

Culture Shock – The Death of Emmett ‘Bobo’ Till
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SETTING

There is just one setting that will represent three different places.

There’s a door SL that leads backstage.

A table is set at SR closer to the audience with a checker board on top.

For scene changes, just add store name, or Lot number on or above the door SL.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

MAMIE TILL-BRADLEY – Female, Emmett’s mother

EMMETT ‘BOBO’ TILL – Male, 14 years old, stocky, muscular, 160 lbs, five feet four inches tall.

CURTIS – Male, Emmett’s cousin

ROY BRYANT – Male, 24 years old, Husband to Carolyn.

CAROLYN BRYANT – Female, 21 years old, 5 ft tall, 103 lbs. Irish girl with Black hair, black eyes.

JW MILAN – Male, 36 years old, 235 lbs...wears khaki trousers, red sports shirt, cap and dark glasses.

ELIZABETH – Female, Preacher’s Wife

PREACHER – Male, Relative to Emmett

LUCIEN - Male

GREG - Male

JOHN - Male

NARATOR - Female

JUANITA – Female, Carolyn’s Sister-In-Law

EXTRAS

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THE SCRIPT

ACT 1 WEDNESDAY

Lights up.

Two African American boys are seated at the checker table playing checkers in Silence.

Roy exits the store carrying a suitcase.

He stops to look at the boys with a slight disgust.

Carolyn comes out behind him. Roy turns to face her.

ROY: Your sister-in-law Juanita should be here soon.

CAROLYN: I know.

ROY: I’ll be sure to bring something back for you and the boys from Texas.

CAROLYN: I know that too.

ROY: Where are them boys by the way?

CAROLYN: In the back!

ROY: Make sure they’re in bed by 7:00 and remember to lock the doors before you leave and turn off all the lights ‘ccept that one on the front porch.

CAROLYN: Ok.

Pause.

ROY: Carol, look...I’m sorry ‘bout what I said back there. It’s just that...

Roy looks at the boys, he speaks a little softer.

ROY: I don’t like having colored people hanging around out here. It makes me nervous.

CAROLYN: Roy, just go. I can take care of myself.

ROY: I wish you wouldn’t be so naïve.

CAROLYN: Stop calling me naïve!

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ROY: Sorry. But one a them days those colored people is gonna get outta line.

CAROLYN: Just go, Roy...don’t let us have another argument.

Roy considers.

He nods and kisses her on her cheek. He picks up his suitcase and exits.

*Carolyn watches him leave. She then turns and goes back into the store leaving
The door half open.*

NARATOR: I’ve long considered the whole concept of death. I have even concluded that no one can die before their appointed time and in most cases, as you carefully examine all the events leading up to that time...it seems like pieces of a puzzle being placed in its exact position. (*slight pause*) Yet, in the case of Emmett ‘Bobo’ Till, let every man be his own judge.

GREG: Mr. Bryant don’t like us being around.

LUCIEN: Yeah, but he ain’t got much choice in the matter. Without us colored folks his shop wouldn’t have customers.

GREG: But he always talking mean and I hear he sometimes beat up on some of the other folks when they don’t do what he says.

LUCIEN: He’s just ignorant. But he knows he needs us just as much as we need his service.

GREG: Yeah.

LUCIEN: As long as we stick to just business, we a’right.

Emmett and his cousin, Curtis enters.

*They stop a little way from the checker table where Lucien and Greg are deep in
The game.*

CURTIS: Bobo, remember mama’s warning.

EMMETT: I remember...but I ain’t let nobody take me for a liar.

CURTIS: I really think we should just leave.

EMMETT: Not yet.

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Emmett takes a photograph from his pocket and stares at it.

EMMETT: A couple more minutes, cous....that’s all I’m asking.

CURTIS: Ohhh...

EMMETT: Will you try to relax.

CURTIS: Oh, I’m trying....

They join those at the checker table.

EMMETT: Hey...

LUCIEN: Hey...

EMMETT: Whose winning?

LUCIEN: Who do’ya think?

EMMETT: Right, right! Maybe you need to teach Greg how to play.

LUCIEN: So he can start winning. I ain’t think so. Whatcha doing here anyways?

GREG: Yeah, you come to spread more lies.

LUCIEN (*speaks without looking up from the table*): What say you, Chicago boy.

EMMETT: I brought proof that I ain’t lying.

LUCIEN (*looks up this time*): Yeah, go ahead...make your case.

Emmett hands them the pictures.

LUCIEN: Whoa!

GREG: You ain’t kidding.

