Getting Away with Murder:  
The True Story of the Emmett Till Case  
by Chris Crowe

Concept Analysis for 9th Grade

Plot Summary:

Chapter 1: The Boy Who Triggered the Civil Rights Movement  
Emmett Till was a 14-year-old Black boy murdered by white men in Mississippi in 1955. This book is a true account of the murder and its surrounding events. Emmett was kidnapped from his relatives’ home in an area a few miles outside of Money, MS. Three days later, his disfigured body was discovered in the Tallahatchie River. Till’s murder create a media frenzy across the nation, and, because the men who murdered Till were acquitted, it was ultimately a catalyst in the civil rights movement. The case exposed the rampant racism that persisted in the South, and it proved that the nation as a whole needed to do something about it.

Chapter 2: Kicking the Hornet’s Nest  
Emmett grew up in Chicago, where he didn’t have much exposure to racism. The Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954 didn’t even affect him much, but it put the South on the defensive, and many Southerners saw the ruling as an abomination that threatened their culture and traditions. Violence against Blacks increased as a result of the push for integration. Emmett was unaware of the significance of these political issues, and he was also unaware of Southern customs.

Chapter 3: The Boy from Chicago  
Emmett was born and raised in an era of rapid technological and political change. His father was killed in WWII soon after Emmett’s birth, leaving only him and his mother who had a close relationship. Emmett had many friends despite his stutter, and was, for
the most part, just like any other Black boy growing up in Chicago. Emmett decided to visit his cousins in Money, MS, and his mom sent him away with a stern warning to be humble toward whites. His first few days in MS were great, but they ended tragically.

Chapter 4: The Wolf Whistle
Emmett and his cousins skipped out of a Wednesday night church meeting early and headed to Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market. Carolyn Bryant was working that night, and Emmett’s cousins and friends dared the boy to ask her on a date. Emmett went in and began talking to her, though no one could hear what was being said. At one point he put his hands on her waist, which caused one of his friend’s to rush into the store and pull him out. When Carolyn walked outside, Emmett wolf whistled at her. The boys rushed home and hoped that everything would be fine. When Carolyn’s husband returned home after a trip, he heard the rumors about what happened between Emmett and his wife in his absence. Bryant told his half brother about the incident, and they made plans to whip Emmett. At 2 a.m. the next morning Bryant and Milam (his half brother) kidnapped Emmett. Bryant and Milam were quickly arrested, even before the body was found. Three days later the boy was discovered, horribly mutilated. Emmett’s mother was notified, and the trial began on September 19, 1955, amidst a national buzz.

Chapter 5: Setting the Stage
The murder and trial occurred within the perfect storm of national attention to civil rights issues. The NAACP and other groups condemned Mississippi and the South as a whole for the murder, putting Southerners on the defensive. Sheriff Sumner made the claim that the body was too old to be Emmett’s to provide some sort of defense for the killers. The indictment and trial became a matter of North vs. South. The courtroom was full—and segregated—and almost 1,000 people stood outside the courtroom. The jury was all white.

Chapter 6: Getting Away with Murder
The trial proceeded, with defense and prosecution calling to the stand Mrs. Bradley, Mose Wright, various sheriffs, the defendants, and others. The prosecution relied on the kidnapping confessions of the defendants and witnesses of Emmett’s screams. The defense relied on casting doubt on the witnesses and playing to Southern sentiments by making Emmett’s actions toward Carolyn seem appalling. The defense also tried to cast doubt on the fact that the boy found was even Emmett’s (despite his mother’s confirmation and his father’s ring on his finger). The jury “deliberated” for one hour eight minutes, but that was only because they had been instructed by the judge to take their time to make it seem like they had thoroughly thought about it. The verdict, of course, was not guilty.

Chapter 7: Aftershocks
A few lauded Bryant and Milam as heroes, but the case was a call to action for civil rights activists, and ultimately the defendants did suffer as a result of their crime. In desperate need for money (Bryant lost many customers), they sold their story to an interviewer, admitting to and describing Emmett’s murder. Their wives divorced them, and within a few years they moved from Mississippi. Mrs. Bradley traveled the country telling the story of her son and promoting civil rights.

Organizational Patterns:
The book is divided into 7 chapters (approximately 10-20 pages each). There is also a brief introduction at the beginning of the book (including a map of Mississippi) and a timeline of civil rights events in the back.

