

Name: _____ Class: _____

Emmett Till

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Emmett Louis Till (1941-1955) was a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955. A lynching is a mob killing, especially by hanging. White Americans used lynching to terrorize and keep control over Black Americans. Between 1877 and 1950, more than 4,000 Black Americans were lynched by white mobs. However, the murder of Emmett Till stood out in a long history of racist violence. As you read, make note of why Emmett was murdered and what his death revealed about American society.

- [1] The murder of Emmett Till continues to resonate¹ with people around the world because of its brutality, and the fact that no one was ever brought to justice for his killing. There have been varied accounts of what provoked his killers to act but, ultimately, the fact remains that the young boy was kidnapped, tortured and murdered for no other reason than the color of his skin.

Emmett Till grew up in a middle-class, predominantly Black neighborhood in Chicago, raised by his mother, Mamie Till-Mobley. In the summer of 1955, his great-uncle Moses Wright traveled up from Mississippi to Chicago to visit Emmett and his mother. When Wright returned to the South, Emmett begged his mother to let him tag along to visit the rest of the family. She relented² but sent him with a warning: Mississippi is very different from Chicago. Emmett promised to be careful. Simeon Wright, one of the cousins Emmett met in Mississippi, remembers him as a person who played jokes and tried to make others laugh. Simeon stated that Emmett “really had no sense of danger.” That summer, Emmett was 14 years old.



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A Fatal Encounter

Emmett arrived in his uncle's hometown, Money, Mississippi, in late August. On the evening of August 24, Emmett, Simeon and several other cousins stopped into a local store to buy candy, where they encountered a young white woman named Carolyn Bryant. She and her husband, Roy Bryant, owned the store.

1. **Resonate (verb)** to create strong feelings or memories
2. **Relent (verb)** to agree to do or accept something after resisting or refusing

Emmett entered the store alone. Accounts have always varied as to what happened next. In 1955, Carolyn Bryant testified that Emmett grabbed her and made a crude comment to her. However, in an interview from 2007, Bryant confessed that she made up her claims that he had made a physical advance on her³, adding that “nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him”. She said that she did not remember what else happened that night. Other witnesses, including Simeon, stated that Emmett whistled at Bryant after they had both left the store. Simeon said, “He had no idea how dangerous that was; because when he saw our reaction, he got scared too.” Carolyn Bryant responded to Emmett by retrieving a pistol from her car. When the boys saw the gun, they ran away from the store to avoid more trouble.

The Murder

- [5] Roy Bryant heard about the incident a few days later and began questioning Black men around town to find out who had done it. He eventually traced it back to Emmett. Bryant and his half-brother, J. W. Milam, broke into Moses Wright’s house in the early morning hours of August 28, 1955, and demanded to know who had “harassed” his wife. They threatened to shoot Emmett, told him to get dressed, and led him outside to their pickup truck. A woman inside the truck confirmed that he was the boy they were looking for.

Bryant, Milam and several other men — among them Black sharecroppers who may have been forced to participate through fear for their own lives — drove out of town, stopping twice to beat Emmett severely. Later that morning, Emmett’s Uncle Moses called the authorities and reported Bryant and Milam for kidnapping. They were arrested shortly thereafter, and Emmett was presumed⁴ still missing.

Three days after the abduction⁵, a fisherman discovered Emmett’s body in the water of the Tallahatchie River. The corpse was so disfigured from the beatings and from being in the water so long that the only way it could be identified was by a ring bearing Emmett’s initials.

The Funeral

When Mamie Till-Mobley found out about the murder, she insisted that the body be sent back to Chicago immediately, whatever the cost. When she saw Emmett’s mutilated⁶ face and body, she also insisted they hold an open-casket funeral, so everyone could see the worst effects of racism in the United States.

Tens of thousands of people came to see Emmett and show their support for his mother. Newspapers across the country carried the story, while Jet and other African American magazines published the story alongside photographs of Emmett’s body.

3. Carolyn Bryant made this confession to author Timothy Tyson during a 2007 interview, and it was published in his book, *The Blood of Emmett Till*, in 2017.

4. **Presume (verb)** to suppose something is true based on probability or likelihood

5. the act of kidnapping someone

6. damaged severely and violently

The Trial

- [10] Bryant and Milam stood trial for Emmett's murder in late September, 1955. Lawyers for the defense argued that the body was too disfigured to be properly identified, and they claimed Emmett was probably still alive and simply had not turned up yet. Moses Wright testified against his nephew's murderers, becoming the first Black man to ever testify against white men in the state of Mississippi.

The jury was made up of entirely white men because Black people and white women were banned from serving. After listening to the facts of the case for five days, they deliberated ⁷for just 67 minutes before concluding that Bryant and Milam were not guilty. One juror said in an interview, "If we hadn't stopped to drink pop, it wouldn't have taken that long."

