

LESSON

The Emmett Till Generation

Overview

About This Lesson

In this lesson, students analyze how the murder of Emmett Till galvanized a generation of young activists in the struggle for civil rights. They will read sources written by leaders of the civil rights movement who reflect on the impact that Till's murder had on them during their adolescence. Students will build on what they learned about Mamie Till-Mobley's choice to hold an open-casket funeral and allow the publication of her son's photo in *Jet* magazine, and deepen their discussion about what made the murder of Emmett Till resonate so powerfully, by reading firsthand accounts by those who experienced this moment in history. In the next and final lessons, students will draw connections between the galvanizing effects of Till's murder and the murder of George Floyd.

Essential Question

- As we pursue racial justice today, what can be learned from the choices people have made in response to racial violence in the past?

Guiding Question

- Why did the murder of Emmett Till galvanize a generation of activists to pursue racial justice?

Facing History Learning Outcome

- Students will analyze how Emmett Till's murder inspired a generation of young African Americans to pursue racial justice.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials. Access materials in this [Google Folder](#).

- **Handout:** Making Connections with Till-Mobley
- **Reading:** Joyce Ladner and Cleveland Sellers on Emmett Till
- **Reading:** John Lewis, "I Couldn't Accept the Way Things Were"
- **Reading:** Anne Moody, "Coming of Age in Mississippi"
- **Reading:** Instructions for Save the Last Word for Me

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Preparing to Lead a Save the Last Word for Me and Jigsaw Activity

Before teaching this lesson, we recommend that you spend time familiarizing yourself with the teaching strategy procedures for two of its activities: [Save the Last Word for Me](#) and [Jigsaw](#). Doing so will ensure that the lesson runs smoothly with quick transitions. These strategies require students to work in groups, so we also recommend that you spend time planning for group work before teaching the lesson. Consider which students will be grouped together, where groups will work, and how you plan to communicate your expectations for group work. Teachers have also found [Assigning Roles for Group Work](#) to be an effective strategy. You know your students best. Therefore, make the preparations and adjustments you think will best facilitate a productive learning environment.

2. Preparing to Answer Questions about the Till Murder Trial

The preface of the reading **John Lewis, “I Couldn’t Accept the Way Things Were”** mentions the acquittal of Till’s murderers. Because the murder trial has not yet been addressed in the curriculum, the reading may prompt students to ask clarifying questions. Below is a brief description of the trial and its outcome.

In September of 1955, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam were indicted for the murder of Emmett Till. The trial was held in Sumner, Mississippi, in a segregated courtroom and lasted five days. Mose Wright, Emmett’s granduncle, and two Black sharecroppers testified against Bryant and Milam. Wright’s testimony was the first time a Black man testified to the guilt of a white man in the state of Mississippi. An all-white male jury found Bryant and Milam not guilty. Months later, Bryant and Milam sold their story to Look magazine, where they admitted to killing Till. As a result of the “double jeopardy” rule, Bryant and Milam would never be convicted of their crimes.

If you’d like to learn more, consider watching this segment of [Prime with Charles Blow](#) for a concise overview.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Reflect on Mamie Till-Mobley's Quote

Begin the lesson by sharing with students the following quote from Mamie Till-Mobley:

Two months ago I had a nice apartment in Chicago. I had a good job. I had a son. When something happened to the Negroes in the South I said, 'That's their business, not mine.' Now I know how wrong I was. The murder of my son has shown me that what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of all of us.¹

Ask students to reflect on the quote in their journals by answering the following questions:

- What do you think Mamie Till-Mobley meant when she said that “what happens to any of us . . . had better be the business of all of us?”
- Have you witnessed or experienced this idea in your own life? If yes, when or where?

After students have written their reflections, ask them to share their responses with a partner. When the class is ready, elicit responses from volunteers. If you'd like students to make deeper connections between the quote and their own lives (and your schedule gives you additional flexibility), consider assigning the handout

Making Connections with Till-Mobley.

2. Exploring the Emergence of the “Till Generation”

In the next activity, students will explore sources highlighting the impact of Emmett Till's murder on youth activism during the 1950s and 1960s. Using the [Save the Last Word for Me](#) strategy, students will work in small groups of three to read and analyze **one** of the three readings:

- **Reading 1:** Joyce Ladner and Cleveland Sellers on Emmett Till
- **Reading 2:** John Lewis, “I Couldn't Accept the Way Things Were”
- **Reading 3:** Anne Moody, “Coming of Age in Mississippi”

¹ Anderson, *Emmett Till*, 84.

Pass out one reading to each group and also the handout **Instructions for Save the Last Word for Me**. Read the instructions as a class. Students will begin by reading their assigned reading silently to themselves and then recording one sentence that stands out to them from the reading, along with an explanation of why they chose it. Then students will break into their small groups and each take a turn reading the sentence they chose. First, the other two members of the group have the opportunity to discuss the meaning and significance of the sentence while the student who provided it listens. Then the student who read the sentence gets the opportunity to weigh in on the discussion and explain why they chose the sentence. The group then repeats the process until each member has had the opportunity to contribute a sentence for discussion.

Finally, students will respond to the following prompt in their journals or on a separate sheet of paper: *Why did the murder of Emmett Till galvanize a generation of activists to pursue racial justice?* After they've written, each student will share their response with their group members. In the next activity, students will be responsible for summarizing their assigned text to another group of students who have not read the text.

3. Share Findings in New Groups

In this [jigsaw](#) activity, students will summarize their assigned text to another group of students who have not read it. Rearrange students into new groups of three so that each new group includes students who have all read a different text. For example, each group will include one student who read Reading 1, another student who read Reading 2, and a third student who read Reading 3.

Instruct each student to summarize his or her source for the new “teaching” group and to share their written reflection. Ask students to extend their own written reflection after their peer shares their summary and reflection.

4. Discuss Takeaways from Today’s Lesson

Reconvene the class and ask students to spend five minutes discussing the following questions in their small groups:

- How did young people (Ladner, Sellers, Lewis, and Moody) react to the murder of Emmett Till? How were their reactions similar? How were they different?

- How do you think young people found the courage to join the civil rights protests and challenge racism?
- What lessons might we draw from their example as we consider how to respond to racial injustices today?

Bring the class back together and begin eliciting responses from volunteers to the questions above.