**The Big Question:**

How does prejudice affect our actions as individuals and as a society?

This historical account could, without consideration of the enduring issue, be taught as nothing more than a horrifyingly sober story, but it is really much more than that, and students should be led to consider this big question. While racism to the extent that it existed in South of the 1950s is rare in modern American society, students should have the opportunity to grapple with current issues of prejudice—both personal and societal.

Crowe keeps this question at the forefront of the book, first by contextualizing the tragic murder (demonstrating why that particular society allowed racist hate crimes to go unpunished and how Emmett’s murderers felt a sense of superiority). He also ends the book by saying that we still struggle with the same issues that led to Emmett’s murder. So, while Crowe certainly wants to preserve Emmett’s story, it isn’t meant to be some interesting relic; Emmett’s story, as told by Crowe, is meant to keep this question in readers’ minds in order to prevent similar prejudice and violence.

**Background Knowledge:**

Students must have a basic understanding of the prejudice associated with the civil rights era, post-Civil War Southern culture, the definition of segregation and Jim Crow laws and the implications of Brown v. Board of Education. Students could read and understand the text without this background knowledge, but their reading would be greatly enriched by familiarity with the customs of the time.

**Issues Related to this Study of Literature:**

**Themes:**

Prejudice—Prejudice is perhaps the most obvious theme in *Getting Away with Murder*. A white boy could have behaved the same as Emmett and gotten away with a mere whipping at worse. Emmett was murdered because he was Black and he didn’t understand his “place” in Southern society.

Communal Interest in Regional Affairs—The North, for the most part, turned a blind eye to the racism that persisted in the South long after the Civil War. It wasn’t until Emmett was brutally killed that many Northerners were willing to accept the extent of the hatred that was occurring and to do something about it. The book ends with Mrs. Bradley stating that “what happens to any of us, anywhere in the world, had better be the business of us all.” This was a hard lesson learned for the nation, and it is one that pervades the book.
Hope despite Trials—Though the book exposes the disturbing reality of what happened to Emmett Till, it maintains a hopeful tone, especially with the example of Mrs. Bradley pushing for change even in the wake of her son’s murder. At several points in the work, Crowe refers to Emmett as a “catalyst in the civil rights movement.” With this underlying idea and his mother’s ability to push forward and fight for change, the book encompasses the theme of hope despite trials.

Societal Change vs. Tradition—The South’s resistance to societal change is one of the largest influencing factors that prevented Bryant and Milam from being convicted of their heinous crime. The South was not prepared for integration, and they were on the defensive to preserve their way of life. Despite this, societal change was ultimately victorious, and it is perhaps the adamant resistance of the South that inspired the changes to come so rapidly and revolutionarily as they did.

The Power of the Media—Emmett’s murder could have just been another low-profile lynching, but the media turned it into a monster that could not be ignored. Both sides of the struggle picked up the story, and it became a national issue. Pictures of Emmett’s mutilated corpse circulated around the nation, newspapers covered the trial, and everyone became involved. This is why Emmett was a catalyst for the civil rights movement—his story was told through the media.

Setting:

The novel primarily takes place in the South of the 1950s—particularly Mississippi. It is also important that students understand Northern culture during this era, too, because Emmett grew up in Illinois and the differences between the North and the South led to Emmett’s demise. Indeed, setting is absolutely everything in this novel, and it is important that students understand this.

Point of View and Narrative Voice:

The book is a nonfiction historical piece with a traditional third person narrator. Crowe, as narrator, is as objective as possible, though there is some editorializing against the murderers, as is natural. For the most part, the book is an honest, straightforward representation of the factual events surrounding Emmett Till’s murder.

Characterization:

Emmett Till—The main character of the book; the victim of lynching. As a fourteen-year-old boy, he left his home and mother in Chicago to visit some relatives in Mississippi, unaccustomed to the customs of the South. He was a spunky character with a slight stutter and many friends.

Mamie Till Bradley—Emmett’s mother. She was a loving and hardworking woman, and upon Emmett’s murder, Mamie Till Bradley pushed to make an example of her son and worked for social change.
Carolyn Bryant—An attractive white woman from Money, MS, wife of Roy Bryant and mother of two. She was revolted when Emmett came on to her, but she didn’t want her husband to find out about it.

