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## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Some events in the novel mirror circumstances in Harper Lee's life. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee infuses the adventure with her experience as a lawyer's daughter and a tomboy growing up in the South. Although a work of fiction, the novel reflects a small Southern town during the Great Depression.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. What do the students learn about Harper Lee from her biographer, Charles J. Shields, and other contributors? What are the three most important points on the Audio Guide?

Read Reader's Guide essays "Harper Lee" (or Handout One: Harper Lee), "The Friendship of Harper Lee and Truman Capote" and "How the Novel Came to Be Written." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

### Writing Exercise

The novel begins with an epigraph by Charles Lamb: "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once." Based on what you've learned from the Audio Guide, why do you think Lee chose this quote to begin her novel? Have students write two paragraphs on how this statement relates to what they have learned about Lee's life.

### Homework

Read Chapters 1–3. Prepare your students to read approximately thirty pages per night in order to complete this book in ten lessons. What happens to Scout on her first day of school? What kind of teacher is Miss Caroline, Scout's first grade teacher?

# 2

## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the mid-1930s during the Great Depression. Throughout the decade jobs were scarce, bread lines were long, and movies cost only a nickel—a time that left an indelible impression on the young Harper Lee. Culturally, the swing era, movies, and radio drama were the talk of the nation. Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald chronicled the lives of the rich and famous, while writers such as John Steinbeck recounted the tale of America’s downtrodden. Women could vote, and the prohibition of alcohol was finally repealed. Government programs such as the Works Progress Administration and Social Security were established. But some things endured even the chaos of economic depression. Jim Crow laws continued to prevent African Americans from enjoying equal rights with other citizens, even if the Old South seemed to be slowly changing.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Based on the Audio Guide, why does former Justice Sandra Day O’Connor say that Atticus “represents the best of the legal profession”? According to O’Connor, how might “the idea of justice pervade everything”? Have you seen any indicators of this in your first reading assignment?

Play Billie Holiday’s 1939 “Strange Fruit,” a description of the practice of lynching. Play the music of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

Jazz crossed racial boundaries, drawing audiences from all walks of life. If you have additional time, you can also cover jazz music in the decades before and after the Great Depression.

### Writing Exercise

Read Handout Two: The Great Depression and the Reader’s Guide essay “Historical Context: The Jim Crow South.” Have students write a one-page, in-class essay on how the book reflects historical realities.

### Homework

Read Chapters 4–7. What role does reading play in Maycomb? Why is Boo Radley such a mystery to Scout, Jem, and Dill? What is the significance of the hole in the tree?

# 3

## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is told in first person by Jean Louise “Scout” Finch. The novel begins from the point of view of Scout as she looks back on her childhood, revisiting memories through the filter of her adult experience.

### Discussion Activities

Why might Harper Lee tell the story from an adult perspective, narrated many years after the fact? In the first seven chapters, can you find statements that remind us of an adult point of view? Or does the adult narrator enter completely into the world of her childhood?

How would this story be narrated, in the third person, from the point of view of Dill’s fabulous imagination? Have the class brainstorm the outline of a new version of the novel told from this perspective.

### Writing Exercise

Based on the previous activity, have students write a few pages of Dill’s version of the story based on the first seven chapters.

Begin another version of the novel told in first person from Boo Radley’s perspective. How would Boo Radley describe Jem, Scout, and Dill?

### Homework

Read Chapters 8–10. Going through the first ninety-nine pages, how many characters have been introduced? Which are primary? What motivates the primary characters?

# 4

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

### Discussion Activities

Who is the protagonist in the novel? Who is the antagonist? How does the opposition of these two characters help develop the drama and the unfolding of the tale?

Divide the class into groups to examine the role of foils in the novel. Assign each group two secondary characters: Calpurnia, Boo Radley, Tom Robinson, Miss Maudie, Aunt Alexandra, Uncle Jack, Francis, or Miss Caroline. Ask students to review the first ninety-nine pages of the novel. Have each group list key attributes of their character. Prepare a presentation that documents moments when these characters bring out reactions from Scout. How do their unique personalities help Scout learn about herself?

