

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD CONTEXT



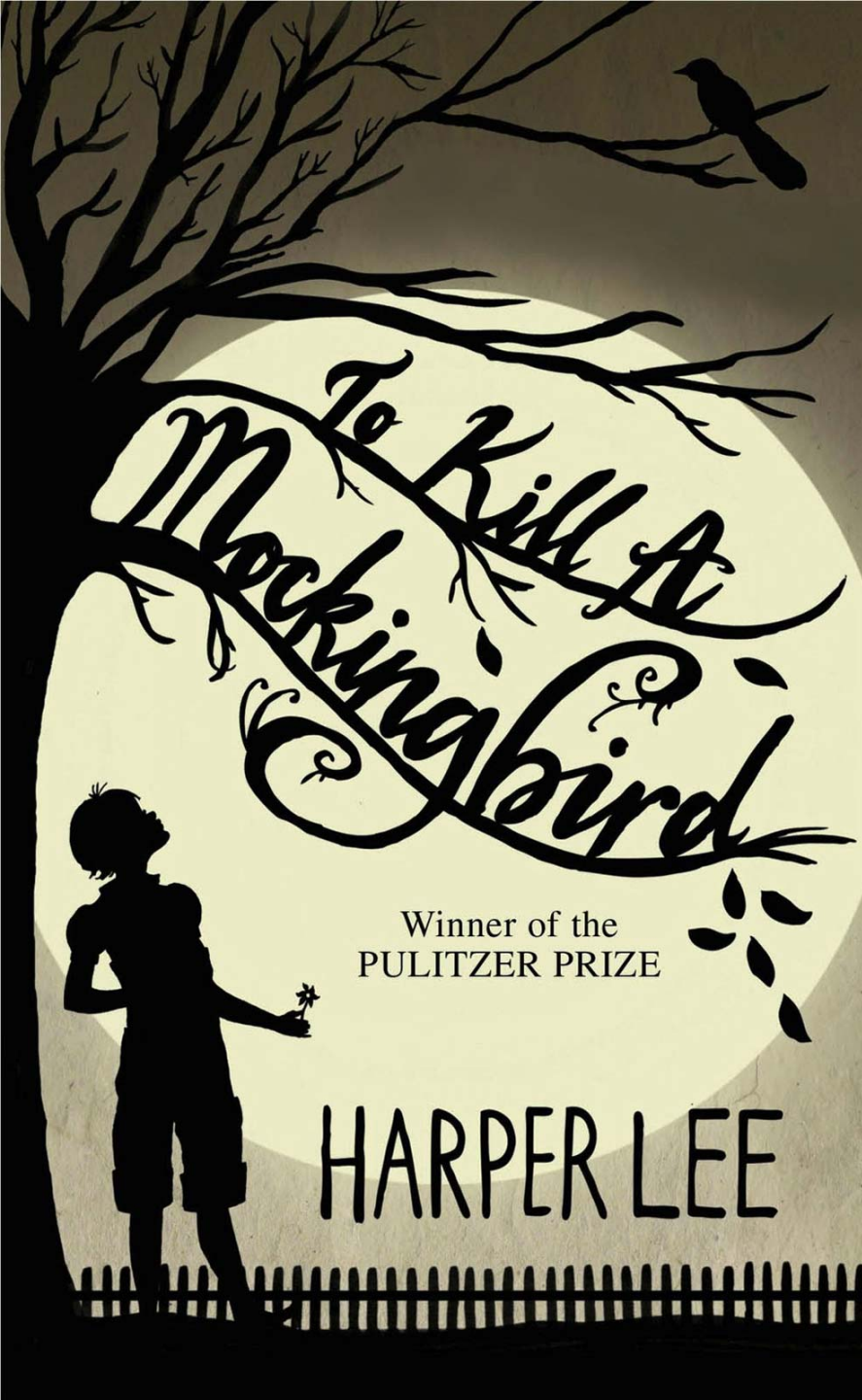
"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Do you agree?

Discuss with a partner.

How reliable are children as witnesses to important events?

- Write a **short response** to this question.
- Try to consider **both sides** of the argument – that children both are and are not reliable witnesses. Explain your thinking and consider using **personal** or **anecdotal** examples.



