

EXTRALEGAL (IN)JUSTICE: LYNCHING IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH

Author: Joann Ross

Louisiana School for Math, Science & the Arts

Grade(s) Level

11-12 grades

Classroom Time

2 - 50 minute classes

Reading (Excerpts from. . .)

1. James H. Madison, *A Lynching in the Heartland: Race and Memory in America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). (Chapters 1, 7 & 8 are representative.)
2. Chris Crowe, *Getting Away With Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (New York: Phyllis Fogelman Books, 2003).

Handouts

1. Lyrics to *Strange Fruit*, Written by Abel Meeropol and Performed by Billie Holiday
2. Lyrics to *The Death of Emmett Till*, Performed by Bob Dylan
3. Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882-1968 (Statistics provided by the Archives at the Tuskegee Institute)

Music

1. *Strange Fruit* (available on YouTube)
2. *The Death of Emmett Till* (available on YouTube)

About this Lesson

This lesson has been designed for a class on Social and Urban history, which is taught around themes of disaster – both natural and man made. It can easily be adapted for an American history survey, lessons on the civil rights movement, or a class national problems. Looking at two instances of lynching, students will consider the legal and social conditions that led to violent, extralegal reaction to community “problems.” They will also learn that lynching, so often considered a southern phenomenon, was evident in northern and western areas as well.

In this lesson, students will read and analyze material on two separate instances of lynching: the 1930 mob action in Marion, Indiana, that left two men dead and another in fear for his life, and the 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi. These case studies were selected to illustrate that extralegal actions revolving around racial issues occurred in both the North and the South, and that subsequent legal action did not necessarily bring about satisfactory resolution. In doing so, they will consider similarities in the cases that took place hundreds of miles and two decades apart. They will evaluate (1) the social attitudes prevalent in the communities where these events occurred; (2) the victims and the defendants; (3) the local and national reaction to the murders and trials; and, (4) conclusions that can be reached from studying these cases.

Background

In August 1930, three young black men in Marion, Indiana were arrested for the murder of Claude Deeter and the rape of Mary Ball, both of whom were white. The men, Tom Shipp, aged 19, Abe Smith, 18, and James Cameron, 16, had

confessed to the crime after an evening of intense interrogation. The next day, a crowd gathered outside the Grant County Jail, claiming that there was too much lawlessness in Grant County. Unwilling to wait for a trial and conviction for the accused, that evening, a mob broke into the

jail to “get justice” for the victims. Shipp was the first reached; he was beaten, stabbed, and hung from the jail window bars. The mob then made its way to the cell of Smith. Smith was clubbed and beaten with a crowbar before being dragged to the Courthouse Square, where he was stripped before hanged from a maple tree. Shipp’s body was then cut from the jailhouse window and carried to the center of town, where it was hanged beside Smith’s. Members of the crowd attempted to build a fire under the bodies, but it failed to burn them. The mob then returned to the jail to collect Cameron; he too was to be stung up in the tree. As the rope fell over Cameron’s head, however, someone in the crowd shouted that he was innocent. It was the words of this man that saved Cameron’s life. Souvenir collectors cut pieces of clothing from the two bodies and bark from the tree. The most prized souvenir was the rope, which was cut into small segments. Photographers came to document the event. Most notable was local photographer Lawrence Beitler, whose photograph would become one of the most famous lynching photos in all of American history.

In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy, was visiting relatives in a small Mississippi Delta town. Likely showing off for friend, Till allegedly whistled at a young white woman, Carolyn Bryant. Three days later his brutally beaten body was discovered floating in the Tallahatchie River. Details of the crime quickly came to light. As details of his abduction, beating, and murder became known, the extreme violence of the crime focused a national spotlight on the “Jim Crow” ways of the South. Even more startling for many Americans, both black and white, was the speedy trial and acquittal of the two men thought to have committed the heinous crime, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. More inflammatory was the January 1956 *Look* magazine article which chronicled the confessions of Milam and Bryant. Till’s murder and the subsequent trial served as galvanizing moments for African American leaders and average citizens, and marks a foundational episode in the Civil Rights Movement. In 2004, the FBI reopened this cold case at the request of the District Attorney of Greenwood, Mississippi in an effort to determine the identity of any additional participants in this crime. Following the FBI’s investigation, in 2006 a grand jury ruled against issuing an indictment. At that point, the case was closed.