### Writing Exercise

Students should write two pages on the character that they believe to be the antagonist. If Scout is our protagonist, why is this character opposed to her? How is this character forcing her to look at herself in profound ways? What passages from the text support these conclusions?

### Homework

Read Chapters 11–12. Find the three most vivid descriptions in the two chapters. Are they effective? Why or why not? What do Jem and Scout learn from Mrs. Dubose and going to church with Calpurnia in this section?

# 5

## Lesson Five

### FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

### Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups. Assign each group a selection of chapters (1–4, 5–8, or 9–12), asking them to identify figurative language used in those chapters. They should identify specific images, similes, and metaphors. In those chapters, how does the figurative language assist in telling the story? Have groups present their findings to the class.

Once they have collected some evidence from the novel, students can reflect on whether some of the figures should be taken literally. What clues help a reader know when the author uses words figuratively? Can you find these clues in the novel?

### Writing Exercise

Find an image in the text. Expand the image by turning it into a simile. For example, Lee expands an ordinary image with a simile: “She did give Jem a hot biscuit-and-butter. . . . It tasted like cotton.”

Have students write a few paragraphs telling a story about an important childhood event. In their story, students should use imagery, simile, and metaphor at least twice. Can they see how developing figurative language in a story contributes to the artistry of the novel?

### Homework

Read Chapters 13–15. What might Mrs. Dubose symbolize? Aunt Alexandra believes the “Finch Family” captures or symbolizes certain values. What does she think this family symbolizes? How does Scout fit into this image?

# 6

## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Atticus is named for a leader from ancient Greece. Independent research on the original Atticus will open doors to a deeper understanding of Lee's Atticus. The very names of Maycomb's residents symbolize something about their nature. Mr. Underwood confines himself to a dark office, and Robert E. Lee Ewell may be the antithesis of his Civil War namesake.

### Discussion Activities

The only time Atticus describes “sin” to his children, he advises Scout and Jem to avoid shooting mockingbirds. Why does the mockingbird become a central symbol of the novel? How does this warning relate to the other events of the story? How does exploration of the mockingbird shed light on other elements of the story?

To further explore this topic, have students do extra research on mockingbirds. Do mockingbirds have other natural features that relate to the story?

### Writing Exercise

In Chapter 15, the drama mounts as Atticus is surrounded by a group of men. How does Scout defuse the potentially violent confrontation? Would you have expected this? Was it convincing that Scout could defuse such tension? Why or why not?

Choose a character whose name serves a symbolic function. Explain how the name as a symbol relates to the real person. Does the person reflect his or her namesake or contradict his or her namesake? Why has Lee depicted them this way?

### Homework

Read Chapters 16–18. Read Handout Three: The Civil Rights Movement. In the first eighteen chapters, how have Jem, Scout, and Dill changed? Are these changes profound or just a result of growing up?

# 7

## Lesson Seven

### FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

This novel explores human nature, equality, and justice through the trial of Tom Robinson. A child's inexperience captures an innocent sense of justice, while an adult's world-weariness leads to abandoning the fight for justice. As a result, this novel hinges on occasions in which adults act like children and children act like adults. In order to argue for racial equality, Lee must demonstrate situations in which narrow-minded prejudice can realistically yield to an expanded moral sensibility.

### Discussion Activities

Which characters in the story are beginning to change their views? In what ways do they change their views? Choose one of the child characters and one of the adult characters to focus your discussion.

Will Atticus still win the trial if he only succeeds in convincing a number of Maycomb citizens of Robinson's innocence? Does he fail if he cannot convince the whole jury? Will it be unrealistic if he is able to convince the jury? Do the main characters reflect the tensions of the Civil Rights Movement? How?

### Writing Exercise

On what occasions do you wish a character might have acted more maturely? On what occasions were you surprised that a character acted very maturely? Why or why not? Explain how you would define "mature."

