

LESSON

The Antilynching Activism of Ida B. Wells

Overview

About This Lesson

This lesson takes students back in time to the turn of the twentieth century to underscore the way Mamie Till-Mobley's choices built on a long tradition of Black resistance to racial terror and violence. In particular, students will explore the life and choices of anti-lynching journalist Ida B. Wells. They will connect Wells's activism to the choices of Till-Mobley, who exposed the brutality of racial violence and white supremacy following her son's murder.

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 the history of Ida B. Wells's truth-telling in the face of racial violence help us understand the power of the choices Mamie Till-Mobley made after her son was murdered?

Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Students will examine how Ida B. Wells used the Black press to expose the truth about lynchings and advocate for racial justice.
- Students will analyze the factors that motivated Wells to speak out against racial injustice in spite of the dangers she faced.
- Students will connect Wells's choices to the choices made by Mamie Till-Mobley in the aftermath of her son's murder.

What's Included

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

- **Video:** TEDEd video on Ida B. Wells
- **Reading:** Excerpt from *Crusade for Justice*
- **Handout:** Say, Mean, Matter: Excerpt from *Crusade for Justice*
- **Reading:** Excerpt from "Lynching and the Excuse for It"

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Homework: Formative Activity 3: Learning from Ida B. Wells

Following this lesson, students will complete the third of four formative activities interspersed throughout the unit that are designed to help them develop their thoughts, gather evidence, and continually reflect back on the essential question in preparation for the summative assignment. You should assign the activity as homework. See **Formative Activity 3: Learning from Ida B. Wells** in the “Homework” section of this lesson plan for directions for this activity.

Lesson Plan

Activities

1. Discuss a Quote from Ida B. Wells

Begin the lesson by sharing the following quote from journalist and activist Ida B. Wells:

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”
—Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*

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

- What does this quote mean to you?
- What connections (for example, in your life or current events) do you make to this quote?

Ask volunteers to share their responses with the class.

2. Introduce the Life and Story of Ida B. Wells

Explain to students that Emmett Till’s murder was part of a long history of violence used to enforce white supremacy, but the response to his murder, especially the activism it inspired from the Black community, also built on a long tradition of African American resistance to racial terror and violence. Tell students that in class

today, they will go back in time to the late nineteenth century to examine the life and choices of an influential anti-lynching activist, Ida B. Wells. This will help them contextualize the choices of Mamie Till-Mobley in the aftermath of her son’s murder, which students explored in the previous lesson.

Explain to students that they will watch a **TEDEd video on Ida B. Wells** (0:00–4:34), narrated by Christina Greer, associate professor of political science at Fordham University. As they watch, ask students to answer the following comprehension questions in their journals. (Timestamps are included in case you’d like to pause the video to give students time to write.)

- After the Civil War, how did Southern whites attempt to reassert their power? (1:28)
- According to Wells’s research, why were African Americans lynched in the years after the Civil War? (2:17)
- How did Wells challenge racial violence? (3:06)
- Wells did not compromise her vision for justice. Provide an example from the video that reflects her commitment to that vision. (4:34)

Close the activity by posing the following question to the class: *Why do you think Wells chose to speak out against lynching, despite the risk?* Instruct students to discuss the question in pairs, and then encourage volunteers to share with the whole class.

3. Read an Excerpt from Ida B. Wells’s Autobiography

Explain to students that in the next part of the lesson, they will read an excerpt from Ida B. Wells’s autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, to try to understand the factors that motivated Wells to speak out against racial injustice, especially at a time when it would have been safer for her to give up her writing and advocacy. As a class or in small groups of two or three, have students read the **Excerpt from *Crusade for Justice***.

Distribute the handout **Say, Mean, Matter: Excerpt from *Crusade for Justice***. Explain to students that they will focus their attention on two specific passages from the Wells excerpt. They will conduct a “Say, Mean, Matter” analysis—read the passage, rewrite it in their own words, and analyze its significance. After analyzing the two passages, students are asked to select two additional quotes.

Here are possible interpretations of two passages:

- “I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or a rat in a trap.” (Students may conclude that it took courage, determination, or passion for justice.)
- “My friends declared that the trains and my home were being watched by white men who promised to kill me on sight. They also told me that colored men were organized to protect me if I should return.” (Students might conclude that Wells relied on a network of allies to share important information and that this network was willing to protect her if she decided to return to Memphis.)

After students have had enough time to write, instruct them to share their responses in pairs or small groups. Bring the whole class together and invite volunteers to share their interpretation of each quote.

4. Connect Ida B. Wells’s Truth-Telling to Mamie Till-Mobley’s

In the final activity of this lesson, students will discuss the connections between Ida B. Wells’s truth-telling and Mamie Till-Mobley’s decision to hold an open-casket funeral and have photos of her son’s remains published in *Jet* magazine. Have students take out the source they examined in the previous lesson, **Mamie Till-Mobley Chooses to Hold an Open-Casket Funeral**. Have students refer to this source during the class discussion.

Then display the following quote from the Ida B. Wells excerpt that students examined in the previous activity:

“Having lost my paper, had a price put on my life, and been made an exile from home for hinting at the truth, I felt that I owed it to myself and to my race to tell the whole truth.”

Lead a class discussion guided by the following questions:

- Why do you think the threat of violence moved Wells from “hinting” at the truth to telling “the whole truth”?

- What connections can you make between Ida B. Wells's dedication to truth-telling and the choices Mamie Till-Mobley made after her son's murder (Lesson 3)?
- Why was Wells so committed to telling the truth that she risked everything to continue telling it? What was at stake for her? What was at stake for Mamie Till-Mobley?
- How did both Wells and Till-Mobley use the media to pursue justice?
- What are some examples of truth-tellers in the media today? How does their work sustain democracy?

Extension Activity

Read an Excerpt from Ida B. Wells on Lynching

This lesson focuses on the bravery of Ida B. Wells's choice to confront racial violence, but you may want to extend students' understanding of Wells's work by having them read more of her writing.

As an extension for this lesson, consider assigning an **excerpt from "Lynching and the Excuse for It,"** an editorial Wells published in the *New York Independent* in 1901. Wells wrote it in response to an article by Jane Addams, a progressive who was known for her work serving immigrant communities in Chicago. In her article, Addams rationalized the violence of white lynch mobs as a natural reaction to alleged crimes committed by African Americans, effectively transferring culpability from the lynch mob to the victim. Wells wrote this editorial to correct Addams's claims using lynching data from the 728 lynchings she documented from 1882 to 1891. Students can respond to the reading using the [Take Note](#) strategy or another teaching strategy of your choosing.

Homework

Formative Activity 3: Learning from Ida B. Wells

Share the following directions with students and have them complete the activity for homework:

In Lesson 4, you examined the choices made by Ida B. Wells to speak out against racial lynchings. Review the primary source documents from this lesson.

Next, highlight words, phrases, or quotations from the documents that illustrate what it took for Wells to take a stand against racial terror. In your journal, write down some initial thoughts reflecting on how this evidence could help you answer the 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?”