Objectives

1. Students will read excerpts from *Lynching in the Heartland* and *Getting Away with Murder*, familiarizing themselves with two tragic events in American history. They will also read the lyrics and listen to the songs *Strange Fruit* and *The Death of Emmett Till*.
2. Students will analyze these documents, drawing connections between the songs (primary documents), the texts (secondary sources) and the events that precipitated them.
3. Students will demonstrate their understanding of the material by participating in classroom discussions and completing a written assignment that requires analytic and rhetorical skills.

Activities

The first day will be spent discussing *Lynching in the Heartland*, considering the facts of the event and the social conditions under which the lynching occurred. After responding to the discussion questions provided, students will listen to *Strange Fruit*, following along with the lyrics. Further discussion will fill the remainder of the class. On the second day, students will discuss *Getting Away with Murder*, evaluating the evidence available at the time of the trial, the testimony of witnesses, and the outcome of the trial. Discussion questions will be provided for this day as well. Following the discussion, students will listen to *The Death of Emmett Till*, while following along with the lyrics. Further discussion will fill the remainder of class. At some point during the discussions, we will evaluate state-by-state lynching statistics. Final evaluation will be based on an out-of-class essay, in which students are asked to synthesize the material discussed on these case studies.

Assessment

Students will be assessed in two ways: in-class discussion and out-of-class writing assignment. Discussion questions will be distributed in advance of the class discussion. The writing assignment will ask students to analyze the above material and reach conclusions about the two events. Students will have one week to complete the writing assignment.

Discussion Questions for *Lynching in the Heartland*

1. In the opening pages of the book, readers find out that three young African Americans had been arrested and charged with the murder of Claude Deeter and the rape of Mary Ball. We are told that the accused all confessed to the crime. Two of the defendants are hung; the third, James Cameron, is saved when a man shouts out that he is innocent. One can't help but think that the other two boys were also innocent. Do you believe this or not? Did the boys confess to crimes they did not commit?

2. The August 1930 lynching in Marion, Indiana was the first in all of Grant County. Could this event be seen as just another lynching in American history or was it something more? What impact do you believe the lynching had, if any, on bringing an end to racism?

3. In 1993, Cameron received a pardon from the governor for his accessory to manslaughter. Why do you think this happened? What kind of affect do you think this had on people of Marion? When answering this question, you may want to consider: (1) how much time had elapsed between the alleged crime and the pardon, and (2) how recently the pardon was granted – it was, after all, only about 15 years ago.

Discussion Questions for *Getting Away With Murder*

1. Crowe argues that the murder of Emmett Till was one of the important events that led to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Chapter 1 of his book is even titled “The Boy Who Triggered the Civil Rights Movement.” The dust jacket description of the book notes: “The

extreme and shocking violence of this crime put a national spotlight on the “Jim Crow” ways of the South.” How important do you think this event was to the coming of the Civil Rights Movement? Where would you place it if comparing it to Rosa Park’s arrest or Dr. King’s “I have a dream” speech?

2. The events in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi took place shortly after the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Briefly summarize the Court’s decisions in these two cases. What concerns did some white Mississippians have about the Brown decision? What action was taken by these individuals, as well as others throughout southern states?

3. Consider the trial of Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam. Imagine that you are Mose Wright, Emmett Till’s great uncle. Given the racist tenor of Mississippi in 1955, would you have the courage to testify at the trial of the defendants? Just months after Emmett Till’s murder, *Look Magazine* published an article in which Bryant and Milam confessed to the crime. What is your response to their acquittal?

Writing Assignment:

Using specific examples from classroom discussions and the documents we have read and listened to and respond to the following prompts. Such examples provide valuable evidence to support your answers and conclusions. The complete answer should be about 3-4 pages in length, typed, double-spaced, and proofread for general grammatical errors. The writing assignment should be thought of as a single, unified essay, utilizing transitional sentences to move from one topic to the next. Remember, this is your opportunity to demonstrate your mastery of the material and its application to the broader themes presented in this class.

