as schools are segregated Negroes will receive an education that is both separate and unequal. By Oklahoma’s own reckoning, the state is currently spending five times more for the education for a white child than it is fitting to educate a colored child. That means better textbooks for that child than for that child. I say that’s a shame, but my opponent says today is not the day for whites and coloreds to go to the same college, to share the same campus, to walk into the same classroom...well, would you kindly tell me when that day is gonna come? Is it going to come tomorrow? Is it going to come next week? In a hundred years? Never? No, the time for justice, the time for freedom, and the time for equality is always, is always right now!”

• **What additional persuasive techniques does Miss Booke use in her speech? Give examples.**

### Scene IV: Debate vs. Harvard University

**Proposition (resolve): “*Civil disobedience is a moral weapon in the fight for justice.*”**

• **When planning their debate against Harvard what point did Samantha suggest should go last?**

• **List TWO persuasive techniques James Farm Jr. uses during his first affirmative.**

• **Does the first Harvard opponent appeal mostly to emotion or logic? How do you know this?**

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### Scene IV: Debate vs. Harvard University Continued

• *“Nonviolence is the mask civil disobedience wears to conceal its true face” is an example of*

• *The second Harvard Opponent recalls a story about his father. Which persuasive technique does he use? Does using this technique appeal to logic or appeal to emotion? Why?*

• *Read the following portion of James Farmer Jr.'s debate:*

“In Texas they lynch Negroes. My teammates and I saw a man strung up by his neck and set on fire. We drove through a lynch mob, pressed our faces against the floorboard. I looked at my teammates. I saw the fear in their eyes and, worse, the shame. What was this Negro's crime that he should be hung without trial in a dark forest filled with fog. Was he a thief? Was he a killer? Or just a Negro? Was he a sharecropper? A preacher? Were his children waiting up for him? And who are we to just lie there and do nothing. No matter what he did, the mob was the criminal. But the law did nothing. Just left us wondering, “Why?” My opponent says nothing that erodes the rule of law can be moral. But there is no rule of law in the Jim Crow south. Not when Negroes are denied housing. Turned away from schools, hospitals. And not when we are lynched. St 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.”

• *Give one example from the above speech where James Farmer Jr. uses to a rhetorical question.*

• *In the second to last line what persuasive technique is used?*

• *Explain with at least two examples above whether you think the above speech appeals to logic or emotion.*

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ MAJOR ASSIGNMENT

# THE GREAT DEBATERS CONT'D: BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF WORDS

## OVERALL REFLECTION:

•What were some of the overall techniques the debaters in the movie used to hook their audience? List as many as possible.

•How did the “audience” influence the approach of Wiley Debaters took in the film?

•What types of support did the debaters used to defend their position? List as many as possible.

•How would you describe the language and vocabulary the debaters used in the film? Speculate how language and vocabulary influences the art of persuasion.

•Analyze why the Wiley Debaters were so successful. Be specific and detailed by giving support for your opinion!