

LIFE OF EMMETT TILL

Directions: Complete the following reading to assist in the related activities.

While visiting family in Money, Mississippi, 14-year-old Emmett Till was brutally beaten and murdered for flirting with a white woman days earlier. Money, Mississippi was a segregated southern community in which whites owned the businesses and lived in the town while African Americans lived on the outskirts of the town. Also, the African Americans worked the land and lived in unfurnished shacks. Alternatively, Emmett Till grew up in a middle-class African American community on the south side of Chicago which thrived with businesses owned by African Americans. In August of 1955, Emmett Till went to Money, Mississippi to visit relatives.



Three days after arriving, Emmett and his cousins entered Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market. After having claimed to have a white girlfriend back in Chicago, Emmett's cousins dared him to ask the white woman behind the counter of the store for a date. The events inside the store will never be known for sure as the accounts of the incident vary wildly. Carolyn Bryant, the woman behind the counter and wife of the owner, claimed that Emmett grabbed her and made lewd comments before whistling at her while he left. Emmett's cousins, on the other hand, claimed he simply said "bye, baby" as he left and then whistled at her.

Regardless, the actions inside the store would lead to the fateful events just four days later. At about 2:30 am on August 28, 1955, Roy Bryant (husband of Carolyn Bryant) and his brother J.W. Milam, still enraged from the incident, kidnapped Emmett from his relative's home. The two men brutally beat him, dragged him to the bank of the Tallahatchie River, shot him in the head, tied barbed wire to a large metal fan from a cotton gin and shoved his lifeless body into the water. His body was found three days later and so horribly mutilated that he was nearly unrecognizable to relatives.

Emmett's body was shipped back to his mother in Chicago where she chose to have an open-casket funeral with his body on display for five days. Her hope, of displaying the mutilated remains of her son, was that all the world could see what had happened to her son. Ultimately, thousands of mourners viewed Emmett's body and photographs of his remains were published across the United States.

Roy Bryant and his brother J.W. Milam went on trial in a segregated courthouse before an all-white all-male jury. Despite being identified by Emmett's relatives as the men who kidnapped him and the overwhelming evidence of guilt, the jury ultimately acquitted both men of all charges.

Only a few months later, Roy Bryant and his brother J.W. Milam admitted to committing the crime by telling the story of how they kidnapped and killed Emmett Till to a magazine for \$4000. They could not be retried for the crime under double jeopardy laws.

EMMETT TILL QUESTIONS

Directions: Complete the following questions based on the previous reading and your understanding of the life of Emmett Till. You may need to complete additional research in order to complete the questions.

1. How do you feel about the decision of Emmett's mother to display his body even though it was horribly mutilated? Explain your thoughts.
2. What impact, if any, do you think the death of Emmett Till had on the overall Civil Rights Movement? Explain.
3. What does the Emmett Till death and resulting trial show about the American Justice system at the time? Explain.

4. Based on the information provided to you by your teacher, or your own research, what role did "Jim Crow Laws" play in the death of Emmett Till? Explain your reasoning.
5. Why do you suppose Emmett Till decided to "flirt" with the woman even though "Jim Crow Laws" existed and were the tradition of the time?

EMMETT TILL

SONG ANALYSIS

The life of Emmett Till has been referenced in several different mediums, such as: music, film and art. One such reference was the 1963 song *The Death of Emmett Till* by Bob Dylan. The song details the main events of Emmett Till's death and its significance as a historical event.

For this assignment, students will read the lyrics of Bob Dylan's song and analyze its message. Students will participate in a class discussion related to the lyrics and will need to consider the questions below in order to be able to fully participate.

1. Does Bob Dylan think that the men who killed till had a good reason for doing so? Explain your reasoning.
2. What do you think Bob Dylan means by the lyric "screaming sounds inside the barn, laughing sounds out on the street"?
3. What does Bob Dylan mean by "on the jury there were men who helped the brothers commit this awful crime"?
4. What thoughts or ideas are being expressed by the lyric: "while Emmett's body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea"?

5. What message(s) is Bob Dylan conveying in the final two stanzas of the song? Explain your ideas.

6. *The Death of Emmett Till* by Bob Dylan was considered a "protest song" in that it provided a perspective on a topical/political issue.
 - a. What is Bob Dylan "protesting" in the song?

 - b. To what extent do you think discussing or addressing political or controversial issues in popular culture (such as a song) is important?