

**LESSON**

# Preparing to Journey to the Mississippi Delta

## Overview

### About This Lesson

In the first lesson of this unit, students are introduced to the history of the murder of Emmett Till by reading Mamie Till-Mobley's account of "the talk" she had with her 14-year-old son Emmett in 1955 shortly before he journeyed from Chicago to visit family in Mississippi. Students are invited to make personal connections with this account by reflecting on talks they have had with parents or elders who gave them advice out of concern for their safety. By considering why Till-Mobley felt she needed to have this talk with Emmett, students will also learn about the historical context of Jim Crow-era Mississippi in 1955 and the dangerous environment into which Emmett would travel.

### 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 Mamie Till-Mobley need to prepare Emmett for his journey from Chicago to the Mississippi Delta?

### Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Students will consider how both Emmett and Mamie anticipated his trip to Mississippi and the experiences and historical context that shaped their expectations.
- Students will understand how racism impacted the daily lives of African Americans in the segregated South.

### What's Included

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

- **Reading:** "I Knew I Had to Give Him the Talk"

- **Handout:** Viewing Guide: The Murder of Emmett Till
- **Video:** The Murder of Emmett Till

## Preparing to Teach

### A Note to Teachers

#### 1. Teaching the History of Lynching

In this lesson, students will watch a clip from the documentary [The Murder of Emmett Till](#). The clip includes brief graphic images of lynchings that may be emotionally challenging for some viewers. **Specifically, these images begin at 5:30 and end at 5:55.** We recommend alerting students, other faculty, and counseling staff at your school before showing these images and giving students the option to avoid viewing the images if they choose. Students who do not want to watch the video may instead read the article "[Lynching in America](#)" and answer the following questions:

- Why was the South a dangerous place for African Americans?
- Before Emmett traveled to the South, his mother told him that "Mississippi is not Chicago." What do you think she meant by this? Why did she remind him of this?
- How do you think white Southerners reacted to the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*?

It is important to point out that the article includes a political cartoon found on the cover of an 1899 issue of *Puck* magazine. The cartoon includes an offensive depiction of an African American man.

#### 2. Offensive and Dehumanizing Language

The terms "Negro" and "Colored" are used in primary sources throughout the unit. While outdated and offensive today, they were used by both white and Black Americans as standard terms for African Americans during the Jim Crow era. It is important to explain to students that these are both antiquated terms that are now considered offensive.

Although the N-word does not appear in the video clip selected from *The Murder of Emmett Till*, the N-word does appear in other parts of the film, specifically at 1:23, 34:10, 37:40, 37:45, 45:33, 48:34. Therefore, be mindful of its presence if you plan on

screening footage outside of the selected video clip or if you assign the video as homework. We recommend that you contract about the word with students before they encounter it in the film, including by sharing the provision that students do not say the word aloud. See [Strategies for Addressing Racist and Dehumanizing Language in Literature](#) for more suggestions for how to address the N-word in the classroom.

### **3. Making Personal Connections**

In this lesson, students will be reading Mamie Till-Mobley’s account of “the talk” she had with her 14-year-old son Emmett. This lesson invites students to make personal connections with this account by reflecting on talks they have had with parents or elders who gave them advice out of concern for their safety. While we believe these connections are essential for deepening students’ interest and engagement with the material, we recommend that you specifically avoid asking students to consider what they would have done differently if they were in Emmett Till’s shoes. Such perspective-taking exercises can, at best, lapse into reductive and historically inaccurate discussions. At worst, they contribute to a mentality of victim blaming that absolves Till’s murderers and fails to acknowledge the full extent of racial terror and white supremacy at the root of the crime.

Some students may react to learning about the Emmett Till murder by discussing how they would have acted differently if they were in Till’s position. This is a normal reaction to the traumatic story of Till’s murder and to the sense of disempowerment felt by many students—especially students of color—who may identify with Till. While complicated emotions are likely to arise as you teach this material and should not be discouraged, we recommend that you steer the class conversation away from this topic for the reasons listed above while also taking care to support students emotionally throughout the unit. See the Teaching Note [Teaching Emotionally Challenging Content](#) for more information.

### **4. Offering a Historically Accurate Portrayal of Northern Racism**

One idea that emerges in the lesson is the belief that Chicago was more racially tolerant than Mississippi. While Chicago and other Northern cities did not legislate Jim Crow-style restrictions on the freedoms of Black citizens, racial segregation endured in the North via institutionalized racism, such as housing covenants, and was enforced with violence, evidenced by the wave of racial violence that targeted Black communities in Chicago and across the nation during the Red Summer of 1919. Consider sharing these details with students to ensure that they have a

balanced understanding of the experience of African Americans who lived in Northern cities.

### 5. **Assigning Homework: Formative Activity 1: Processing the Essential Question**

Following this lesson, students will complete the first 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 1: Processing the Essential Question** for directions for this activity.