- Consider this **book cover design** for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- Based on this image, what do you think that the novel might be about? Think about the ideas that we have just discussed, too.

Harper Lee

- **Harper Lee** was an American writer born in 1926 in **Alabama**, where she was raised.
- Her father was a **lawyer**, and she used this – as well as other details from her own life – to inform her debut novel, ***To Kill a Mockingbird***, which was published in 1960.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* was her only published novel until the unexpected release of ***Go Set a Watchman*** in 2015.
- Lee was awarded the **Presidential Medal of Freedom** in 2007 and died in 2016.



About the Novel

- The novel is set in the fictional town of **Maycomb, Alabama**, during the Great Depression in the 1930s.
- The protagonist is a young girl named Jean Louise Finch, but everybody calls her 'Scout'. Along with her brother, Jem, she is raised by her widowed father, Atticus Finch, who is a lawyer. Atticus teaches his children to be honest, kind, and empathetic.
- The story concerns Atticus' decision to represent and defend a black man who has been accused of raping a white woman, for he knows that the accusation is false. This makes Atticus unpopular in the racist town in which they live.
- The novel won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and is now considered a classic of American literature, as well as one of the most famous novels in the world.

Task

- As a quick task, research what is meant by the '**Great Depression**' and what this era meant for the American people.
- Since the novel is set during the Great Depression, consider how this might affect the **characters** in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Semi-Autobiographical Elements

- Though the novel was published in 1960, it is set in the **1930s**, when Harper Lee was a child. This suggests that she is drawing on her own **childhood experiences** to inform the novel's plot, tone, and themes.
- As a lawyer, Lee's father had **unsuccessfully defended** two black men accused of murder. He gave up being a criminal lawyer after this case.
- Many people believe that this fact influenced Lee's writing of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the character of **Atticus Finch** is believed to be at least partly based on Lee's father.

KEY WORD

empathy

definition:

The ability to understand and share the feelings of another. To be empathetic toward someone is to imagine or relate to what they are experiencing.

The Title

Lee's title is referenced in the following excerpt from the novel:

"Remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

"Your father's right," she said. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

Atticus believes that mockingbirds, as innocent creatures, should be protected from harm and evil. His message is that innocent people do not deserve to be hurt or killed.

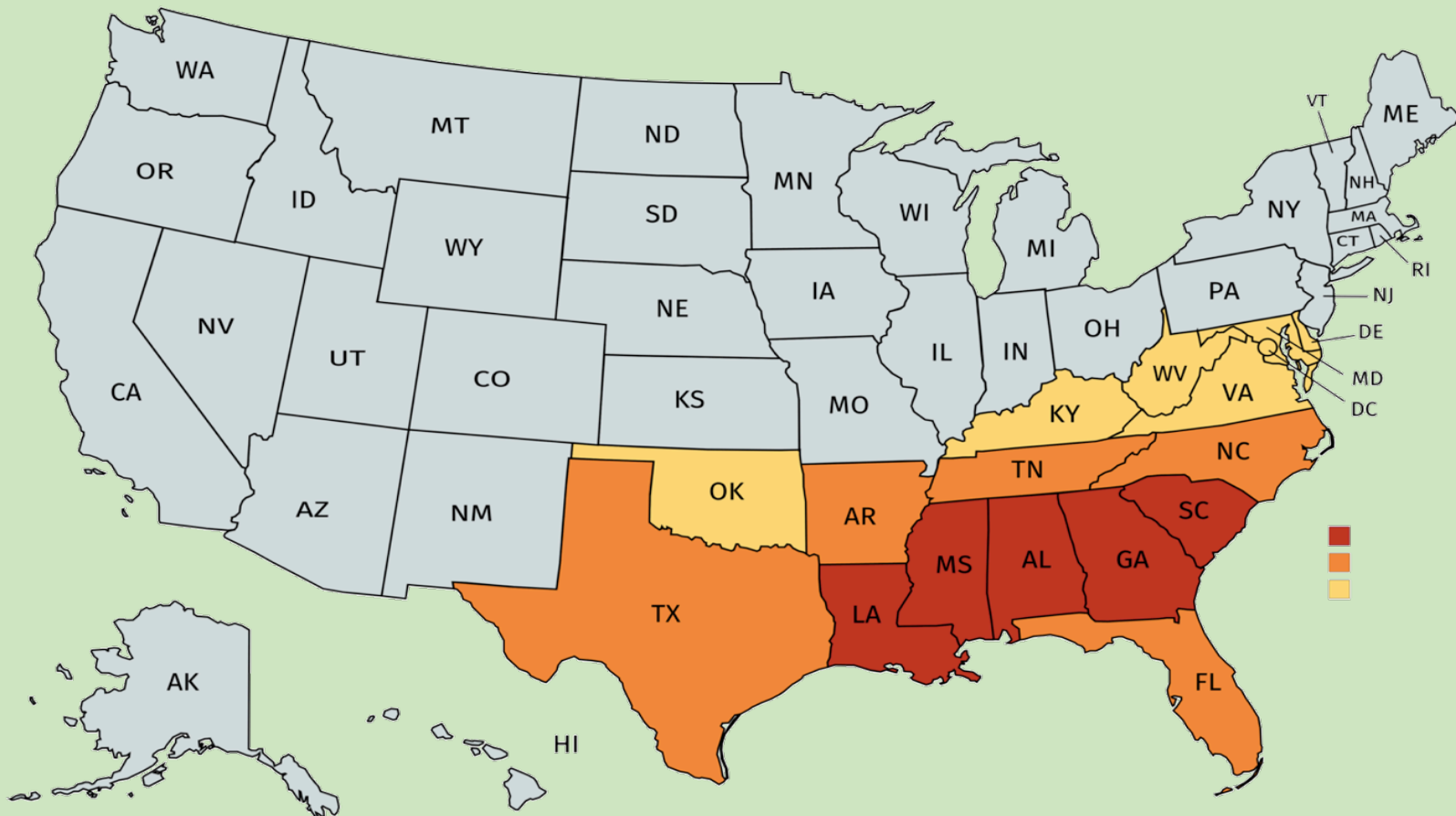
To kill something harmless and beautiful is wrong.