Roy Bryant—Husband of Carolyn. Ex-paratrooper. Upon hearing the rumors about his wife and Emmett’s exchange, Bryant immediately wanted revenge. With the help of Milam (and probably a third accomplice), Bryant brutally murdered the young Emmett and tossed his body in a river. After his acquittal, Bryant admitted to the murder, and his wife ultimately divorced him.

J.W. Milam—Bryant’s half-brother. Milam helped Bryant kill Emmett. He was bigger than Bryant, and perhaps a bit more aggressive.

Sheriff H.C. Strider—County sheriff largely in charge of leading the investigation. He ordered that Emmett’s body be buried by a black undertaker the same day it was discovered. He presented the ridiculous idea that the body might not be Emmett’s after all, and that the race couldn’t even be determined.

Literary Terms:

Voice—Crowe’s voice is important to the text inasmuch as it reflects traditional nonfiction narration. His voice is relatively unbiased, though distinct and personal.

Connotation—Not everything is completely spelled out for students in the text; there are words with connotations that they need to pick up on to fully understand the implications of various events in the novel.

Characterization—While this work is nonfiction, the characters are still portrayed in particular ways that highlight their roles in the story of Emmett Till.

Imagery—Imagery associated with the setting and with Emmett’s murdered body enhances the readers’ interaction with the text. These images are important because they allow readers to connect emotionally with the text.

Narration—The narrative voice in this book is especially important because it is a work of nonfiction with minimal dialogue. The reliability of the narrator is at the core of the reader’s interaction with the book.

Setting—As aforementioned, setting is all-important in this work. Cultural difference, even within the United States, led to Emmett’s murder. Students should become as acquainted as possible with setting and the role it plays in this text.

Affective Issues Related to this Work

Because of the age of Emmett, the main character, and the emotionality of the story, this work provides many opportunities for students to connect with it.
Peer Pressure—It was peer pressure that led Emmett to come on to Carolyn. Because he wanted to prove himself as daring and brazen as his friends considered him, he rose to the challenge and ultimately lost his life. How do students succumb to peer pressure and how is this similar to Emmett’s experience?

Fighting for What You Believe—This issue appears a couple of times within the work: First, Emmett refused to back down to his murderers and admit inferiority. Because of this, he lost his life. Was his pride worth fighting for? On the other hand, Emmett’s death contributed to the nationwide fight for civil rights.

Prejudice—This theme is one that affects students every day to some degree or another. What are forms of prejudice that persist today? How do these influence student interactions? Are they as dangerous as the racial prejudice that existed in the 1950s?

Vocabulary Issues

Crowe uses an extensive vocabulary that could be challenging to 9th-grade readers, but there are plenty of context clues that contribute to understanding. Thus, the verbosity provides a rich opportunity for young readers to study word usage, practice meaning making, and expand their own vocabularies. Some of the expansive vocabulary includes jargon specific to segregation and the civil rights era. Despite the specificity of this usage, these words are important for students to know and understand for their further study of literature and history.

This book is, as a whole, a good model of informational and research writing. Because of the historical nature of the work, it is entirely research based, demonstrating appropriate integration of sources. Students often struggle to know when to use direct quotations and when to put things in their own words, and this is a great model for tackling this issue.

Implications for Students of Diversity

Diversity is at the forefront of Getting Away with Murder, particularly racial diversity, and students of every color will be likely to connect with it quite naturally. At the same time, the text confronts readers with some incredibly weighty issues related to race relations and, if the classroom is not conducive to confidence, students could easily feel uncomfortable with these topics or singled out for their differences. Therefore, students must be aware going into the book that the issue of race will be paramount to the classroom exploration of the text, and they must be prepared to discuss it maturely and respectfully.

Getting Away with Murder also tackles the tense relationship between the North and the South that existed in the 1950s, and if there are any students of regional diversity in the class (particularly from the Northeast or Southeast), this could certainly lead to rich classroom conversation. Southern customs vary greatly from the customs of other regions, even now in the 21st century, and students with experience in the South could bring interesting insights into the interpretation of the book. At the same time, this presents potential problems, especially for Southern students in a Northern classroom. Again, regional diversity should be at the forefront of classroom discussion, and students must be aware of behavioral expectations.

Gender Issues
Gender roles are not glaringly obvious in this book, but they are an underlying and highly significant feature that could be interesting to discuss. Emmett’s behavior toward Carolyn robbed the boy of his life. Emmett epitomized the stereotype of a testosterone-driven adolescent, and Carolyn responded in a stereotypical manner for a young, attractive woman (and she was certainly justified in her reaction). However, Carolyn was brave enough to ask that the story not be spread to her husband, which is not the response of a damsel in distress, but of an independent woman who understands the potential repercussions of her husband’s temper.