Early in the novel Scout says, "Jem was a born hero." Have students write a paragraph explaining who they believe is the most heroic character of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Is it Jem? Is it Atticus? Scout? Tom Robinson? Or is it perhaps Boo Radley? Make sure students define "hero."

### Homework

Read Chapters 19–23. Ask students to reflect on how Lee has constructed the plot to reach this dramatic conclusion and come to class with the two most important turning points in the novel.

# 8

## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story’s conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* begins as a story about curiosity, sibling adventures, and the first school days. The novel evolves into a saga about criminal justice, legal representation, and deep-rooted Southern values. All the events lead to the final, tragic event: Tom Robinson’s guilty verdict. At this tragic moment, Jem forsakes “background” in exchange for how long his family has “been readin’ and writin’.” He believes that literacy allows the Finches to rise above prejudice, while illiteracy sinks the Cunninghams into a moral quagmire. In the face of such injustice, Jem realizes that Boo Radley may want to stay inside to avoid the prejudice and injustice.

### Discussion Activities

Have students identify the most important turning points in the novel. Ask students to reference the passages from the novel, explaining why these events are the most significant. Use this information for the next activity.

As a class, map a timeline that depicts the development of the dramatic build-up from the beginning of the story. This map should include the most significant turning points but also examine the lesser events that build tension. As students develop their maps, they should define the beginning, middle, and end of the novel.

### Writing Exercise

Outline a sequel to Lee’s novel. How would this plot unfold? How would students map the beginning, middle, and end? Have students write the opening paragraphs to the sequel.

Rewrite the novel’s ending as if Tom Robinson was acquitted. If he were acquitted, would the novel be as powerful? Would it be more powerful?

### Homework

Read Chapters 24–27. Why did Lee choose this title? How is literacy a theme of the novel?

# 9

## Lesson Nine

### FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Ask students to name five themes within the novel. Here are some examples:

#### **Race**

At what points do different characters make remarks about race? At what points do other characters' actions speak louder than their words? Does the novel make a final statement about how race should affect our treatment of others? Does Dolphus Raymond provide us a clue to this question?

#### **Justice**

Return to Sandra Day O'Connor's statement that the "idea of justice pervades everything" in the novel. What evidence supports or refutes O'Connor's view? If Lee is using the novel to provide us with a definition of justice for the twentieth century, what is her definition? Remember, she published the novel in 1960, during the Civil Rights era.

#### **Literacy/Illiteracy**

Explore Jem's statement about literacy. Review the novel, noting occasions where reading plays an important role. How is the novel developing an argument about the value of reading? What is more important: the activity of reading or the content within the text?

#### **Gender**

A tomboy, Scout becomes more feminine as the novel closes. How does Scout battle with her gender role? Does she give a new definition of femininity? How does this relate to the rest of the story? In what ways do Jem and Dill face the same coming-of-age dilemma? Finally, does this reflect the 1930s, 1960s, or both?



### Homework

Read Chapters 28–31. Begin essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due next class.

# 10

## Lesson Ten

### FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

#### Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Lee provide through Scout and the Finch family? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of her generation? How does this voice represent the era of the Great Depression and Jim Crow?

Discuss the meaning of Scout's concluding comment, "Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" How might Lee's portrayal of Scout, in this scene, make this a great novel?

#### Writing Exercise

Ask students the following questions: If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have them partner with another student to edit outlines and rough drafts. For this editing, provide students with a list of things they should look for in a well-written essay.

#### Homework

Finish essays. Students will present their paper topics and interpretations to the class.

## Harper Lee

Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was a lawyer, newspaper editor, and state senator during her formative years. Harper Lee's childhood in a small Southern town decades before the triumph of the Civil Rights Movement provided all the material she needed for her celebrated, and only, novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Though narrated by a child, *Mockingbird* was not a story Lee could have written without experience in the larger adult world. She studied at Huntingdon College, the University of Alabama (where she never finished a law degree), and at Oxford University in England. In 1950, she moved to New York City, where she worked as an airline reservation clerk. Convinced she had a story to tell about her own magical childhood, she moved to a cold-water apartment and, in earnest, took up the life of a struggling writer.

