

Reflect on the autobiography of Anne Moody to consider the following: To what extent does Moody's narrative highlight the history of the Civil Rights Movement as a movement of "everyday" and/or "exceptional" people?

Research Paper

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HIST 473: Black Women in U.S. History

Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* uses her personal life experiences to portray a story of relentless truth. From the happiest and intimate moments, to the most chilling, Moody allows readers to follow her life from a young child through to her young adult life; where her determined and perseverant spirit guides her life from Centreville, Mississippi, to New Orleans and beyond. From these Centreville roots, Moody characteristically joins numerous civil rights organizations including the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Throughout all of her endeavours — both high and low — Moody's Centreville roots act as her North Star; guiding and framing her efforts in the pursuit of racial equality and desegregation. Critically, however, Moody's memoir shows how the makeup of prominent figures of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement were not from prominent backgrounds, but from rather mundane, unexceptional beginnings who instead grow to become exceptional individuals as the Civil Rights Movement reaches its climax, where their absolute dedication is so vividly displayed in their efforts and sacrifices. And while Anne Moody perhaps could have been overlooked as typical while she was working for Mrs. Bruke or living at home with her mother and siblings, the killing of Emmett Till would spark this determined spirit to be anything but typical; resulting in a life of determined and relentless activism for greater equality among all. For Anne Moody and her generation, however, the idea of the typical "everyday" individual had changed profoundly compared to Moody's mother and grandmother's due to a greatly expanded and more accessible education system, as well as technological advancements that collectively showered Moody and her generation in knowledge that had been prohibitively inaccessible before.

Anne Moody's story mimics and contours a primary theme (displayed creatively with prominence and subtlety) of the Civil Rights Movement: age, and one's willingness to change. Moody describes how adults — particularly African Americans — were unwilling to sign up to vote, not because they were uninterested or lazy, but because for decades, they had faced intimidation, brutal violence, and persistent fear by whites that paralyzed them to retain the status quo, with Anne's mother and grandmother being prime examples of such fear-based hesitation.¹ This age-based fissure is not specific to Anne's strained relationship with her family, however, but rather is also represented in the hundreds of high school and college students who worked alongside Moody in various sit-ins, singings, protests, marches, and speeches while their parents and school administrators pleaded with them not to participate. Holistically, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* represents the generational dichotomy between Anne Moody and her mother Toosweet Davis, and how this profound generational difference can be largely extrapolated upon the rest of these members of each distinct generation. For Anne Moody, her differences between herself and her mother are not developed until the death of Emmitt Hill, just one week before she enters high school.²

Up until this point, Moody had focused her ambitions on academics and work, leaving her with a severely limited social life, and a pipeline to news controlled almost exclusively by her mother. As a result, Moody had gone much of her life as a child unaware of the pervasive nature of segregation, anti-Black violence, and lynchings that had profoundly defined and impeded life as an African American living in Mississippi during the 1950s. When her mother is regressive

¹ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Tantor Audio, 2012), <https://www.audible.ca/pd/Coming-of-Age-in-Mississippi-Audiobook/B0711N JL4K>, Ch. 26.

² Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Ch. 10

towards explaining what happened to Emmitt Till, and her employer Mrs. Burke largely justifies Till's murder because he got "out of his place with a white women", claiming "Negros up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything", Moody develops a fear that she, like similarly aged Till, could be killed simply because she was Black, stating "I didn't know what one had to do or not do [as an African American]. Probably just being a Negro was [...] enough".³

Until this point in her life, Anne's life had been much similar to that of her mothers — growing up on a pre Civil War-style sharecropping farm, living in poverty, and receiving only rudimentary academic training closely linked to local church operations.⁴ However, when Moody and her family moved to Centreville and she could now attend a more formal school, Moody's knowledge and perspective began to shift away from her mother's. Because Moody was largely denied knowledge that pertained to the growing Civil Rights Movement or the prevalence of anti-Black racism by her mother, Moody's teacher, Mrs. Rice, filled this intellectual gap and played a motherly role in Moody's life where Toosweet was otherwise dismissing and was unwilling to provide.⁵ After being enlightened to the relentless anti-Black racism and violence, as well as groups like the NAACP that sought to expand rights and protections to African Americans to be in parity with their white counterparts, Moody's fundamental ethos towards segregation and anti-Black racism sever from her mother's; resulting in Moody leaving the family home the following summer to pursue a life (and job) free from the passiveness of

her mother and the relentless

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Tracey Jean Boisseau, "Coming of Age with Anne Moody," *Meridians* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2020): 32–64, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-8117713>, 41-2.

