

# Southern Culture: The Ordinariness of Violence in an eerie Southern Classic.

Grade 12: Southern Writers/ U.S. History  
Integrated Lesson



Time: 180 Minutes

Standards: SW1:2, SW1:4, SW2:3, SW2:4,  
SW3:2, US 4:1, US4:2, US 4:3, US 4:4, US1:9

## Materials

- Excerpt from *Emmett Till & The Impact of Images* by Noah Adams
- *Bobbie Gentry's Odes to Mississippi: A Musical Autobiography of a culture at a crossroads* by Christine M. McCusker
- *The Murder of Emmett Till* PBS American Experience
- *Ode to Billy Joe* by Bobbie Gentry, Capital Records

## Pedagogical Method

1. **Opening Question:** Have you Ever experienced an event that made you question the society around you? That made you look at the community you were in in a different way? (Free Write - allow for time to discuss and share answers.)
2. **Initial Listen.** Have students listen to Bobbie Gentry's *Ode to Billy Joe*. Incite a discussion as to what perhaps inspired its writing.
3. **Viewing:** Students will watch PBS American Experience *The Murder of Emmett Till*. Notes to be taken as an exit ticket requirement for proof of engagement.
4. **2nd Level Questioning:** How is the song listened to earlier connected to the historical event of Till's Murdern?
5. **Close Read:** In Collaborative Groups, Students will read and annotate *Bobbie Gentry's Odes to Mississippi* by Christine M. Mcusker. Deeper Level Questioning Accompanies

## Core & Higher Level Comprehension Questioning:

1. Where did Bobbie Gentry live in proximity to the murder of Emmett Till and the subsequent trial and media coverage?
2. How Old Was Bobbie Gentry at the time of the murder?
3. Do you believe the impact of the murder on her community had any influence on her decision to move to San Diego to live with her estranged mother in 1957?
4. According to the article, what are “White respectability politics” and what role did racism play in the hierarchy of southern “respectability?”
5. How did these “White Respectability Politics” influence the way that Bobbie Gentry coded her lyrics in dealing with the effect of the Till murder on her Community?
6. Discuss the dichotomy of the breezy, almost funky blues-scales used in the songs’ chorus against lyrics that describe a horrifying tragedy. What does this insinuate Gentry wants to say about the “ordinariness of tragic violence” in Southern Culture?
7. It is well known that the Tallahatchie bridge is not tall enough for a leap from it to result in death. The Article states that leaps inspired by the song only ever ended with the jumper being fined. Why did Gentry deliberately choose to misrepresent the dimensions and the effect of a leap from the bridge?
8. Does knowing the impetus for the creation of the song change your interpretation of the piece’s famous

Mcguffin - the unnamed item thrown from the Tallahatchie Bridge?

## Concluding Activity:

Students will Read *Emmett Till & The Impact of Images* by Noah Adams. They will be asked to consider how they would be forced to respond if they were to see images of such violence perpetrated by their own community

