Coming Of Age Essay, Research Paper

Coming of Age in Mississippi

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Coming of Age in Mississippi is an autobiography written by an African-American woman exploring the social significance of race in Mississippi and the deep South and the impact it had on her life and her perspective. The author depicts her life story, both her experiences and evolving thinking on race, gender, and social relations to demonstrate the origin, evolution, and social and political consequences of the civil rights movement. She traces her life through what she labels as her four stages of development: her childhood, high school years, college and the civil rights movement. The story describes in detail some of the consequences of being black in Mississippi. The author begins with her childhood and the way her mother struggled to care for her and 7 other children after her father left. She recalls the poor living conditions and the lack of food her family suffered in. She was the oldest child of poor sharecroppers. She recognized early that the only option available to her mother, who was uneducated, was working as a domestic help for meaningless pay. She even worked herself, taking on the burden of helping to support her family while she was in school. Although she lacked the intellectual comprehension of prejudice, she knew that she was treated differently from other children. She wondered why the white families had such modern conveniences as indoor toilets, while her family and those like them were denied such things. She knew that white families even ate differently and longed to know what was their secret. She acknowledges from a very early age that racism wasn’t just something to read about in newspapers. Her high school years marked a pivotal movement in her life and her understanding. When a 14-year-old visitor from Chicago named Emmitt Till had been murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman Moody’s attitude toward her society began to change. It was then that she came to realize that the only difference between her and whites was the color of her skin and that she could be killed just for being black. She stated that it was then that she begun to hate people. She hated the white people for killing Emmitt Till and she hated the black people for letting it happen and not doing anything about it. She later learned that he was killed for being involved in the NAACP. She could not understand how blacks seemed so eager to just accept whatever happened to them and realized that she would never just accept things. In college, Anne Moody joined the NAACP. It was here, fueled by her attitude toward her society, that she began her involvement in the civil rights movement. She knew it was very dangerous for her and for her family to join but she thought about the murders and the beatings and joined anyway. She also became involved with the SNCC through a girl living in her dormitory. She spent the next few years deeply involved in voter registration drives for blacks. She went through various counties throughout Mississippi encouraging blacks to register for their constitutional right to vote. Many blacks were frightened to register, some because they were just so eager to leave things as they were, and some because they didn’t fully understand the importance of voting rights in this country. Many barriers were placed on the voting laws aimed at keeping the election away from minorities, including a poll tax and an exam that could not be passed by anyone illiterate or blind. Lawmakers were powerless to do anything to stop this at the time. It would still be years before the social conscious toward race would shift. In her senior year in college, Moody was involved in her first sit-in, when she went to the white section of the local bus station and refused to leave. After that, the head of the NAACP activities at her college asked her, to be the spokesman for a team that would sit in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter, which was segregated at the time. She knew she would go to jail for this but she did it anyway. A white mob formed around her and her friends and threw things at them and smeared food on them. Later, Moody joined CORE and continued to fight for voting rights until she ended up on the KKK black list until she fled the south to testify in Washington. I found this book to be an excellent view through which to examine a variety of issues in recent US History. She used the voice of a writer to tell a story of the history. I had read about various aspects of the civil rights movement, but to read it in reference to someone’s real life who experienced it was completed different. I admired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a leader and often never really understood those who differed from his idea of the non-violent protests. Anne Moody lived through and touched upon various historical events, including Brown v. Board of Education and the doctrine of separate but equal. She knew that there would never be any equality in the south as long as things remained separate. She was part of the 1960 lunch counter sit-ins, the Freedom Rides of 1961, the church bombing of Birmingham, Alabama where four little girls died and the March on Washington lead by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. This book has been recognized as a very realistic portrayal of life in the South for blacks in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Civil rights activists were fighting for one of many civil rights that had long been denied to blacks in this country, rights that I, as a “minority” can enjoy today. Social customs that separated the races in every aspect of daily life were put into laws, from segregated movie theaters, lunch counters and schools. It was the Southern atmosphere of legal oppression that led to commonplace white violence against blacks. Mississippi whites believed so much in the segregated way of life in the south, they would kill to preserve it. Moody’s youthful idealism embraced the civil rights movement wholeheartedly. She was so amazed to see other blacks that felt like her and wanted to do something other than simply accept their way of life. But eventually, she begins to doubt the effectiveness of the movement and its nonviolent spokesman, Martin Luther King, Jr. Two differing groups began to emerge within the movement itself, the non-violence position advocated by King and his followers, and the more militant stance of Malcolm X. Moody had the courage to wonder aloud whether the civil rights movement could ultimately be successful without violence. She wanted blacks to fight for what they deserved. When your fellow man is being clubbed in the streets or hung in the trees, she wonder whether “turning the other cheek” was an effective response. Having endured beatings by the fists of a white man, it is natural for Moody to want to fight back to protect both herself and her race. In conclusion, Coming of Age in Mississippi conveys what it was like to be an African American and a female living under the oppressive daily shadow of racism. She had the courage to criticize the ineffectiveness of the civil rights movement and question openly whether the nonviolent approach was effective. The autobiography does not offer any pretty conclusions or tell its readers ‘don’t worry about all of the bad things because in the end we all lived happily ever after.’ In the end, she considers the words “We Shall Overcome,” which symbolized the march on Washington but she was afraid to speculate and simply says ” I wonder, I really wonder.” I think in her heart she knew already that changing legislation does not necessarily change minds.