⁵ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Ch. 10.

racialized verbal attacks made by Mrs. Bruke.⁶ As described by Moody, she was “choking to death” in her hometown and was “sick of selling her feelings for a dollar a day”.⁷ As Moody grows older, particularly when she enters College, her and her mother grow further and further apart as Moody becomes increasingly active in the NAACP, and later CORE and SNCC, with their only communication being a repetitive stream of letters from her mother pleading with her to cease participation in these organizations and that she is putting herself and her family in danger as word of Moody’s activism reaches Centreville.⁸

Moody, like many of her friends, colleagues, and fellow civil rights activists and organizers originate from everyday or mundane beginnings, such as the hundreds of regular high school students who partake in mass sit-ins, protests, free Moody and Doris from the fair ride, or the one thousand college students who travel from across the country to assist in the Summer Project — all of whom in so doing become extraordinary.⁹ Again, readers are presented with a clear divide between generations: Moody, and her high school and college-aged activists, and Toosweet’s generation of fear-instilled passivity among many African Americans and outright bigotry among many similarly aged whites including Mrs. Bruke, the cook and president at Moody’s college, the bus terminal ticket agent, and the Police.¹⁰ Towards the end of the memoir, Moody encapsulates this generational fissure when she states:

⁶ *Ibid*, Ch. 11.

⁷ *Ibid*.

⁸ *Ibid*, Ch. 22, 26.

⁹ *Ibid*, Ch. 22, 26, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Ch. 13, 19, 21.

It seemed as though everyone was in a singing mood. Sometimes it seemed that, without the songs, the Negroes didn't have the courage to move. When I listened to the older Negroes sing, I knew that it was the idea of heaven that kept them going. To them heaven would end their troubles. But listening to the teen-agers, I got an entirely different feeling. They felt that the power to change things was in themselves. More so than in God or anything else. Their way of thinking seemed to have been "God helps those that help themselves" instead of "When we get to heaven things will be different, there won't be no black or white," which was what my grandmother thought".¹¹

While Moody casts a clear division between her own generation and the ones prior to her's, it is worth analyzing this stance taken by Moody throughout the later half of the book to ensure nuance and complexities are not overshadowed by generalizations developed in response to reading *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. More specifically, while it is not disclosed the age of Mrs. Rice or the other Black educators Moody learns from throughout her academic years, it can reasonably be assumed these teachers — the very ones who enlightened Moody in the first place about the pervasiveness of segregation and anti-Black violence and racism — were of the same generation of Moody's mother. Tracey Jean Boisseau in *Coming of Age with Anne Moody*:

Looking Within and Without for the Origins of Black Women's Activism in the Civil Rights Movement illuminates how the radically different life experiences between Toosweet David and her daughter Anne changed what it meant to be an "everyday" individual growing up in their respective time periods. Boisseau highlights how Toosweet, like many African Americans of her generation and earlier growing up in Mississippi, where sharecropping, attending rudimentary schooling (which was beholden to agricultural schedules) and living in substandard housing was pervasive, entrenched as it pre-existed the Civil War, and representative of a typical life.¹² For Moody and her generation, they represented the first African American cohort able to attend

¹¹ *Ibid*, Ch. 29.