In 1957, her attempt to publish the novel failed. On the advice of an editor, she decided to turn what was a manuscript of short stories into a longer, more coherent narrative about the Depression-era South. She gained valuable

inspiration when, in 1959, she traveled to Kansas with childhood friend Truman Capote (the inspiration for Dill in *Mockingbird*). There she helped Capote research *In Cold Blood*, a work of creative non-fiction published to wide acclaim in 1966.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, finally published in 1960, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. The following year the book was adapted as a movie with an Academy Award-winning screenplay by Horton Foote. Virtually overnight Lee became a literary sensation. A resolution was passed in her honor by the Alabama Legislature in 1961, and in 1966 she was named to the National Council of the Arts by President Lyndon Johnson.

In the last forty years, Lee has received numerous honors, including several honorary university degrees. Most recently she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in November 2007.

Expectations notwithstanding, Lee has never published another book. Her entire published oeuvre consists of a brilliant novel and miscellaneous articles, mostly from the 1960s.



# The Great Depression

The 1929 stock market crash set into motion a series of events that plunged America into its greatest economic depression. By 1933, the country's gross national product had been nearly cut in half, and 16 million Americans were unemployed. Not until 1937 did the New Deal policies of President Franklin Roosevelt temper the catastrophe. This economic downturn persisted until the massive investment in national defense demanded by World War II.

The causes of the Depression were many, and still debated. High spending in the 1920s created a gap preventing working class people from increasing their incomes. The trade policies of earlier administrations increased the cost of American goods abroad. Lines of credit were overextended, which fueled speculation on Wall Street. The crash that occurred on October 29, 1929 ("Black Tuesday") soon spread across the world, ruining European economies not fully recovered from World War I.

American writers and artists depicted the devastation in prose and pictures. John Steinbeck immortalized the plight of Oklahoma tenant farmers fleeing the Dust Bowl in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise*

*Famous Men* (1941) used the grim but dignified photographs of Walker Evans to illustrate the catastrophe in rural areas. Photographer Dorothea Lange, employed by the Farm Security Administration, documented in magazines and newspapers nationwide the reality that confronted American farmers.

Harper Lee experienced the Great Depression as a child in Monroeville, Alabama, and used her memory of it in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Maycomb County," she writes, "had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself," a reference to a famous speech by President Roosevelt. Walter Cunningham's father refused a WPA (Works Progress Administration) job, fearing what would come of his independence if he went on relief. And Bob Ewell, as Scout tells us, was "the only man I ever heard of who was fired from the WPA for laziness."



# The Civil Rights Movement

Civil rights are something most Americans take for granted today. But millions of Americans were long denied fundamental democratic rights: voting, freedom of movement, due process, and equal protection under the law. At the end of the Civil War, the U.S. government began passing constitutional amendments and civil rights legislation on everything from voting rights to the right to own property and appear in court. The Civil Rights Movement in America really began as a newly freed African American population demanded rights.

Well-intentioned federal law was obscured by the failure of Reconstruction in the 1870s. Southern states passed a variety of “Jim Crow” laws enforcing racial segregation in education, housing, transportation, and public facilities. Marriage between blacks and whites was forbidden. For almost ninety years following Reconstruction, poll taxes and literacy tests made voting all but impossible for African Americans.

A forceful, nonviolent movement opposed Jim Crow. In 1909, W.E.B. Dubois cofounded the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), leading the twentieth century civil rights struggle. With opposition from the Ku Klux Klan, the Civil Rights Movement struggled through the 1920s and 1930s, marred by race riots and lynchings. Between 1882 and 1968, some three hundred blacks were lynched in Alabama alone.

Slowly, the federal government and the courts endorsed the stance of the NAACP and other organizations. In 1954 the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruled that “separate but equal” school facilities were unconstitutional, ordering integration in public schools. The next year Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white man, leading to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In the decade that followed, under the spiritual and political leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement for civil rights expanded, even if the path was hard and bloody. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, the civil rights of all Americans were established by law.