Just one year later, in 1956, Bryant and Milam sold their story to *Look* magazine. In the interview, they gave their account of the murder for the very first time (they did not speak during their trial). Because they were found not guilty, they could not be tried again in a court of law for the murder. They admitted to everything, including shooting Emmett to death, and filled in many details from the story. According to their account in the interview, their original intent was to beat him up and leave him on a riverbank, just to teach him a lesson. They claimed that, as they continued to beat him, Emmett called them names and insisted he was just as good as they were. Bryant and Milam then drove to the edge of the Tallahatchie, shot Emmett in the head, tied a weight around his neck with barbed wire, and threw his body into the water.

Milam explained why he felt he had to kill Emmett: "'Chicago boy,' I said, 'I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. I'm going to make an example of you – just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand.'" Throughout the interview, the two men never showed any sign of guilt or wrongdoing; in their minds they had done what was right to protect their families and their country; they were heroes. Mamie Till-Mobley later confirmed that "they never regretted what they had done.... He said he would do the same thing over again, to whoever got in his way. I felt sorry for him."

A Symbol for Civil Rights

Reactions to the feature in *Look* shed light on the complex race issues facing the country in the 1950s. Letters to the editor flooded in, some congratulating the interviewer's bravery. One preacher from Ohio wrote, "You are to be complimented for your willingness to stick your neck out in this manner for the sake of justice."

- [15] But others condemned⁸ the piece: "By this example of opinionated, baseless reporting, *Look* itself pays scant⁹ recognition to the traditions of American Justice it claims were ignored," said one Mississippi reporter. Another writer defended Bryant and Milam, saying, "[They] did what had to be done, and their courage... is to be commended."¹⁰ To have followed any other course would have been unrealistic [and] cowardly." Reactions like these demonstrated how widespread and deep racism was among white Americans.

Emmett Till's murder became one of the most important catalysts¹¹ of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Rosa Parks has said that, when she famously refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in December of 1955, she was thinking of Emmett and the injustice he experienced. Her action sparked the year-long Montgomery Bus Boycott, which brought the Civil Rights movement to the national stage.

7. **Deliberate (verb)** to think about or discuss a serious decision, especially a jury deciding a court case
8. **Condemn (verb)** to express complete disapproval
9. very little and not enough
10. **Commend (verb)** to praise

Two years later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which set up protections for Black voters and established the Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department; federal officials could now get directly involved in cases where people's civil rights were being denied. Later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended all forms of segregation¹² in public places and banned employment discrimination. Mamie Till-Mobley, who passed away in 2003, understood the significance of Emmett's death. She herself became actively involved in empowering Black youth in Chicago. But the pain of her son's murder never left her completely. "This is what really started the Civil Rights Movement, that's what everyone tells me. But I was not trying to start anything. I was just upset that my only child was gone, and so needlessly."

Emmett Till was brutally murdered because of racial hatred. There is nothing that can explain or justify what happened to him. Even more disturbingly, white people have lynched thousands of other African Americans, many of whose names have been erased from history. Because of the circumstances surrounding his death and his mother's refusal to let his death be in vain,¹³ Emmett Till's story has become one of the most well-known.

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11. **Catalyst** (*noun*) something that initiates or speeds up a change or action
12. referring to the separation of white people and Black people in the U.S.
13. without success or a result

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which TWO statements should be included in an objective summary of the article?
 - A. Emmett Till's murder was only reported in Black media outlets.
 - B. Emmett Till's murder stunned Americans because lynching was so unusual.
 - C. Emmett Till's murder revealed that all white Americans supported the murderers.
 - D. Emmett Till's murder inspired many Americans to fight against racism and injustice.
 - E. Emmett Till's murder illustrated the danger that Black Americans lived with every day.
 - F. Emmett Till's murder prompted Mississippi to make its justice system fairer towards all.

2. What do paragraphs 2-4 reveal about Black life in America in 1955?
 - A. Black people could expect the same treatment from white people in all cities and states.
 - B. Black people had to be constantly aware of the threat of violence from white people.
 - C. Black people generally lived their lives freely without worrying about white people.
 - D. Black people had tense but unremarkable interactions with white people most of the time.

3. Which statement best describes Mamie Till-Mobley's reaction to her son's death?
 - A. She withdrew from public view to avoid people's criticism of her and her son.
 - B. She decided to show the whole country what the killers had done to her son.
 - C. She was inspired to fight for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957.
 - D. She forgave her son's killers during an interview with Look Magazine.

4. What does paragraph 13 reveal about white people's attitudes in 1955?
 - A. Some white people believed the country had moved past racism to a more equal society.
 - B. Some white people felt powerless to stop the racist violence in their communities.
 - C. Some white people felt it was their right to control Black people through violence.
 - D. Some white people were heartbroken over the suffering of their Black neighbors.

5. What did the murder of Emmett Till reveal about America in 1955?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Emmett Till's murder was one of many causes for social unrest and the Civil Rights Movement. Can you think of similar catalysts for social movements happening at that time or today? What do these events have in common?
2. Emmett Till was killed because of Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam's racist beliefs. What are the effects of prejudice? How does prejudice continue to affect our world today?
3. The jury that found Bryant and Milam "not guilty" was made up entirely of white men. Do you think it's important to have people of different genders and backgrounds on a jury? What about lawyers and judges, or police forces? How could having more diversity in these groups of people affect our justice system?