¹² Boisseau, "Coming of Age with Anne Moody", 37, 55.

formalized public education in the wake of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling which yielded access to educators (both Black and white) that provided enlightenment, and promoted feelings of self worth and achievement to Moody and others like her.¹³ In addition, Boisseau also speaks to the urbanization of the post-WWII U.S., and how this — largely for the first time — creates opportunities at scale for African American and white youth to interact with each other both inside and outside the classroom setting.¹⁴ Applying this more detailed and sophisticated explanation of Boisseau’s to Moody’s memoir, one does see this explanation in the form of Moody and Wayne’s friendship despite Wayne’s mother being a primary racist towards Moody and her brother.¹⁵ In fact, this close friendship between Moody and Wayne becomes so pronounced that Mrs. Bruke at one point becomes visibly flustered and shocked when she sees her son and Moody having their faces close to each other’s during a study session, subsequently announcing that they should finish their last algebra question, and Moody should return home.¹⁶

Hayden Noel McDaniel in *Growing Up Civil Rights: Youth Voices from Mississippi’s Freedom Summer* also raises the notion that part of the reason Moody’s generation was so disproportionately active in the Civil Rights movement was because they were “reacting to what they saw as their elders’ compliance with entrenched social norms of white dominated society”.¹⁷ While there is certainly validity in this statement; Moody — throughout her memoir — expresses

¹³ *Ibid*, 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Ch. 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ Hayden Noel McDaniel, “Growing Up Civil Rights: Youth Voices from Mississippi’s Freedom Summer,” *Southern Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (Winter 2016), 94.

her frustrations at the adults who take benefits from organizations like the NAACP (such as clothing), yet refuse to sign voting registration lists, for example, this action is certainly not exclusively unique to Moody's generation. Expanding on McDaniel's assertion that passiveness (primarily displayed by Toosweet) was a contributor to the enormous youth participation in the Civil Rights Movement (primarily displayed by Moody), it is crucial to consider how new technologies, specifically the television, enabled media and communication to be distributed quicker and in greater volume to more people, and how this helped fuel the Civil Rights Movement.

Within just ten years, between 1950 and 1960, the percentage of households with a television rose from 9% to over 87%; corresponding exceptionally well to the Civil Rights Movement that had been gaining momentum during this very same period.¹⁸ With the adoption of the television so (relatively) high by the late 1950s, the "everyday" average American now came equip with a media device that could transport them to any region and have them watch and make up their own mind about what they were seeing. With the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, the media coverage — perpetuated by the explosive growth of the television — helped propel instances of anti-Black violence and racism to all corners of the United States, allowing white liberals and northerners more generally to *see* these repetitive acts of violence that had historically been insulated by geography and the low bandwidth of radio.¹⁹ Within *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Moody describes how when demonstrations were "televised on all the news

¹⁸ "9.1 The Evolution of Television," *Understanding Media and Culture*: University of Minnesota, 2016, figure 9.3.

¹⁹ Amanda Philley, "The Civil Rights Movement: The Power of Television," *3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing*, no. 4 (2012), <https://fisherpub.sjf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=journal3690>, 5-7.

programs, it seemed as though every girl in the dorm was down in the lounge in front of the set. They were all shooting off about how they would take part in the next demonstration”.²⁰ With the mass adoption of the television occurring concurrently to the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, the American public — for the first time — was able to physically watch what could only once be told through print and mouth, enabling a whole new engaging and unapologetically real dimension of segregation to be distributed and shown to millions of Americans across the country.

Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* highlights the significance of “everyday” people from a diverse set of backgrounds coalescing around a movement driven to produce the same equal protections and rights to all — in turn transforming these peoples into truly extraordinary individuals. And while much of these efforts were driven by the efforts and sacrifices of youth, it is critical to also keep in mind that many older individuals, particularly in the field of education which was becoming more accessible to an increasingly urban population, played a pivotal role in enabling Moody’s generation the access to knowledge that was previously difficult to obtain in the patchwork of rudimentary, rural, church-dependant schools that dominated Black southern educational institutions before. While the Civil Rights Movement was compiled from almost all normal, average, “everyday” people, these typical individuals were brought up in an environment much different than that of their parents or grandparents; enabling their desires, beliefs, values, and outcomes to also be different. Individuals like Anne Moody who made up the ranks of the NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and other organizations largely dropped the passivity of which defined their parents, grandparents, and previous generations’ fear-induced

²⁰ Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Ch. 21.

mindset. Critically, this generation was able to drop such a mindset because their access to information had changed, enabling them to become truly exceptional individuals in their successful pursuit of advancing racial equality and abolishing Jim Crow segregation that had come to define the African American Southern U.S. experience since the 1880s.

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