

GRADES 3-5 LESSON PLAN

MEMPHIS, MARTIN, AND THE MOUNTAINTOP: THE SANITATION STRIKE OF 1968

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Title: *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968*

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Grade Level: 3-5

Standards*:

- **Common Core:** *CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.1, 3.2, & 3.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1, 4.2, & 4.3; CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.1, 5.2, & 5.3*
- **Virginia Standards of Learning:** 3.5; 4.5; 5.5

Overarching Theme(s): Segregation, Fairness, Point of View, Empathy, Inferencing

Timeframe: (45-60 minutes)

Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968

Summary: This story is about the 1968, Memphis sanitation worker strike. The story is told from the perspective of a child named Lorraine, whose parents are involved in the strike. Lorraine witnesses various community members talk about their experiences during months of labor organizing. The community is abuzz when Lorraine shares that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King will be in Memphis to support the sanitation workers. As Lorraine's family and other sanitation workers listen to Dr. King talk about "getting to the Promised Land" on April 3rd, 1968, they feel more empowered than ever to continue striking. On April 4th, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis, TN. In the aftermath of Dr. King's death, Memphis workers are more resolved than ever to stand up for labor rights. The sanitation workers' protest against unjust treatment has a lasting legacy in the city of Memphis and the United States.

Lesson Goals:

1. Identify feelings and motivations of characters.
2. Determine the fairness of working conditions.
3. Examine the relationship between laborers and city leadership.

Key Terms:

- **Discrimination:** the purposeful unjust and unfair treatment of people, usually based on their race, age, or gender; with the purpose of keeping the dominant group in control or power
- **Equal Opportunity:** a policy of treating others without discrimination, especially on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, religion, etc.
- **Jim Crow Laws:** laws and rules that discriminated against or enforced the segregation of Black people in the United States (i.e. Black people had to use separate drinking fountains, restrooms, medical facilities, theaters, restaurants, railroad cars, buses,

and separate schools with old/used textbooks and equipment, etc.); the laws purposely created disadvantages for Black people; Jim Crow was not an actual person but was the name of a song and dance done by a white entertainer who wore Blackface

- **Literacy:** the ability to read and write.
- **Negro:** a word that was used to describe Black people; it was often used by White people in a derogatory way
- **Oppression:** purposeful harsh and unfair acts, demands, and treatment towards a group of people, over a period of time, with the purpose of keeping the dominant group in control or power
- **Protest:** to express objection to or disagreement with something, in a planned and organized way; can include marches and parades, banners and signs, speeches, petitions, and many other methods to show that you disagree with something
- **Race:** a way to group people based on their skin color, facial features, hair texture, or ancestry; reinforced and made concrete in the United States during slavery to oppress Black people; different “races” (i.e. Black and White people) have the same genetics
- **Racial Segregation:** separating people because of their race; it was legal to do this because of laws created by people who thought White people in America were the superior race; this led to “separate but equal” policies which implied people of different races had separate but equally good options for things like schools, restaurants, and hospitals; the reality was People of Color had poorer options compared to White people; legal from 1896 (Plessy v. Ferguson) to 1954 (Brown v. Board)
- **Racism:** the unfair treatment of people based on the opinion that one race is better than another race or races; a system of advantage based on race; racial prejudice plus social power; individual racism: actions and/or language toward a person that intentionally expresses prejudice, hate, or bias based on race; institutional racism: discriminatory treatment, unfair policies, and inequitable opportunities and impacts, based on race, that are produced and perpetuated by institutions (schools, workplace, mass media, etc.); structural or systemic racism: normalization and legitimization of historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dynamics that routinely advantage White people, while producing cumulative and long-lasting disadvantages for People of Color
- **Strike:** an action taken by a group of workers to stop work until the things and conditions that they ask for are agreed upon

Procedure:

*Important! Before the start of the lesson, students **must** engage in transactive discussion practice for the discussion to be meaningful. This does not have to take place before every lesson but students need to be familiar with this type of discussion for the lesson to be effective.*

Before Read Aloud:

The teacher should give a brief history of the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968 (sample language below):

“The Memphis sanitation strike began on February 12, 1968, in response to the deaths of sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker. The deaths served as a breaking point for more than 1,300 African American men from the Memphis Department of Public Works as they demanded higher wages, time and a half overtime, dues check-off, safety measures, and pay for the rainy days when they were told to go home. Mayor Henry Loeb refused to recognize the strike and rejected the City Council vote, insisting that only he possessed the power to recognize the union. The Memphis sanitation strike prompted Martin Luther King Jr.'s presence, where he famously gave the “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech. The city is ultimately where he was assassinated.”

The teacher should read the story aloud to the whole group. During the read aloud process, teacher should stop and ask teacher-generated comprehension questions to assess/support student understanding, address misconceptions, and answer questions.

Following Read Aloud:*

Students, in groups of 3-5 people, should work together to respond to discussion questions.

- Teachers should remind students that they are working as a team to figure out the best answer/position for each question.
- Teacher should circulate among groups during the discussion process, probing students to practice communicative discussion practices, as outlined in transactive discussion guidelines. Teacher should not provide right or wrong statements to students regarding answer but rather probing questions.
- After small group discussions, students share out the conclusions of their small group with the whole class. Answers should reflect what the whole group determined, rather than individual responses of each group member.
- Immediately following small group and whole class discussions, teacher should have students *independently* respond to writing prompts or assign for homework.

