

Reviewing the Case: Deliberating on the Emmett Till Case

By Erin Bronstein

Grade: 10/11

Time: at least one period (45-50 minutes), depending on extension activities

Introduction and Background:

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old African-American boy from Chicago who was visiting relatives in the Mississippi Delta in the summer of 1955. After reportedly whistling at a white woman, Till was murdered. Two white men, Roy Bryant and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, were charged with the murder, but were acquitted by an all-white jury. Till's murder and the subsequent trial are considered triggers for the Civil Rights Movement.

This lesson asks students to consider evidence in the Emmett Till Case and evaluate the information. After students have come to their own conclusions about the evidence and discussed it, they will be asked to read the later-printed confession of the defendants. Students will then write a letter to the editor of *Look Magazine* as though they were living at the time.

Standards:

(NCSS standards)

VI. Power, Authority, & Governance

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance*, so that the learner can:

- give examples of how government does or does not provide for the needs and wants of people, establish order and security, and manage conflict;
- recognize how groups and organizations encourage unity and deal with diversity to maintain order and security

X. Civic Ideals & Practices

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic*, so that the learner can:

- identify key ideals of the United States' democratic republican form of government, such as individual human dignity, liberty justice, equality, and the rule of law, and discuss their application in specific situations;
- locate, access, organize, and apply information about an issue of public concern from multiple points of view;

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- explain the evidence and outcome of the Emmett Till Case
- evaluate the impact of the Emmett Till Case

Materials:

Copies of the attached handout
Computers with internet access

Procedure:

1. Have students answer the following question: How much evidence do you think is necessary to convict someone for a murder? After students have independently answered the question, have students share answers and discuss what is expected in a criminal case (i.e. beyond a reasonable doubt)
2. Ask students how Jim Crow Laws made rules different for blacks and whites. Hopefully, students will say different water fountains, separate public bathrooms, separate areas of movie theatres and busses. Explain to students that interactions between blacks and whites were also not the same everywhere.
3. Have students review the section on the Emmett Till case or read an excerpt from a source such as Chris Crowe's *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case*. Refrain from telling students the outcome of the trial as of yet.
4. Pass out copies of the handout below. Warn students that the material is somewhat gruesome, particularly the picture of Till's body, but that it appeared nationwide in newspapers at the time. ** You can get the report off the FBI site ([Emmett Till Case](#) on FBI site)
5. After students have reviewed the handout, ask students to suggest what the jury should have said in the case....were these two men guilty of Till's murder? Ask them to use the evidence to support their opinion.
6. Explain the verdict: The men were acquitted of the crime.
7. Pass out either copies of the Look magazine article or have students use the link to read the article.
(http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_look_confession.html)
8. Ask students what they feel the impact of this would be? Ask students to consider what they know of the Civil Rights movement and how this case would bring about change? More information on impact is available on the site above. You can have students read the following article *In Pursuit of Justice*.<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/040524/24emmett.htm>

Assessment:

Assign students to write a letter to the editor of *Look Magazine* after the publishing of the above article in 1956. They should reflect on the evidence in the case as well as the article in *Look magazine*. Possible rubric is attached below.

Extension Options:

1. There are several articles and ways to extend the discussion of the impact of the case on the nation. One such example is *County Apologizes To Till Family* (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=14904083>). Ask

- students, “Does this resolve the case? Why or why not? Who all might need resolution?”
2. Have students read other comments, such as those by Rosa Parks about Emmett Till or Bob Dylan’s song lyrics about Emmett Till (link below).
 3. Show students the movie *The Murder of Emmett Till*. For additional information, please see the [PBS movie site](#).
 4. Have students read letters to the editor regarding the *Look* magazine article. [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf look letters.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_look_letters.html)

Additional Resources:

Segment on Emmett Till from *Eyes on the Prize*

Lyrics and music from the Bob Dylan song, *The Death of Emmett Till* (available at http://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/bob_dylan/the_death_of_emmett_till-lyrics-67218.html)

Emmett Till Case Evidence links

Please work your way through the following explanations and links:

1. The following is a picture of the Bryant store, the place where Emmett Till interacted with Mrs. Bryant. (<http://www.emmettillmurder.com/>) (Click on Pictures from 1955 and click on Bryant Store)
2. The following is a picture of the Moses Wright, who bravely testified that the two men on trial were the two who took Till. Click on the link and then go to Pictures from 1955 and click on Moses Wright holding Emmett Till's pants. (<http://www.emmettillmurder.com/>)
3. The following is a picture of Emmett Till's body which his mother insisted be shown in an open-casket funeral. Click on the link and then click on picture of Emmett Till. This picture is gruesome. . (<http://www.emmettillmurder.com/>)
4. Go to the following link and click on FBI transcript. (You will need to download the document) Though difficult to read skim pp. 38-60. Write down what evidence links the two men to the crime. (<http://www.emmettillmurder.com/>)
5. Basic Timeline of the Case:

August 21st, 1955 Emmett Till and friend arrive in Mississippi—
boarded in Chicago and went to Greenwood, MS. Were taken

August 24th—Emmett Till whistles at Carolyn Bryan

August 28th -kidnapped

August 29th—Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam arrested for killing of ET

August 31st—body taken out of river

September 6th—Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam indicted; funeral held on

September 15th—Jet Magazine publishes pictures of Emmett Till's
body

September 19th —trial begins in Sumner

September 21st—Mose Wright testifies and identifies Bryant and
Milam

September 23rd—trial pronouncement made

December 1st—Rosa Parks refuses to give up seat, cites Emmett Till in
her explanation

January 1956—Look Magazine comes out with confession

December 1980 Milam dies

December 1990 Bryant Tills

2003—FBI delivers case to Greenville MS

2007—Case is closed

Would you consider these two men guilty? Why did you make this choice?

Name _____

Letter to the Editor Rubric

CATEGORY	4	3	2	1
Content Accuracy	The letter contains at least 5 accurate facts about the topic.	The letter contains 3-4 accurate facts about the topic.	The letter contains 1-2 accurate facts about the topic.	The letter contains no accurate facts about the topic.
Grammar & spelling (conventions)	Writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling.	Writer makes 1-2 errors in grammar and/or spelling.	Writer makes 3-4 errors in grammar and/or spelling.	Writer makes more than 4 errors in grammar and/or spelling.
Ideas	Ideas were expressed in a clear and organized fashion. It was easy to figure out what the letter was about, and what side it took.	Ideas were expressed in a pretty clear manner, but the organization could have been better.	Ideas were somewhat organized, but were not very clear. It took more than one reading to figure out what the letter was about.	The letter seemed to be a collection of unrelated sentences. It was very difficult to figure out what the letter was about.
historical period	This letter reflects the correct historical period completely.	This letter reflects the correct historical period mostly.	This letter has an undefined historical period.	This letter reflects an inaccurate historical period.

Total:

Additional Comments: