

LESSON

Contextualizing Emmett Till's Murder

Overview

About This Lesson

In the previous lesson, students analyzed “the talk” that Mamie Till-Mobley had with her son Emmett about navigating the racial norms in Mississippi. In this lesson, students will deepen their understanding of the historical context that precipitated Emmett Till’s murder by learning about the ways that white supremacy was enforced in Jim Crow-era Mississippi. By exploring this historical context, students will understand that the murder wasn’t an isolated act; it was part of a long history of racial oppression and violence enacted by white Southerners to enforce the color line in order to maintain political and economic power.

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

- How does learning about the historical context of Jim Crow-era Mississippi change or deepen our understanding of Emmett Till's murder and its significance?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Students will identify the different methods used to enforce white supremacy in the South during the era of Jim Crow.
- Students will interpret the murder of Emmett Till with a historical lens by analyzing white supremacy in the decades prior to 1955.

What's Included

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

- **Image:** Image of a Hippo
- **Handout:** Iceberg Diagram
- **Video:** [60 Minutes: Emmett Till](#)
- **Reading:** Segregation and Precipitating Events
- **Map:** Racial Lynchings in the United States

- **Handout:** Mississippi Miscegenation Laws
- **Reading:** The Brown Decision
- **Reading:** Quotes from the Mississippi Constitutional Convention, 1890
- **Handout:** African American and White Voter Registration in Louisiana (1878–2010)

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Teaching Students about White Supremacy

In this lesson, students will read a range of sources that exemplify the efforts to enforce white supremacy during the Jim Crow era in the South. For this reason, it is crucial that students have the opportunity to process individually and together the emotions and questions this history evokes. It is especially important for you to look at students' work and their participation in class discussions for evidence of how they are processing what they have encountered in this lesson. If necessary, follow up with individual students to offer support, or set aside additional class time for students to talk through and articulate their thoughts and feelings about this challenging history. We also recommend that you do the following:

- Preview each resource in this lesson before you share it with your students. Let students know in advance when they are about to encounter material that some may find upsetting. If necessary, omit resources that you believe will be too disturbing for your students.
- Briefly review the class contract with students before beginning the lesson. This will help to reinforce the norms you have established and the idea of the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise.
- See the Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content section for more information.

2. Keeping Students' Iceberg Diagrams

In this lesson, students will complete an "iceberg diagram" that helps them understand the historical context of Emmett Till's murder. They will revisit this assignment in Lesson 6, so either collect students' diagrams or remind them to keep these in a safe place.

3. Using an Interactive Map on Racial Lynchings

One of the documents in Document Set A, **Racial Lynchings in the United States (1884–1954)**, includes a map of racial lynchings. An interactive version of the map can be

accessed using [this link](#). Students working with Document Set A might work best in a computer lab or with appropriate technology.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Understand the Significance of Context

To help students think about the ways that context can change our understanding of events, it can be helpful to start with something unrelated to the topic of this unit. As a warm-up activity, use a teaching strategy called [“What’s Going On in This Picture?”](#) from the *New York Times* Learning Network. Project the **Image of a Hippo**. Ask students to think about what they see and what they notice in the photograph. Give students a moment to make silent observations. Then ask them to answer the following questions in their journals:

- What’s happening in the photo? What makes you say this?

Next, provide some additional context for the photo. Explain that on the day this photo was taken, there was a flood in Tbilisi, Georgia (in Eastern Europe). A local zoo was affected by the flood, and dozens of animals escaped. Ask volunteers to share how the additional context changes their understanding of the photo.

Transition into a discussion of the lesson objective by explaining to students that historical context helps us better understand events in history. Without context, we don’t get the complete picture. In today’s lesson, they will think about Emmett Till’s murder like “historians” by situating the crime within the historical context of Jim Crow-era Mississippi.

2. Introduce the Iceberg Diagram

Explain to students that although Emmett Till was murdered by racist and hateful individuals, the goal in this lesson is for them to be aware of the underlying context for Till’s murder and to see that the crime was not an isolated act but part of a long history of racial oppression and violence enacted by white Southerners to enforce the color line in order to maintain power.