*Note: For questions occurring after specific page numbers, teacher can stop and have students discuss in small groups. If there are multiple copies of the book, students can also address the questions after reading.

*Discussion Questions***During Read Aloud**

(Memphis-1968):

1. This story took place in 1968, and little Lorraine wants to tell everyone about what happened to her father and other sanitation workers. Why is it important to learn the stories of past events?
2. What event made the sanitation workers demand better working conditions?
3. Sanitation workers striking affected lots of people who could not get their trash picked up. Do you think it was fair for the sanitation workers to strike, or should they have found a different solution?
 - a. Why or Why not?

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(Marching Orders)

4. What do you think of Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb treatment of sanitation workers?
 - a. Do you think it was justified?
 - b. Why or why not?
5. Sanitation workers were already poorly paid about \$1.70 an hour for their important services. The wages were so low that many of the men needed government assistance.
 - a. Who benefits from keeping wages so low?
 - b. The workers? The owners? The customers? Everyone?

(Winter Blues)

6. How did the strike affect the families of the sanitation workers?
7. Is it fair that families must sacrifice at home because of the labor strike?
8. James Lawson calls his old friend, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, to come to Memphis and support the sanitation strike.
 - a. Should only the people directly affected have been involved in the strike considering they understand the issues best?
 - b. Why or why not?

(Trouble)

9. Lorraine's parents disagree about continuing the labor strike. Mama is concerned about money and if it will be successful. Daddy says, "Trouble don't last always."
 - a. Who do you agree with, mama or daddy?
10. Do you think sacrifice is necessary for progress?
 - a. Why or why not?

(Martin)

11. Mama and Daddy did not finish high school and did not read well. They trust little Lorraine to read and update the newspaper on the sanitation strike. How did they feel when Lorraine informed them that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was coming to Memphis?

(Silver Rights)

12. When Dr. King spoke in Memphis, he reminded the crowd that “all labor has dignity.”
- Why do you think this statement appealed to sanitation workers?

(Beale Street)

13. A riot disrupted the nonviolent march during the first march on Beale Street. Some people were upset that Dr. King left the march as the violence began.
- Do you think Dr. King should have stayed with marchers? Why or why not?

(Trucks and Tanks)

14. After the first march ended in violence, should Mayor Henry Loeb have met with sanitation workers to end the strike?
- Why or why not?

(Dreamers)

15. On April 3, 1968, Dr. King gave a powerful speech in Memphis, “The Mountaintop” speech. During the speech, Dr. King said, “I may not get there with you, but we as a people will make it to the promised land.”
- What do you think he meant by this line?

(Black Widow)

16. Despite her grief, Mrs. Coretta Scott King continued the sanitation strike after Martin’s assassination.
- Why do you think she did this?
17. Even after Dr. King’s assassination, Memphis Mayor Henry Loeb never bargained with sanitation workers to settle the labor strike.
- Do you think he had a responsibility to do so? Why or why not?
18. The sanitation workers eventually gained many benefits and a raise after the federal government got involved.
- Why do you think Lorraine ends the story by saying, “freedom is never free”?

After Read Aloud

- Why do you think the mayor did not want to give sanitation workers better pay and safer working conditions?

Writing Prompt

Do you think staging a worker strike is a fair way of gaining better working conditions? Why or why not? Defend your answer using evidence from the book and/or class discussions.

Cut Here: - - - - -

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The reason I believe this is because _____

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Standards*

Common Core Standards[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.1](#)

Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.2](#)

Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3](#)

Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1](#)

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2](#)

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3](#)

Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1](#)

Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2](#)

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3](#)

Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL)

Reading: Demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts and use word analysis strategies

- **3.5** The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts, literary nonfiction, and poetry: c) Make, confirm, and revise predictions; d) Compare and contrast settings, characters, and plot events; e) Summarize plot events; f) Identify the narrator of a story; g) Ask and answer questions about what is read; h) Draw conclusions using the text for support; i) Identify the conflict and resolution; j) Identify the theme; k) Use reading strategies to monitor comprehension throughout the reading process; l) Differentiate between fiction and nonfiction.
- **4.5** The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts, literary nonfiction, and poetry: a) Describe how the choice of language, setting, and characters contributes to the development of plot; b) Identify the theme(s); c) Summarize events in the plot; d) Identify genres; e) Identify the narrator of a story and the speaker of a poem; f) Identify the conflict and resolution; g) Identify sensory words; h) Draw conclusions/make inferences about text using the text as support; i) Compare/contrast details in literary and informational nonfiction texts; j) Identify cause-and-effect relationships.

- **5.5** The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of fictional texts, literary nonfiction, and poetry: a) Summarize plot events using details from text; b) Discuss the impact of setting on plot development; c) Describe character development; d) Identify theme(s); e) Explain the resolution of conflict(s); f) Identify genres; g) Differentiate between first- and third-person point of view; i) Explain how an author’s choice of vocabulary contributes to the author’s style; j) Draw conclusions and make inferences with support from the text; k) Identify cause-and-effect relationships; l) Compare/contrast details in literary and informational nonfiction texts.