EMMETT (*smiles triumphantly*): Told ya. (*folds his arm*)

LUCIEN: But...you got to do better than that, Bo.

Just then Carolyn Bryant steps from the store with a broom in hand.

She starts sweeping the curb.

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EMMETT (*grabs his pictures*): Man you guys are hardheaded.

CURTIS: What more proof do ya need?

LUCIEN: Them just pictures man. You expect us to swallow your story that you been with white girls because you took a picture standing beside one of ‘em.

EMMETT: Its proof, ain’t it?

Lucien glances over at Carolyn.

When he looks back, Greg nods at him with a sheepish smile.

LUCIEN: We know how you can prove yourself beyond any shadow of a doubt.

EMMETT: Yeah, how. Tell me and I’ll do it.

LUCIEN: You talking mighty big, Bo...there’s a pretty little white woman over there. Since you know how to handle white girls, let’s see you get a date with her.

CURTIS: Ohhh...Bobo, bad idea.

LUCIEN: You ain’t chicken, are you Bo?

EMMETT: I ain’t chicken.

LUCIEN: Go ahead.

Emmett walks boldly over to Carolyn.

CURTIS: Ohhh...

GREG: Stop winning, you sissy!

Lucien and Greg chuckles.

Curtis is almost wetting his pants.

EMMETT: Halo, ma’am.

Carolyn stops sweeping.

CAROLYN: May I help you with something.

EMMETT: Apart from two cents worth o’ bubble gum, how’s about a date, baby.

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Curtis gasp, slaps his hand over his mouth.

CAROLYN: Excuse me!

EMMETT: Ya know...dinner...where two people sit ‘round a table and have some chow.

CAROLYN: You have some nerve talking to me like that.

EMMETT: You don’t like the way I talk baby?

CAROLYN: Please leave.

Emmett grabs her by her waist.

Lucien and Greg are no longer smiling; they start to shake in their boots.

LUCIEN: Ah, Bo...

EMMETT: You needn’t be afraid o’ me, baby. I been with white girls before.

CAROLYN (*open mouth*): Ah...

Carolyn pulls away from him and head for the door to the store.

*Emmett eyes her and wolf whistles before she disappears behind the door
Slamming it loudly.*

CURTIS: Ohhh..

Only Emmett is laughing at this point.

Lucien and Greg can’t believe what he just did.

LUCIEN: Hey, gotta go...see you in Heaven, man.

They dash off quickly.

CURTIS: Ohhh...

Emmett slaps Curtis.

EMMETT: Stop that! Its no big deal a’ight.

Emmett grabs Curtis arm, and they exit.

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*The door opens and Carolyn storms out with a gun (.38 colt) hoisted
In front of her.*

She looks left and right, but no one else is there.

Her Sister-in-law, Juanita, run out behind her.

JUANITA: What happened?

Carolyn is too shaken to respond right away.

She turns for the door, but Juanita grabs her.

JUANITA: Tell me what just happened here, Carol.

CAROLYN: Boy...Boy just touched me...asked me for a date.

JUANITA: Boy? You mean a black boy?

Carolyn nods.

JUANITA: Lord have mercy.

CAROLYN: Roy will deal with it when he gets back.

JUANITA: Roy will kill him if he found out.

Carolyn stares at Juanita a bit.

CAROLYN: I’m not good at keeping secrets, Juanita.

JUANITA: There has been enough bloodshed, Sis...we have to try.

Carolyn nods. She goes back into the store.

Juanita looks around to see if there’s anyone watching.

She then follows behind Carolyn.

The stage remains quiet and lighted for a beat, and then the lights go out.

LIGHTS UP

Mamie Till-Bradley sits alone on a stool.

She hesitates before speaking.

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MAMIE: I warned him so many times and...even as I watched that train pull away, I knew...somehow...my words had fallen on deaf ears. “Be Careful,” I said, “If you had to get down on your knees and bow when them white folks go past, do it willingly.

(Pause)

Emmett Till was always too much a man to listen.

(Pause)

Course you know somet’ing like that is hard to keep quiet.

LIGHTS OUT

FRIDAY

LIGHTS UP

*There’s a Boy, Emmett’s age, sitting at the checker table, waiting, eating peanuts
Or just gloating. Let’s say his name is John.*

Roy enters.

He sees the boy, but ignores him. He heads for the entrance to the store.

JOHN: How was your trip?

Roy stops, but doesn’t turn around.

ROY: Who you talking to, boy?

JOHN: An ignorant white boy.

Roy folds his fist and grinds his bottom lip.

