

# What Was Jim Crow? Pre-reading Essay Activity

By Rick Vanderwall

## Overview

This pre-reading activity will provide students the background on the Jim Crow system they need to better understand the novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, and the historical setting in which it takes place. Students will read the abridged essay, "What Was Jim Crow?" by Dr. David Pilgrim, one part at a time, and complete each corresponding vocabulary activity. They will then orally report to the class on the meaning of the word they have been assigned. When students have completed the reading, the entire class will discuss the essay's content.

## Student Objectives

Students will demonstrate the understanding of:

- Demonstrate their understanding of the Jim Crow System and its history.
- Demonstrate their understanding of vocabulary words through the assigned essay.

## Skills Attained

Students will be able to:

- Use the dictionary.
- Apply word definitions to derive contextual meaning of vocabulary words in the assigned essay.

## Materials Needed

- Copies of the essay, "What Was Jim Crow?" by Dr. David Pilgrim (See below)
- Copies of the three worksheets, below
- Access to dictionaries and the web

## The Lesson

### Anticipatory Set

Pass out copies of "What Was Jim Crow?" and the three worksheets to students in the class.

### Procedures

1. Assign students to read (either aloud or individually) part one of the essay and assign one vocabulary word and worksheet to each student.
2. Have the class discuss part one when students have completed the assigned reading. Questions for discussion should include:
  - When and where did the Jim Crow system exist?
  - What were each of the Jim Crow etiquette norms?

3. Have students report to the class on the contextual meaning of their assigned words once they have completed the vocabulary worksheet.
4. Assign parts two and three repeating the vocabulary assignments; once they have completed their assignments, have students discuss the:
  - Concept of “separate but equal”.
  - Ramifications for African Americans when they couldn't vote.
5. Assign part four, again repeating the vocabulary assignment; then have students:
  - discuss the role of violence in the maintaining of the Jim Crow System.
  - compare the violence of the Jim Crow System with the Holocaust.

### Assessment

You can assess students on the worksheets they completed, the paragraph portion of the worksheets, and the oral reports of the contextual definitions of the vocabulary words according to the following rubric. You can also give credit for students' participation in the essay discussions.

### Pre-reading Essay Activity Rubric

Grading Areas	Specific Grading Criteria	Percentage of Total Grade
<b>Work Sheet Completion</b>	Finds the word in the context	40%
	Selects the best definition	
<b>Paragraph</b>	Clearly explains contextual meaning of the word	60%
	Uses complete sentences	
	Provides evidence showing that he or she revised	
	and proofread work	

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### Connections

For further background on the history of Jim Crow, go to the [jimcrowhistory.org](http://jimcrowhistory.org) web site. [link to home page, [jimcrowhistory.org](http://jimcrowhistory.org)]

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## What Was Jim Crow?

By Dr. David Pilgrim

Blue = vocabulary word

### PART ONE

Jim Crow was the name of the [racial segregation](#) system, which operated mostly in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of strict anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were given the status of second-class citizens. Jim Crow helped to make anti-black [racism](#) appear right. Many Christian ministers taught that whites were the Chosen people, blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation. Many scientists and teachers at every educational level, supported the belief that blacks were intellectually and culturally inferior to whites. Pro-segregation politicians gave persuasive speeches on the great danger of integration: the destruction of the purity of the white race. Newspaper and magazine writers routinely referred to blacks as niggers, coons, and darkies; and worse, their articles reinforced anti-black images and ideas. Even children's games portrayed blacks as [inferior](#) beings (see "From Hostility to Reverence: 100 Years of African-American Imagery in Games"). All major organizations reflected and supported the [oppression](#) of blacks.

The Jim Crow system was based on the following beliefs: whites were superior to blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior; relationships between blacks and whites would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America; treating blacks as equals would encourage interracial relationships between men and women; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial sexual relations; if necessary, violence must be used to keep blacks at the bottom racial level. The following Jim Crow etiquette norms show how [inclusive](#) and [pervasive](#) these norms were:

1. A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it [implied](#) being socially equal. Obviously, a black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman, because he risked being accused of [rape](#).
2. Blacks and whites were not supposed to eat together. If they did eat together, whites were to be served first, and some sort of partition was to be placed between them.
3. Under no circumstance was a black male to offer to light the cigarette of a white female--that gesture implied [intimacy](#).
4. Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended whites.
5. Jim Crow [etiquette](#) required that blacks were introduced to whites, never whites to blacks. For example: "Mr. Peters (the white person), this is Charlie (the black person), that I spoke to you about."
6. Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.

7. If a black person rode in a car driven by a white person, the black person sat in the back seat or the back of a truck.
8. motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.