Moreover, Bryant’s response, like Emmett’s affront, epitomized the masculine drive to protect the “weaker” sex and the propensity toward violence as a means of defending womanhood. Bryant and Milam, then, could be studied in the light of masculinity, with Carolyn portraying traditional femininity. Students could discuss how these gender roles have shifted and/or how they have remained intact.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

Research Issues:
- Jim Crowe laws
- Reactions to Brown v. Board of Education ruling
- Southern society in the 1950s
- History of lynching/cases similar to Emmett’s
- Mob mentality (psychology of it, how it affected this case, etc.)
- Blacks fighting in the armed forces during WWII
- Civil rights movement
  - Rosa Parks
  - Martin Luther King, Jr.
  - Violent vs. peaceful protests
  - Involvement of adolescents
- Effects of peer pressure on adolescents

Project Ideas:
- Introduction into Southern society (before reading): Host a Southern party. Students bring Southern dishes to class (biscuits and gravy, banana pudding, fried chicken, okra, etc.) and enjoy a picnic. Besides the food, students must also bring one fact about Southern culture (either current or from the 50s). All students must use the terms “sir” and “ma’am” and remember their “pleases” and “thank yous.” Students will be separated based on the color of their shirts (dark shirts on one side of the classroom and light shirts on the other side). Light shirts get to serve themselves food first (and, if possible, they get better seating). While the students picnic, the teacher gives a presentation on Southern culture, and students have the opportunity to elaborate on the presentation with the facts that they found. At the end of the class period, students will write three facts about the South that they learned from the activity on a note card.
- Found poem (during or after reading): Students create found poems from phrases they find in the book. First, before knowing the assignment, they find 15 words or phrases that are especially poignant to them. Then they reorder the words or phrases into a 20-line poem that captures the emotions of the Emmett Till tragedy.
• Collage and ekphrasis (after reading): Students create collages using construction paper and magazine articles that, to them, represent the book and Emmett’s case. After creating their collages, students write poems about Emmett Till that include each visual element of their collage.

• Writing connection (during or after reading): Students write a journal entry or personal narrative from the perspective of one of Emmett’s friends who witnessed his interaction with Carolyn.

• Writing connection (during or after reading): Students imagine they are Mr. Bryant and write (in an informal journal entry or a more polished writing assignment) how they reacted to Emmett’s interaction with Carolyn. Students are encouraged to create an alternative reaction than Bryant’s extreme violence, but they are to keep in mind that they would certainly be bothered by the exchange. Students should be reminded to make their writing as authentic as possible, to reflect how they believe they would truly react in that situation.
  o Individually or as a class, reflect on why this reaction differs from Bryant’s. Is it a matter of living in a different era, or is it just a difference of personalities?

**Text Sets and Enrichment Resources**

**Novels**
- *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers
  o Deals with issues of race
  o Set in a courtroom (from the perspective of the boy on trial)
- *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor
  o Race relations post-Civil War
  o Set in Mississippi
- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
  o Set in post-Civil War Alabama
  o Deals with race relations and intolerance
  o Includes court scenes

**Short Stories/Articles**
- Newspaper articles from the 2004 investigation into Till’s death
  o Investigation proved that it was, indeed, Till’s body that was recovered
- The original 1955 *Jet* magazine
- “The Lynching of Jube Benson” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

**Poetry/Songs**
- “The Death of Emmett Till” by Bob Dylan
- “Lines” by Martha Collins
  o Addresses concept of boundaries and the repercussions of crossing them
- “Lesson” by Forrest Hamer
  o Refers to the dangers of Mississippi for Black individuals during the civil rights movement
  o Compares racial dangers to the dangers of Vietnam

Johnson. BYU. 2011.
Film Adaptations/Video Clips
- Poetry slam video clip “Hate” by lisarussellnyc
  - Discusses prejudice and its place in the rising generation
- Poetry slam video clip “Maskless” by Miles Hodges
  - Discusses how skin color still affects us today
  - References lynching

Images
- Open casket image of Emmett Till
  - Warn students that it is grisly
- Images of civil rights protestors and advocates
  - Particularly ones directly responding to the Emmett Till case; a Google search provides plenty of appropriate pictures