*He turns and steps towards the youth grabbing his throat when he gets near
Enough.*

Roy pulls his free hand back to deliver a few blows.

JOHN: I got something you want.

ROY: You got nothing I want.

Roy is about to redesign John’s face.

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JOHN: A Negro touched your wife.

Roy is frozen in shock.

These words affect him so much, he loosens his grip.

John pulls away.

ROY: No! If something like that happened, she would have told me.

JOHN: You’re the only one who doesn’t know.

Roy grabs him again.

ROY: Tell me what happened!

JOHN: The way I see it, you have something I want...and I have something you want.

Roy doubles his fist.

ROY: Wrong! I have something you don’t want.

JOHN: I know you to be a decent and fair man, Mr. Bryant.

Roy considers this, then let go of John.

ROY: What do you want?

JOHN: One week supply of snuff-and-fatback and ten pounds cotton.

ROY: Fine!

John comes closer.

JOHN: The boy is from Chicago. He’s visitin’ Preacher.

ROY: Preacher?

JOHN: Yeah...they family.

John smiles.

JOHN: I’ll be back to pick up the stuff later.

John exits.

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Roy is steaming inside.

*Carolyn exits the store...she sees her husband...she goes to him and hugs him...
But he doesn't hug back.*

Carolyn pulls away.

CAROLYN: What's wrong?

ROY: Why didn't you tell me?

CAROLYN: Tell you what?

ROY: Why'd you tell me that a nigger touched you?

Carolyn stand silent.

CAROLYN: How did you find out about that?

ROY: Everybody knew, except me.

CAROLYN: Roy, I'm sorry, I knew you would be upset...

*Roy pushes his wife away from him and enters the store slamming the
Door hard behind him.*

Carolyn remains onstage...She knows something terrible is about to happen.

LIGHTS OUT

LIGHTS UP

Curtis sits alone on the stool.

CURTIS: In the minds of many Mississippians in 1955, a black man could justifiably be lynched even for looking at a white woman. *(Pause)* One of the tragedies of this case is that the so-called “wolf whistle” was probably a misunderstanding. Emmett had a speech impediment. When he got stuck on a word, he would stop speaking and abruptly whistle, as a way of untangling his tongue. I ain't saying that was the case...but, it might 'ave been.

LIGHTS OUT

SATURDAY

LIGHTS UP

Roy and JW drink scotch at the checkers table.

Each time a black person comes to the store, Roy yells at them chasing Them away.

JW: You know if you do nothing, you’ll be marked a coward and a fool?

ROY: Who said I was planning to do nothing!

They pour and drink some more.

JW: What’s the plan?

Roy downs a glass of scotch.

ROY: I’m coming over early in the morning. I need a little transportation.

JW: Sunday’s the only morning I can sleep. Can’t we make it around noon?

ROY: I’ll be there...early.

JW: What do you have in mind?

ROY: I don’t know yet...but I plan to teach that boy a lesson.

They finish the bottle in silence.

LIGHTS OUT

SFX: Loud thuds on a door.

Groans...footsteps...creaking as the door opens...

JW’S VOICE: Yeah?

ROY’S VOICE: Let’s go. Let’s make that trip now.

END OF ACT 1

(Intermission)

ACT II
SUNDAY MORNING

LIGHTS UP

JW and Roy approach Preacher’s House with rifles in their hands.

They stop at the door.

JW pats his rifle.

JW: Best weapon the Army’s got. Either for shootin’ or sluggin’

Roy pounds on the door.

PREACHER’S VOICE: Who’s that?

ROY: Mr. Bryant from Money, Preacher.

PREACHER’S VOICE: All right, sir...just a minute.

Preacher opens the door moments later.

ROY: Preacher, you got a boy from Chicago here?

PREACHER: Yessir.

ROY: I want to talk to him.

Preacher hesitates.

PREACHER: I just want you to know that I sho’ had talked to my nephew about the incident and he’s mighty sorry...

Roy and JW push past him...

Preacher looks around outside, then locks the door.

EMMETT’S VOICE: Can you cut that light. It’s blinding me.

JW’S VOICE: You the nigger who did the talking?

EMMETT’S VOICE: Yeah.

JW’S VOICE: Don’t say ‘yeah’ to me. I’ll blow your head off.

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ROY’S VOICE: Get your clothes on.

Pause.

JW’S VOICE: Just the shoes!

EMMETT’S VOICE: I don’t wear shoes without socks.

Moments later.

The door opens and Emmett is pushed outside, followed by Roy and JW.