Racism in the Deep South

- The novel is set in the '**Deep South**' of the United States. This area of the country, which usually includes Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi and Louisiana, is known historically for its dependence on **slavery** and **slave plantations** before the American Civil War. This has culturally associated this part of the country with **racism**.
- Following the Civil War's end in 1865, the Deep South was still marked largely by racism, becoming a major site of racist crimes and **white supremacy**. The **Civil Rights movement** faced particular difficulties from the Deep South.
- Born in Alabama, Harper Lee knew this part of the world well, and drew upon her own experiences of witnessing racism in the Deep South. Hence the **novel's setting** is vital to understanding the extent of the racism that it depicts.

The Deep South

The **coloured** States represent the parts of America commonly referred to as the 'Deep South'. The darker the colour, the more likely the State is to be considered a part of the Deep South.



The Civil Rights Movement

- The publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird* coincided with the heart of the **Civil Rights movement of America in the 1960s**, making its depictions of racism all the more important.
- The movement marked the struggles of **black and African-Americans** to end **racial discrimination, segregation** and **disenfranchisement** in the United States.
- Decades of racial discrimination against African-Americans were highlighted globally by **mass protests** and acts of **civil disobedience** throughout the 1950s and 60s.
- The movement was and is still famous for its representation under the leadership of **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, who spoke movingly about racial inequality in speeches and protests that were shown around the world. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, and was **assassinated** in 1968 for his work to end racial inequality. There are of course **many other notable and important figures in the movement**; famous examples include Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou, Harry Belafonte and James Baldwin.

KEY TERMS

DISCRIMINATION

The unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.

SEGREGATION

The action or state of setting someone or something apart from others. In the United States, segregation meant that black people would be separated from white people in terms of where they ate, drank, walked, and were educated, among many other limitations.

DISENFRANCHISEMENT

The state of being deprived of a right or privilege, especially the right to vote. It was not until 1965 that all African-Americans were allowed to vote.



- Martin Luther King, Jr., (pictured: left) delivered his famous '**I Have a Dream**' speech to over 250,000 supporters in Washington, DC., in August 1963.
- Landmark achievements of the Civil Rights movement include the passing of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** (outlawing discrimination based on race, skin colour, sex, religion or national origin) and the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**.
- **Segregation** in schools and laws banning **interracial marriage** were made illegal in 1967.
- The **dismantling of racism** in the United States is still believed to be an on-going process. There is still evidence of **racial inequality** to this day.

