

**LESSON**

# “A Rallying Cry and a Cause”

## Overview

### About This Lesson

In this lesson, students will explore the murder of Emmett Till within the context of the Mississippi backlash to *Brown v. Board of Education* and local voting rights activism. They will examine new evidence to make hypotheses about why Emmett Till’s murder resonated with the public and became a rallying cry in a way that previous murders did not. In the process, they will consider the power of photographs, the importance of activism, and the courageous choices of Mamie Till-Mobley.

### 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 Emmett Till’s murder resonate in a way that others did not?

### Facing History Learning Outcomes

- Students will examine the courageous choices of Mamie Till-Mobley in the aftermath of her son’s murder.
- Students will consider the murder of Emmett Till within the context of the Mississippi backlash to *Brown v. Board of Education* and local voting rights activism.

### What’s Included

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

- **Reading:** Mamie Till-Mobley Chooses to Hold an Open-Casket Funeral
- **Reading:** Myrlie Evers-Williams Reflects on the Impact of Emmett Till’s Murder

## Preparing to Teach

### A Note to Teachers

#### 1. Alternative Activity for Viewing Photos from Emmett Till's Open-Casket Funeral

As students have already learned in this unit, one of the important choices that Mamie Till-Mobley made after her son Emmett's murder was to have an open casket at the funeral and to allow photographs of her son to appear in *Jet* magazine. These photographs were an important factor in galvanizing the public outcry and civil rights activism that followed Emmett's murder. In this lesson, the images of Emmett's corpse briefly appear in a clip from the video "[The Lost Story of Emmett Till: The Universal Child](#)" (timestamp 16:37). 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 "[Emmett Till's Open Casket Funeral Reignited the Civil Rights Movement](#)" and complete a [Color, Symbol, Image](#) reflection in response to the article.

#### 2. Prepare for a Stations Activity

This lesson includes a stations activity with two texts that you should set up before class:

- Copy the handouts for each station and place them in numbered or labeled folders (Station 1 and Station 2). Make enough copies of each folder so that there is one available for each group member to use while they visit each station (i.e., if you have divided students into groups of four, have four copies of each folder at each station).
- Think about whether you will create random, heterogeneous, or leveled groups for the stations or have students select their own groups. Set up the classroom so there are table groups for each station.

#### 3. Assigning Homework: Formative Activity 2: Learning from Mamie Till-Mobley

Following this lesson, students will complete the second 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 2: Learning from Mamie Till-Mobley** in the "Homework" section of this lesson plan for directions for this activity.

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### 1. Reflect on Powerful Stories in the News

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

*Write about a time you learned about something in the news that shocked you, opened your eyes to an important issue, or changed the way you think about the world. What was it? Why did it have such an impact on you? What about the way it was reported in the news helped you understand it more deeply?*

After a few minutes, give several volunteers the opportunity to share their responses.

#### 2. Examine Mamie Till-Mobley's Activism

Watch the clip from the film [The Lost Story of Emmett Till](#) (13:02–18:41). The film begins with the discovery of Till's body and ends with the public reaction after viewing Till's remains. Please note that at **timestamp 16:37**, the clip includes the photo of Emmett Till's remains that was published in *Jet* magazine. **See Teaching Note 1 in the A Note to Teachers section of this lesson plan for more details on how to best support students and for an alternate activity for students who do not want to watch the video.**

Instruct students to complete a reflection based on the [Color, Symbol, Image](#) strategy in their journals by offering the following prompt:

- Think about your experience watching the video clip and the ideas and emotions it evoked for you. Choose one idea or emotion that you'd like to focus on. Then do the following:
  - Choose a color that you think best represents that idea or emotion.
  - Choose a symbol that you think best represents that idea or emotion.

#### 3. Explore the Impact of Emmett Till's Story

Explain that, in large part due to Mamie Till-Mobley's courageous choices, the murder of Emmett Till motivated a generation of leaders to pursue racial justice. They staged demonstrations, held rallies, participated in letter-writing campaigns, and fundraised for the civil rights groups like the NAACP. But what was it about Emmett Till's murder that caused millions to take a stand?

Thousands of African Americans had been victims of racial violence; however, none of those tragedies had the same effect as the murder of Emmett Till. Before moving into the next activity, in which students explore the question of why Emmett Till's murder resonated in a way that others did not, share with students that in the months prior to Emmett Till's murder, George Lee and Lamar Smith had both been murdered for their voting rights activism in Mississippi. However, the national press and federal government largely ignored the murders, despite Lee also having an open-casket funeral.

Ask students to write their initial thoughts in response to the question, "Why did Emmett Till's murder resonate in a way that others did not?"

Explain to students that they will be working in small groups of three to five to interact with two texts that will help them think more deeply about the guiding question. The [Stations](#) strategy activity will use the following sources. (Note that you may need to create multiple copies of the same source.)

- **Reading:** Mamie Till-Mobley Chooses to Hold an Open-Casket Funeral
- **Reading:** Myrlie Evers-Williams Reflects on the Impact of Emmett Till's Murder

Tell students that they will have ten minutes at each station and that they will use the [Connect, Extend, Challenge](#) teaching strategy to take notes on each source. Before leaving each station, they will discuss and complete two or more of the following sentences in their journals:

- "The information and ideas at this station connected to, or supported, my initial thinking about the guiding question because \_\_\_\_\_."
- "The information and ideas at this station extended, or broadened, my initial thinking about the guiding question because \_\_\_\_\_."
- "The information and ideas at this station challenged, or complicated, my initial thinking about the guiding question because \_\_\_\_\_."

Assign each group to begin at a different station, and ask the groups to move to their first stations. As students work, circulate to listen in on their conversations or work with struggling groups if they need help understanding the text or instructions.

Direct groups to move to the next station after the allotted amount of time has passed until all of the groups have visited every station.

#### 4. Debrief the Stations Activity

Debrief the activity as a class, using the following questions:

- What conclusions did you draw about the guiding question from the sources you examined?
- What questions do you have after examining the sources?

Finally, ask students to respond to the following prompts in their journals, which they can complete for homework if time is short:

- After having considered all of the sources in this lesson, how would you respond to the guiding question now? Why did Emmett Till's murder resonate in a way that others did not?

#### Homework

#### Formative Activity 2: Learning from Mamie Till-Mobley

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

In Lessons 2 and 3, you examined the historical context of Southern white supremacy and the choices made by Mamie Till-Mobley to speak out against racial lynchings. Review the primary source documents from both of these lessons.

Next, highlight words, phrases, or quotations from the documents that illustrate ways that white supremacy was enforced and Till-Mobley's rationale in deciding to hold an open-casket funeral. In your journal, write down some initial thoughts as you reflect 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?"

**Note:** If you struggle to generate thoughts, consider using the following prompt to get started:

- What tactics did Mamie Till-Mobley use to pursue racial justice? How might these tactics be applied to the pursuit for racial justice today?