Preacher and wife Elizabeth comes out after them.

PREACHER: He ain’t got good sense. He didn’t know what he was doing. Please don’t take him.

ELIZABETH: I’ll pay you gentlemen for the damages.

ROY: You niggers go back to bed.

Roy and JW lead Emmett offstage.

Elizabeth hold’s Preachers hand.

ELIZABETH: We have to call Mamie Till.

PREACHER: I don’t want to worry her.

ELIZABETH: What if they do something bad to him?

Pause.

PREACHER: They will just say something to him. I don’t think they’d kill a boy. He’s just a boy.

ELIZABETH: I have to do something.

Elizabeth lets go of Preacher’s hand and exits as...

LIGHTS FADE

SFX: Sound of van driving.

ROY’S VOICE: What do we do with the boy?

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JW’S VOICE: I say we whip him and scare some sense into him.

Pause.

ROY’S VOICE: Where are we going?

JW’S VOICE: I know the scariest place in the Delta. Brother, she’s a hundred foot sheer drop and she’s a hundred feet deep after you hit. If that won’t scare the Chicago boy, hell won’t.

LIGHTS UP

JW and Roy lead Emmett to the front of JW’s house.

They stand to face Emmett who stares them dead in the eyes.

JW: Who you staring at, boy?

EMMETT: I’m not afraid of you.

ROY: You will be, after tonight.

EMMETT: You think just because the color of our skins are different that makes us unequal?

JW: Don’t tell me you actually think we’re equal, boy?

EMMETT: More ‘an that, I’m as good as you are.

ROY: Boy, do’ya have any idea what you saying?

EMMETT: I’s not an illiterate bastard like you think. I know math, I know English and I can speak Spanish. Can you?

JW: You got guts boy...

EMMETT: Guess that makes one of us...

JW: I think I’ve heard enough from you.

JW hits Emmett across the head with the rifle.

Emmett stands his ground.

EMMETT: Is that the best you got?

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They both hit him this time. He’s still standing.

EMMETT: You bastards, I’m not afraid of you.

They hit him again.

EMMETT: I’m just as good as you are.

They hit him again and again.

EMMETT: I’ve had white women. My grandmother was a white woman.

They continue to hit him until he’s on his knees.

They grab him and drag him into the house.

LIGHTS OUT

They continue to hit him over and over again, but only the thuds are heard.

They continue over the next dialogue...

LIGHTS UP

*JW is seated on the stool with a glass of scotch in one hand and his rifle in the
Next.*

JW: What else could we do? He was hopeless. I’m no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers - - - in their place - - - I know how to work ‘em.

(takes a sip of his glass)

But I decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain’t gonna vote where I live. If they did, they’d control the government. They ain’t gonna go to school with my kids and when a nigger gets too close to mentioning sex with a white woman., he’s tired o’ living.

(pause)

I’ll make an example of him, just so everybody knows how me and my folks stand.

Roy leads a now battered and weak Emmett back onstage.

JW puts his glass down and points his rifle at Emmett’s head.

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JW: You still as good as I am?

Emmett lifts his head painfully to stare into their eyes.

EMMETT: Yeah...

JW grits his teeth; Roy bites his bottom lip.

ROY: You still had white women?

EMMETT: Yeah!

They remain still for a moment...

Then the lights go out...

A single shot cuts through the silence of the darkness...

Then all that remained was silence.

NARATOR: Three days later, Emmett’s body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River. It was weighed down by a seventy-five pound cotton gin fan that was tied around his neck with barbed wire. *(pause)* His face was so mutilated that the only thing that identified the body as belonging to Emmett was the ring he was wearing that belonged to his deceased father.

OPTIONAL SCENE

*(This scene can be done if your drama group has the time and resources
To build a coffin - - - otherwise, just leave it out)*

LIGHTS UP

The open coffin is at CS.

Mamie Till and other family members pay their last visits.

Others come along just to view the body, some are taking pictures.

NOTE: Use as many people here as possible...their faces don’t need to be visibly to the audience.

NARATOR: An all white Jury found JW Milan and Roy Bryant not guilty. The Jury claimed that the prosecution had failed to prove that the body recovered from the river was Emmett Till.

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(Pause)

They were put on trial two other times and was found not guilty on all counts.

(Pause)

Mamie Till decided to have an open casket funeral for her son.

(Pause)

In life, Emmett Till was just an ordinary boy, but his death helped spur the Civil Rights Movement. It was only One Hundred Days after Till’s death that Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus.

BLACKOUT