Narrative Perspective

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from the **perspective of Scout**, a girl whose age in the novel ranges from six to nine.
- Scout **witnesses and documents** her father's decision to defend Tom Robinson, a black man, and the associated racism of the town. This narrative is coupled with her own **commonplace childhood experiences**.
- Why do you think that Lee chooses to tell her story of **prejudice, truth, and justice** through the **eyes of a child**? Discuss your thoughts.

Childhood & Education

- **Childhood and education** are important themes in the novel.
- Children are commonly associated with **innocence and naivety**, and for being **easily impressionable**.
- Scout's narrative includes reference to her **education** – both formal and moral – and Lee encourages the reader to see the world through a **child's eyes**. The novel shows how much children learn from the environment and culture in which they are raised.

Bildungsroman

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a **coming-of-age** novel, otherwise known as a **Bildungsroman** story.
- This means that it depicts the **psychological or moral growth** of a young protagonist in their formative years, often from childhood to adulthood.
- Lee's novel functions in many ways as a Bildungsroman text in showing Scout's coming-of-age story as she learns about **prejudice** and **equality** in the world around her.

Morality Tale

- We might also call the novel a **morality tale**; in other words, it is a story with a moral to **teach**.
- Some people have criticised Lee's **sermonising** and **moralistic** approach to telling the story, but it is mostly praised for its attempt to promote **equality** and **tolerance**.

Allegorical Significance

- The fictional town of **Waycomb, Alabama**, is **symbolic** not only of the Deep South, but really of prejudice (specifically: **racial discrimination**) in the whole of the United States.
- Waycomb is a **microcosm** for the whole country. It represents the structures of racism prevalent in the entire national culture. The novel can therefore be read as an **allegory** about **justice** and **equality**.

KEY WORD

allegory

definition:

a story, poem, or picture that can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning, typically a moral or political one.

Key Themes in the novel...

- Racism
- Prejudice
- Justice
- Truth
- Childhood
- Tolerance
- Gender
- Equality
- The Law
- Class
- Education