Apply the [Iceberg Diagrams](#) teaching strategy for the next activity. Begin by asking students to list what they know about icebergs, or you can show them a picture of an iceberg. The main idea you want to establish is that what one sees above the water is only the tip of the iceberg; the larger foundation rests below the surface. Then ask students to draw an iceberg on a piece of paper or in their journals, making sure that there is a tip, a water line, and a larger area below the surface. Their drawings should be large enough so that students can take notes within the iceberg. Alternatively, you can distribute the **Iceberg Diagram handout**.

3. Watch a 60 Minutes Video Clip

Explain to students that they will be watching a video clip from the television series *60 Minutes* that tells the story of Emmett Till's murder and includes interviews with several of Emmett's family members, friends, and other witnesses to what happened in 1955. Then play 0:00–7:49 of the video [60 Minutes: The Murder of Emmett Till](#). As students watch, ask them to list the facts of Emmett Till's murder in the "tip" area of the iceberg on their iceberg diagrams. Once the clip has finished, ask students to share what they included in the "tip of the iceberg."

4. Analyze the Historical Context of Till's Murder

Explain to students that in the next activity, they will work in small groups of three to five students to read primary and secondary sources that will help them complete the "beneath the surface" section of the iceberg diagram and better understand the context behind Till's murder.

Explain that each group will read different documents and become "experts" so they can share their findings with the class. Have each group choose a spokesperson who will be prepared to share their group's findings.

Assign a document set (A, B, C) to each group:

Document Set A

- **Segregation and Precipitating Events**

This excerpt from an FBI investigation of the Till murder describes some of the Southern norms that were created to enforce white supremacy.

- **Racial Lynchings in the United States (Map)**

This map uses research from African American sociologist Monroe Nathan Work to pinpoint the location of the 4,000+ racial lynchings that occurred in the United States since 1848.

Document Set B

- **Mississippi Miscegenation Laws**

This document lists, in chronological order, the evolution of Mississippi miscegenation laws between 1865 and 1942.

- **The *Brown* Decision**

*This document gives students the immediate historical context of the Till murder by summarizing the segregationist reaction to the *Brown* decision and the emergence of White Citizens' Councils in Mississippi.*

Document Set C

- **Quotes from the Mississippi Constitutional Convention, 1890**

This source includes quotes from delegates at the 1890 Mississippi Constitutional Convention asserting the desire to create a government to uphold white supremacy.

- **African American and White Voter Registration in Louisiana (1878–2010)**

This graph shows the strategies that white Southern legislators used to disenfranchise African Americans during the Jim Crow era.

Instruct groups to read each source together and reflect on how the source helps them respond to the prompt: *How was white supremacy enforced in the Jim Crow-era South?* (Write the prompt on the whiteboard for students to reference.) They should write their responses in the “beneath the surface” section of the iceberg diagram.

5. Debrief the Iceberg Activity

Once students have had enough time to examine their sources and complete the iceberg diagram, ask each group to share their findings with the class. As each group presents, ask students to take notes on what they learn and add it to the “beneath the surface” section of their iceberg diagram in response to the question, “How was white supremacy enforced in the Jim Crow-era South?” Students’ contributions may include:

- Racial violence and lynchings
- Miscegenation laws, which outlawed interracial relationships
- Citizens' Councils, which were formed to enforce segregation after the *Brown* decision that declared segregated schools illegal
- Laws, such as the grandfather clause, that prevented Black people from voting
- Norms of racial etiquette, such as the requirement that Black people address white people as "Sir" or "Ma'am"

Then post each group's iceberg diagram in the room and give students five minutes to view the diagrams in a [gallery walk](#) to reinforce what they heard or fill in the blanks of what they may have missed orally.

Be sure to tell students to keep their iceberg diagrams in a safe place, as they will use them again in Lesson 6.

6. Complete "Today I Learned" Exit Card

Close by giving students time to process what they've learned individually in a written reflection. This activity offers a safe exit from the emotionally challenging material in this lesson and also helps you gauge student understanding and address learning gaps in subsequent lessons.

On a separate piece of paper, instruct students to respond to the following prompts on an [exit card](#):

- Today I learned that . . .
- This is important to my life because . . .
- Tomorrow I hope we review _____ from today's lesson because . . .

Ask students to turn in their exit cards.