## PART TWO

Stetson Kennedy, the author of Jim Crow Guide, offered these simple rules that blacks were supposed to observe in conversing with whites:

1. Never assert or even intimate that a white person is lying.
2. Never **impute** dishonorable intentions to a white person.
3. Never suggest that a white person is from an inferior class.
4. Never lay claim to, or overly demonstrate, superior knowledge or intelligence.
5. Never curse a white person.
6. Never laugh derisively at a white person.
7. Never comment upon the appearance of a white female. (1)

Jim Crow etiquette operated together with Jim Crow laws (Black Codes). When most people think of Jim Crow, they think of laws (not the Jim Crow etiquette), which excluded blacks from public transport and facilities, juries, jobs, and neighborhoods. The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution had granted blacks the same legal protections as whites. However, after 1877, and the election of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, southern and border states began restricting the liberties of blacks. Unfortunately for blacks, the Supreme Court helped to ignore the Constitutional rights of blacks with the **notorious** *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case, which supported Jim Crow laws and the Jim Crow way of life.

In 1890, Louisiana passed the "Separate Car Law," which claimed to aid passenger comfort by creating "equal but separate" cars for blacks and whites. This was not true. No public **accommodations**, including railway travel, provided blacks with equal facilities. The Louisiana law made it illegal for blacks to sit in coach seats reserved for whites, and whites could not sit in seats reserved for blacks. In 1891, a group of blacks decided to test the Jim Crow law. They had Homer A. Plessy, who was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black (therefore, black), sit in the white-only railroad coach. He was arrested. Plessy's lawyer argued that Louisiana did not have the right to label one citizen as white and another black for the purposes of restricting their rights and privileges. The Supreme Court decided that, so long as state governments provided **legal freedoms** for blacks, equal to those of whites, they could maintain **separate but equal** accommodations to **facilitate** these rights. The Court, by a seven to two vote, upheld the Louisiana law, declaring that racial separation did not necessarily do away with equality.

Blacks were denied the right to vote by grandfather clauses (laws that restricted the right to vote to people whose ancestors had voted before the Civil War), poll taxes (fees charged to poor blacks), white primaries (only Democrats could vote, only whites could be Democrats), and literacy tests ("Name all the Vice Presidents and Supreme Court Justices throughout America's history"). The Plessy decision sent this message to southern and border states: **Discrimination** against blacks is acceptable.

## PART THREE

Jim Crow laws touched every aspect of everyday life. For example, in 1935, Oklahoma **prohibited** blacks and whites from boating together. Boating **implied** social equality. In 1905, Georgia established separate parks for blacks and whites. In 1930, Birmingham, Alabama, made it illegal for blacks and whites to play checkers or dominoes together. Here are some of the typical Jim Crow laws, as compiled by the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Historic Site interpretive staff:

1. Barbers. No colored barber shall serve as a barber (to) white girls or women (Georgia).
2. Blind Wards. The board of trustees shall ... maintain a separate building ... on separate ground for the admission, care, instruction, and support of all blind persons of the colored or black race (Louisiana).
3. Burial. The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for the burial of white persons (Georgia).
4. Buses. All passenger stations in this State operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races (Alabama).
5. Child Custody. It shall be unlawful for any parent, relative, or other white person in this State, having the control or custody of any white child, by right of guardianship, natural or acquired, or otherwise, to dispose of, give or surrender such white child permanently into the custody, control, maintenance, or support, of a Negro (South Carolina).
6. Education. The schools for white children and the schools for Negro children shall be conducted separately (Florida).
7. Libraries. The State librarian is directed to fit up and maintain a separate place for the use of the colored people who may come to the library for the purpose of reading books or periodicals (North Carolina).
8. Mental Hospitals. The Board of Control shall see that proper and distinct apartments are arranged for said patients, so that in no case shall Negroes and white persons be together (Georgia).
9. Militia. The white and colored militia shall be separately enrolled, and shall never be compelled to serve in the same organization. No organization of colored troops shall be permitted where white troops are available and where whites are permitted to be organized, colored troops shall be under the command of white officers (North Carolina).
10. Nurses. No person or corporation shall require any white female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which Negro men are placed (Alabama).
11. Prisons. The warden shall see that the white convicts shall have separate apartments for both eating and sleeping from the Negro convicts (Mississippi).
12. Reform Schools. The children of white and colored races committed to the houses of reform shall be kept entirely separate from each other (Kentucky).
13. Teaching. Any instructor who shall teach in any school, college or institution where members of the white and colored race are received and enrolled as pupils for instruction shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof, shall be fined... (Oklahoma).