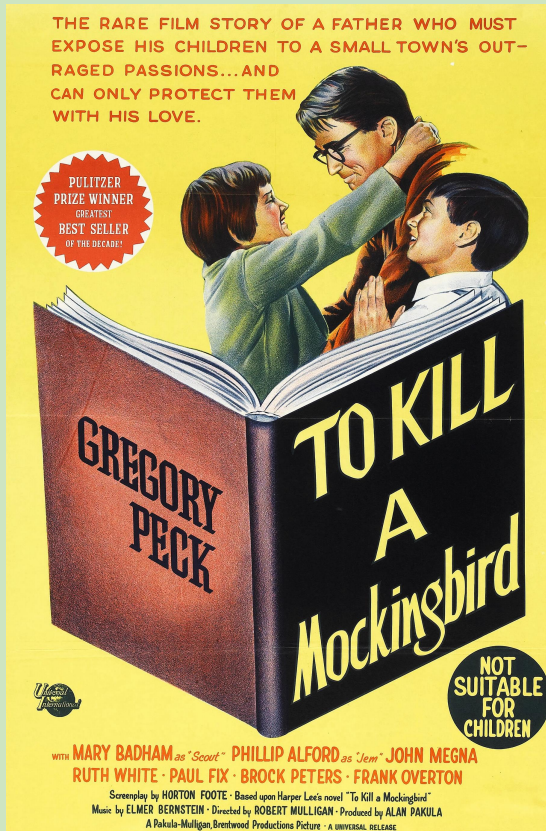
HARPER LEE



TO KILL A
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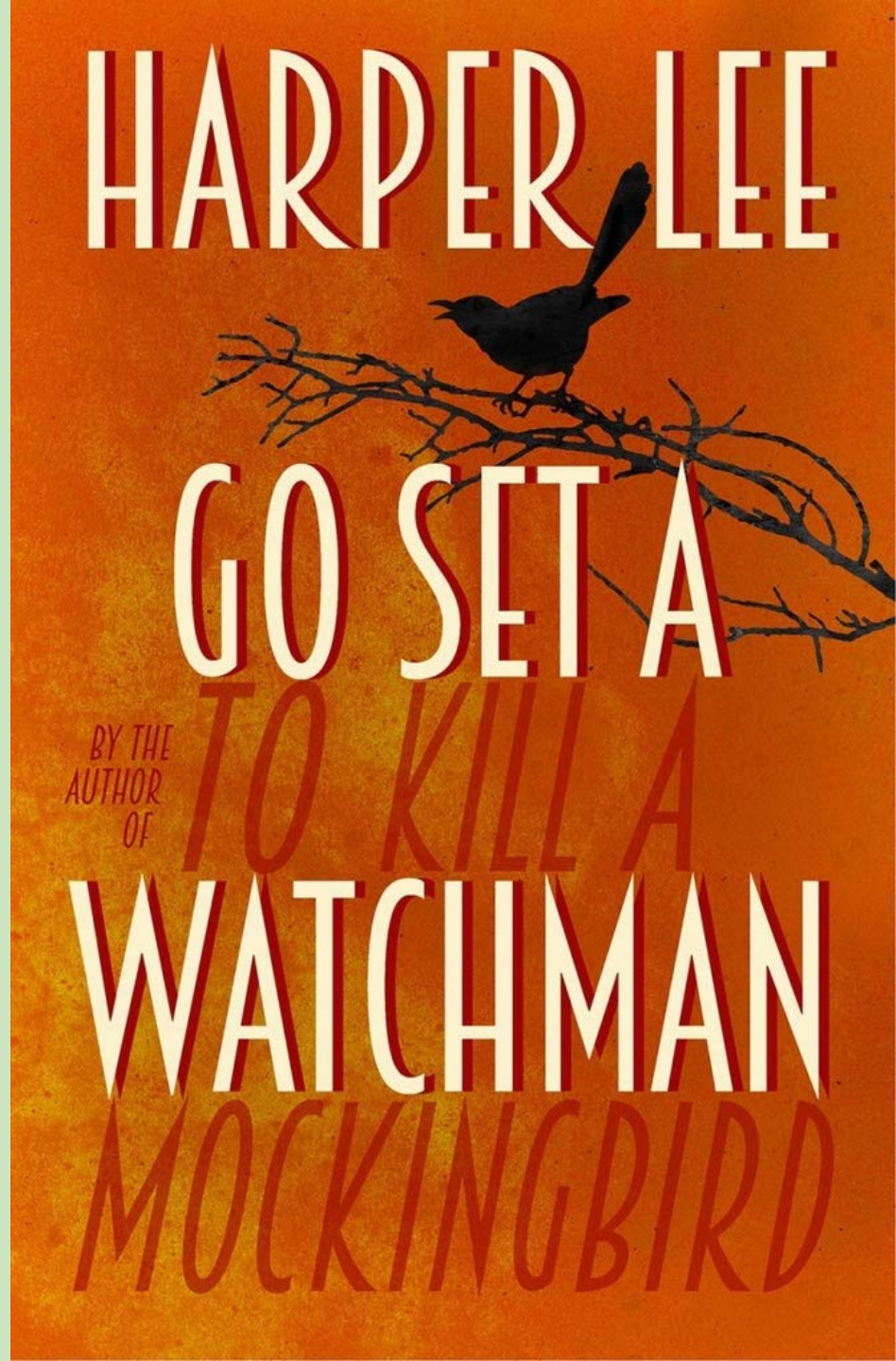
Film Adaptation

In **1962**, the novel was **adapted** into an Oscar-winning film starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch. You may wish to watch it to support our study of the novel.



Go Set a Watchman

- In 2015, Harper Lee published **Go Set a Watchman**, which was marketed as a sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but is now generally believed to constitute an **early draft** of the famous novel.
- Many of the **characters** from *To Kill a Mockingbird* are present in *Go Set a Watchman*. The novel concerns **racial tensions** twenty years after the events of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
- You may wish to **read** *Go Set a Watchman* after we have read *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



Task

Based on our original discussion, write a **response** to the following question:

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

To what extent do you agree?

Explain in your response whether you agree or disagree and give evidence to support your opinions. Try to create a strong argument, bolstered by facts and opinions. Aim for between 400-500 words.