1. Describe the social and political climate of 1930 Grant County, Indiana and 1955 Tallahatchie, Mississippi, explaining how those conditions led to individuals taking the law into their own hands to bring “justice” to their region.
2. To what extent does regionalism influence these cases studies? Given that the events occurred 25 years apart, what conclusions can you reach about extralegal resolution to conflict regarding relations?
3. Have these issues been fully resolved? If so, how do you feel about the resolution? If you do not believe that the cases have been fully resolved, what do you believe still needs to happen?

Further Resources

- American Experience, *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1985* (section on the murder of Emmett Till).
- American Experience, *The Murder of Emmett Till* (2003 DVD) (55 minutes)
- William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look Magazine* (January 1955) (Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam confess to the crime).

Strange Fruit

Written by Abel Meeropol

Performed by Billie Holiday

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

The Death of Emmett Till

Written and Performed by Bob Dylan

'Twas down in Mississippi not so long ago,
When a young boy from Chicago walked through a
Southern door.
This boy's fateful tragedy you should all remember well,
The color of his skin was black and his name was Emmett Till.

Some men they dragged him to a barn and there they beat him up.
They said they had a reason, but I disremember what.
They tortured him and did some things too evil to
repeat.
There was screaming sounds inside the barn, there was
laughing sounds out on the street.

Then they rolled his body down a gulf amidst a blood-red rain
And they threw him in the waters wide to cease his
screaming pain.
The reason that they killed him there, and I'm sure it
was no lie,
He was a Black skin boy so he was born to die
And then to stop the United States of yelling for a trial,
Two brothers they confessed that they had killed poor
Emmett Till.
But on the jury there were men who helped the brothers
commit this awful crime,
And so this trial was a mockery, but nobody seemed to mind.

I saw the morning papers but I could not bear to see
The smiling brothers walkin' down the courthouse stairs.
For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free,
While Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea.

If you can't speak out against this kind of thing, a crime
that's so unjust,
Your eyes are filled with dead men's dirt, your mind is
filled with dust.
Your arms and legs they must be in shackles and chains, and
your blood it must refuse to flow,
For you let this human race fall down so God-awful low!

This song is just a reminder to remind your fellow man
That this kind of thing still lives today in that
ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan.
But if all us folks that thinks alike, if we gave all we
could give,
We could make this great land of ours a greater place to live.

Lynchings: By State and Race, 1882-1968 *

State	White	Black	Total
Alabama	48	299	347
Arizona	31	0	31
Arkansas	58	226	284
California	41	2	43
Colorado	65	3	68
Delaware	0	1	1
Florida	25	257	282
Georgia	39	492	531
Idaho	20	0	20
Illinois	15	19	34
Indiana	33	14	47
Iowa	17	2	19
Kansas	35	19	54
Kentucky	63	142	205
Louisiana	56	335	391
Maine	1	0	1
Maryland	2	27	29

Michigan	7	1	8
Minnesota	5	4	9
Mississippi	42	539	581
Missouri	53	69	122
Montana	82	2	84
Nebraska	52	5	57
Nevada	6	0	6
New Jersey	1	1	2
New Mexico	33	3	36
New York	1	1	2
North Carolina	15	86	101
North Dakota	13	3	16
Ohio	10	16	26
Oklahoma	82	40	122
Oregon	20	1	21
Pennsylvania	2	6	8
South Carolina	4	156	160
South Dakota	27	0	27
Tennessee	47	204	251
Texas	141	352	493
Utah	6	2	8
Vermont	1	0	1

Virginia	17	83	100
Washington	25	1	26
West Virginia	20	28	48
Wisconsin	6	0	6
Wyoming	30	5	35
Total	1,297	3,446	4,743

*Statistics provided by the Archives at Tuskegee Institute.

Causes Of Lynchings, 1882-1968

	Number	Percent
Homicides	1,937	40.84
Felonious Assault	205	4.32
Rape	912	19.22
Attempted Rape	288	6.07
Robbery and Theft	232	4.89
Insult to White Person	85	1.79
All Other Causes	1,084	22.85
Total	4,743	100.00