14. Wine and Beer. All persons licensed to conduct the business of selling beer or wine ... shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room at any time (Georgia). (2)

## PART FOUR

The Jim Crow laws and system of etiquette were enforced by violence, real and threatened. Blacks who violated Jim Crow norms by, for example, drinking from the white water fountain or trying to vote, risked their homes, their jobs, even their lives. Whites could physically beat blacks with impunity. Blacks had little legal recourse against these assaults because the Jim Crow criminal justice system was all white: police, prosecutors, judges, juries, and prison officials. Violence was instrumental for Jim Crow. It was a method of social control. The most extreme form of Jim Crow violence was [lynching](#).

Lynchings were public murders carried out by mobs. Between 1882, when the first reliable data were collected, and 1968, when lynchings had become rare, there were 4,730 known lynchings, including 3,440 black men and women. Most of the victims of Lynch-Law were hanged or shot, but some were burned at the stake, [mutilated](#), beaten with clubs, or [dismembered](#). Arthur Raper investigated nearly a century of lynchings and concluded that approximately one-third of all the victims were falsely accused. (4)

James Weldon Johnson, the famous black writer, labeled 1919 "The Red Summer." It was red from racial tension; it was red from bloodletting. During the summer of 1919, there were race riots in Chicago, Illinois; Knoxville and Nashville, Tennessee; Charleston, South Carolina; Omaha, Nebraska; and two dozen other cities. W.E.B. Du Bois, the black [social scientist](#) and [civil rights activist](#), wrote:

During that year 77 Negroes were lynched, of whom one was a woman and eleven were soldiers; of these, 14 were publicly burned, eleven of them being burned alive. That year there were race riots large and small in 26 American cities including 38 killed in a Chicago riot of August; from 25 to 50 in Phillips County, Arkansas; and six killed in Washington. (8)

The riots of 1919 were not the first or last "mass lynchings" of blacks, as evidenced by the race riots in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Atlanta, Georgia (1906); Springfield, Illinois (1908); East St. Louis, Illinois (1917); Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921); and Detroit, Michigan (1943). Joseph Boskin, author of *Urban Racial Violence*, claimed that the riots of the 1900s had the following traits:

1. In each of the race riots, with few exceptions, it was white people that sparked the incident by attacking black people.
2. In the majority of the riots, some extraordinary [social condition prevailed](#) at the time of the riot: prewar social changes, wartime [mobility](#), post-war adjustment, or [economic depression](#).
3. The majority of the riots occurred during the hot summer months.
4. Rumor played an extremely important role in causing many riots. Rumors of some criminal activity by blacks against whites [perpetuated](#) the actions of the white mobs.
5. The police force, more than any other institution, was invariably involved as a cause or supporting factor in the riots. In almost every one of the riots, the police sided with the attackers, either by actually participating in, or by failing to [quell](#) the attack.
6. In almost every instance, the fighting occurred within the black community. (9)

Boskin left out the following: the mass media, especially newspapers often published [inflammatory](#) articles about "black criminals" immediately before the riots; blacks were not only killed, but their homes and businesses were looted, and many who did not flee were left homeless; and, the goal of the white rioters, as was true of white lynchers of single victims, was to instill fear and terror into blacks, thereby supporting white domination. The Jim Crow system could not work without violence being used against those on the bottom rung. George Fredrickson, a historian, stated it this way:

Lynching represented ... a way of using fear and terror to check 'dangerous' tendencies in a black community considered to be ineffectively regimented or supervised. As such it constituted a confession that the regular institutions of a segregated society provided an inadequate measure of day-to-day control. (10)

Many blacks resisted the indignities of Jim Crow, and, far too often, they paid for their bravery with their lives.

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**What Was Jim Crow Activity**  
**Vocabulary list**

**PART ONE**

1. racial segregation
2. racism
3. inferior
4. oppression
5. etiquette
6. inclusive
7. pervasive
8. implied
9. intimacy
10. rape

**PARTS TWO AND THREE**

1. impute
2. notorious
3. accommodations
4. legal freedoms
5. separate but equal
6. facilitate
7. discrimination
8. prohibited
9. implied

**PART FOUR**

1. lynching
2. mutilated
3. dismembered
4. social scientist
5. civil rights activist
6. economic depression
7. social condition
8. prevailed
9. quell
10. mobility
11. perpetuated
12. inflammatory

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**What Was Jim Crow Essay  
Work Sheet**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_

**Vocabulary word activity**

My word for (circle one) -- **Part One** -- **Part Two** -- **Part Three** -- **Part Four**

is \_\_\_\_\_

Find the sentence that contains this word in the essay and copy the sentence here.

Write the dictionary definition that best fits the way the word is used above.

Write a short paragraph explaining the meaning of your word in the context of the essay. Explain in complete sentences and provide evidence that you revised and proofread your paragraph by submitting both a rough and final draft.