The Great Debaters
Question Guide

Scene # 1-My Soul Is a Witness

Listen to and discuss the opening prayer and speech by Dr. Farmer. Explain the significance of the powerful words which are spoken in the background as the viewer watches several different scenes:

• Samantha Booke takes the bus to school and is watching her impoverished community in the window as she passes
• Melvin Tolson dressed as farmer walking into the night
• Henry Lowe in bar about to get in a fight

“When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child but when I became a man, I put away all childish things. Freshman class...I believe we are the most privileged people in America, because we have the most important job in America, the education of our young people...We must impress upon our young people that there will difficulties that they will face, they must defeat them, they must do what they have to do in order to do what they want to do. Education is the only way out, the way out of ignorance, the way out of darkness, into the glorious light.”

Dr. James Farmer

1. What does Dr. Farmer mean when he said “When I was I child I spake as a child...but when I became a man I put away all childish things”? 

2. Is it the school’s role to help youth to develop into adults? Why or Why not?

3. Where do most of our young people learn the lessons they need to become adults today?

4. What do you think Samantha Booke is thinking as she looks out the window at her impoverished community?

5. What does Dr. Farmer mean when he says “they must do what they have to do in order to do what they want to do”? How can you apply this to your own life?

6. What would have happened if Henry Lowe had actually stabbed the women’s husband in the fight in the bar?

7. Is education still the “way out of darkness and into the glorious light” for the African American community? If so, how?
Scene #2 The Harlem Renaissance

1. What does Mr. Tolson do to capture the attention of his students as he enters the classroom?

2. How does this differ from what we see in most classrooms we see today?

3. How does Langston Hughes’ poem “I, Too, Sing America” relate to the issues that the students in the class were facing as Blacks in the United States during that time period?

4. What does Tolson mean when he says “To be born without record”?

5. Discuss how the revolution in Harlem “chang[ed] the way Negroes in America think.” Why does Tolson believe it is important for the students to learn about this?

Scene #3 The Hot Spot

1. What does Mr. Tolson mean when he says that “debate is blood sport; it’s combat but your weapons are words”?

2. What does the term “the hot spot” mean?

3. Explaining Debate: Explain the concepts of starting a debate with a proposition and demonstrate how debaters argue the affirmative and negative.

4. How do you think Samantha Booke might have felt as the first and only female trying out for the team?

5. How does Samantha’s source, “the look in a mothers eye when she can’t feed her kids” represent an insight that a male student may not have?

6. D.H Lawrence once said: “I never saw a wild thing sorry for itself.” What does this mean?

Scene #4 Melvin Tolson’s Debate Team

1. What obstacles do you think Samantha Booke will face as one of the first female lawyers in Texas?

2. What does Tolson mean when he says “Black is always equated with failure. Well write your own dictionary”?
3. How does James’s mother react when she hears a female made the debate team? Why might she have been so surprised?

**Scene #5 The Pig Farmer**

1. Why does the pig farmer refer to Dr. Farmer as a “boy”?

2. What do you think both sets of children are learning from observing this conflict?

3. Discuss how poor Whites still had privileges over wealthier, professional Blacks.

4. How do you think Dr. Farmer feels when he is degraded in front of his family?

5. Why do you think Dr. Farmer angrily snaps at his son after he returns to the car?

**Scene #6 Debate Training**

Tolson: Who’s the judge?
Debaters: The judge is God.
Tolson: Why is he God?
Debaters: Because he decides who wins and looses not my opponent.
Tolson: Who’s your opponent?
Debaters: He doesn’t exist.
Tolson: Why doesn’t he exist?
Debaters: Because he is just a mere dissenting voice to the truth I speak.