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### 1. **Reflect on Discussions about Safety with Parents/Elders**

Begin by asking students to respond to the following prompt in their journals:

*Consider a talk your parents/elders have had with you about how you need to behave in order to keep yourself safe. What was the situation? What was their advice? How did you feel about their advice at the time? What aspects of your identity did the conversation raise?*

After students have had a few minutes to write and reflect, ask for a few volunteers to share their responses. To respect students' privacy if their reflection pertains to a personal experience, we **do not** recommend requiring them to share aloud.

#### 2. **Read Mamie Till-Mobley Excerpt**

Explain to students that today they will examine a conversation that an African American mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, had with her son Emmett before he traveled from Chicago to Mississippi in 1955. Ask students if they are familiar with the name Emmett Till. Explain that over the next six lessons, they will study how his murder would inspire a generation of young activists to pursue justice in the grassroots civil rights movement. Emphasize that this unit isn't just about a murder. It isn't about injustice. It's about how people were inspired to stand up to injustice. Learning

about how people stood up in the past will give us tools to stand up to racial injustice today.

Explain that as Emmett Till prepared to visit Mississippi in 1955, his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, thought she needed to prepare him for how he would need to behave in order to be safe there.

Distribute the reading **“I Knew I Had to Give Him the Talk”** and read Mamie Till-Mobley’s account aloud. Then give students a few moments to highlight a phrase or sentence that they think is particularly important or feels especially meaningful to them.

### 3. Process “The Talk”

After students have highlighted a phrase or sentence, instruct them to write a few sentences about why they chose it and make connections to their own knowledge and experiences. They might write about what it means to them or what it reminds them of, or they might connect it to something that has happened in their own life, in a film or book they have seen or read, or in history or current events.

Next, have students share the phrase or sentence they chose with a partner using the [Think, Pair, Share](#) strategy. Ask volunteers to share their sentences and reflection with the class.

### 4. Watch a Clip from *The Murder of Emmett Till*

Next, tell students that they will watch a video clip to learn more about Emmett Till and the historical context of Jim Crow Mississippi into which he traveled in 1955. Distribute the handout **Viewing Guide: *The Murder of Emmett Till***. Students will answer the questions on the viewing guide as they watch the video.

Show the video clip from [The Murder of Emmett Till](#) (4:00–14:48). Because the clip includes brief images of lynchings and other violence (specifically at 5:30–5:55), give students a moment after it is over to write privately in their journals about any thoughts or feelings that came up for them while they watched. **See the A Note to Teachers section (Teaching Note 1: Teaching the History of Lynching) for more details on how to best support students and for an alternate activity for students who do not want to watch the video.**

Then discuss the following questions from the viewing guide. Timestamps are included to indicate when you may want to pause the video to give students time to respond to each question.

- What was life like for African Americans living in Mississippi? (7:46)
- Mamie Till-Mobley told Emmett that “Mississippi is not Chicago.” What did she mean by this? How was Chicago different? Why did she need to explain this to him? (12:37)
- By the time Emmett traveled to Mississippi in the summer of 1955, why were race relations tense? (13:51)

By the end of the discussion, be sure that students understand the violent backlash to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as an effort to maintain the white supremacist power structure (i.e., economic and political power over Black citizens).

## 5. Complete a 3-2-1 Prompt

Finally, at the close of the lesson, ask students to return to their journals and reflect on what they’ve learned from the lesson by completing this [3-2-1](#) prompt.

In your journal or on a separate piece of paper, write down the following:

- Three ways that racism impacted the daily lives of African Americans in the South
- Two questions you have in response to this lesson
- One comment on or connection you made with “the talk” that Emmett’s mother had with him or how it resonates with you

## Extension Activity

### 1. Watch the *New York Times* Video “A Conversation with My Black Son”

You may want to extend students’ learning by exploring contemporary connections to “the talk” that Mamie Till-Mobley gave her son. The video [“A Conversation with My Black Son”](#) (5:00) is a mini-documentary in which Black parents reveal their struggles with telling their Black sons that they may be targets of racial profiling by the police.

Ask students to reflect on the video using the following prompts:

- Head: What information did you learn from this video? What connections can you make to the talk that Mamie Till-Mobley had with Emmett?
- Heart: What emotions does this video raise for you? What aspect of the video stands out to you the most, and why?
- Conscience: What questions about right or wrong, fairness or injustice, does this video raise for you?

## Homework

### Formative Activity 1: Processing the Essential Question

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

Record the essential question in your journal:

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

Then dissect the essential question by making the following notations:

- Circle words you do not know or understand.
- Star words that seem to be the central ideas of the essential question.
- Underline all of the verbs in the essential question.

In your journal or on a separate sheet of paper, record the following:

**3** questions you have about the essential question

**2** initial ideas or thoughts you have about the essential question

**1** "heart" response or emotional reaction to the essential question