1. Why do you think Tolson has the students recite this?

2. Why does Tolson feel it is important to tell Henry Lowe about Willie Lynch?

3. Discuss Lynch’s method of “keeping the body and taking the mind”.

4. Why does Tolson believe that Henry Lowe has “lost his righteous mind”?

5. How do you think Tolson and the other professors at Wiley helped the students to “take their righteous minds back”?

**Scene #7 Tolson, The Labor Organizer**

1. What was Tolson doing with the farmers?

2. What fears did the farmers have?
Scene #8 James Farmer, Jr. Defies His Parents

1. Why is James Jr. unable to tell his parents where he was?

2. Discuss the reason that Farmer Sr. slaps his son after he brings up the incident when his father apologized to the pig farmer.

3. Discuss the conversation between the sheriff and peasant farmers. Why doesn’t the sheriff want the farmers to unite?

Scene #9 The First Debate

1. Discuss the Great Depression and the argument that “unemployment relief should be ended when the depression ends”.

2. What does Lowe mean when he says “they would allow the unemployed to die so the economy could live”?

3. After listening to the arguments posed by debaters, discuss the relevance of those arguments in today’s environment.

Scene #10 The Winning Streak

1. Discuss various debates such as:
   a. “Big fish eats the little fish and the color does not matter.”
   b. Should the federal government intervene in lynchings?

2. Discuss how the debaters look at the struggling sharecroppers as they drive to debates.

3. Why you think the Black farmer was beaten by the sheriff?

Scene #11 The Dinner Table

1. Why does Tolson correct Farmer, Sr. when he uses the term “Anglo Saxons” as opposed to “White”?

2. Why did the debaters have to debate at an off campus site?

3. Why were Tolson’s politics threatening to the debater who quit the team?
Scene #12 Debating Oklahoma State University

1. How do you think Samantha Booke felt as a Black female on the debate team?

2. Discuss the various arguments on the question of whether “Negroes should be admitted into State Universities”.

3. Discuss segregated education and the notion of “Separate and unequal”. Does this phenomenon still exist in our schools today?

4. “The time for justice, the time for freedom, the time for equality is always right now.” What does this mean? Is this statement still relevant today as we think about issues of inequality?

Scene #13 Melvin Tolson and James Farmer Sr.

1. When Samantha says “I didn’t need a gun, I didn’t need a knife” what is she speaking about?

2. Why does Dr. Farmer say he could find Tolson hanging from a tree?

3. “A hungry negro steals a chicken and goes to jail, a rich business man steals bonds and goes to congress.” What point is Tolson trying to make?

4. Why does Tolson say that Jesus was a radical?

Scene #14 Henry Lowe and Samantha Booke

1. What do we learn about Henry Lowe’s father?

2. Why do you think that reading makes Henry Lowe want to travel and see the world?

Scene #15 Tolson Gets Arrested

1. How does Dr. Farmer redeem himself in the eyes of his son?

2. Discuss the quote “an unjust law is no law at all”.

3. Why is the sheriff forced to let Tolson go?
Scene #16 Tolson’s Message

1. Why did many of the schools cancel debates with Wiley College?
2. What does Tolson mean by “blacklisted”?

Scene #17 Lynching

1. Discuss what a lynch mob is and how it operates.
2. Why does Henry Lowe pull out his knife?
3. What would have happened had the mob caught Tolson and the debators?
4. How does Henry Lowe cope with his pain and anger after witnessing the lynching?
5. Why is Lowe so hurt when Farmer says “this is all useless”?

Scene #18 Howard Debate

1. Discuss the Howard debater’s argument that “Prison is a dark gift”.

Scene #19 An Invitation to Debate Harvard

1. Why do you think debating Harvard is so important to Tolson?

Scene #20 Traveling To Boston

1. Why is Tolson unable to go to Harvard with the debaters?

Scene #21 Change of Debate Topic

1. Why was the debate topic changed?
2. Discuss Civil Disobedience as a moral weapon to fight for justice.
3. Why did the debaters disagree on using Gandhi?
Scene #22 Harvard Debate

1. How does James Farmer Jr.’s argument surrounding the lynching of negro’s in Texas leave very little room for debate?