

## Literature Unit 1: *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

### Skills targeted:

**AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

**AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

**AO4** Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant to self and other readers in different contexts and at different times.

### Why study this text?

In spite of being the only novel published by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is widely regarded as one of the most important literary works of twentieth-century American fiction. Set in America's Deep South during the Great Depression, Lee's partially autobiographical study of the catastrophic effects of racial and social prejudice on a small community is told through the eyes of a child, Scout, the daughter of one of the great modern literary heroes, Atticus Finch, the lawyer. This narrative perspective subtly exposes the tension between good and evil which exists behind the familiar faces of Scout's family, friends and neighbours, and the gradual recognition of the flawed, imperfect adult world that marks the end of childhood.

Lee expertly conjures a world of small-town America, interweaving detailed character study of the inhabitants of Maycomb, Alabama with the all-engrossing world of children's make-believe games. Although Scout is the narrator of the story, it is her brother, Jem, who is the central character and it is his rite of passage into the adult world which is the main focus of the novel; his dawning realisation of, and disillusionment with, the adult world of racism and prejudice is the major theme.

Both Higher and Foundation candidates will find the experience of reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* rewarding and enjoyable. It is accessible on many levels; at a literal level the plot lines provide plenty of enthralling reading and some of the character studies can engender lively debate. Higher Tier candidates will be able to consider the effect of narrative perspective as well as some of the moral and philosophical elements of the text.

As part of Literature Unit 1 Exploring Cultures, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has enormous cultural significance. Although its themes are universal, the particular events and social/cultural climate of 1930s America form the backdrop of the novel and, while contextualising these, students will deepen their understanding of American history.

### Background and context

Published in 1960, at a key time in America's struggle for Civil Rights, Lee received instant acclaim for her novel and was awarded The Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Writing as an adult dealing retrospectively with her childhood, the narrative voice in the novel is both child and adult – the adult Lee reflecting on the six-year-old girl who is both observer of, and participant in, the events of the novel.

It is widely assumed that Harper Lee based the events of Tom Robinson's trial and conviction on the famous trial of the Scottsboro Boys; nine black boys accused of the rape of two white girls. This trial, one of the most famous legal battles in American history, spanned two decades and became synonymous with America's perceived inability to deal equitably with racial tensions in the courtroom – the one place where, as Atticus points out, all men should be treated equitably. Atticus's battle to save Tom Robinson plays out against a background of extreme racial tension, in a climate where the effects of the Great Depression has already taken its toll on the economic and social structures especially in the rural areas of America such as Alabama.

## Discussion points

### Prejudice

There is huge social and racial prejudice in this world. As a child, Scout is also prejudiced – the ‘game’ of Boo Radley signifies childhood’s prejudice of the unknown, the misunderstood. In the children’s world ‘playing Boo Radley’ becomes an allegory for the adult world’s prejudice against and distrust of people from different racial and social backgrounds, e.g. their black neighbours, as well as, to a lesser extent, poor whites and extreme victims of the Great Depression, symbolised by the gross figure of Bob Ewell. What begins in Chapter 1 as rather trivial, social prejudice is eventually unmasked as deep-seated, insidious fear of the unknown. Aunt Alexandra’s discomfort when she hears of the children attending Calpurnia’s church is a mild precursor to the lynch mob that arrives at the courthouse to kill Tom Robinson.

### Good and evil

Jem’s rite of passage, the central point of the novel, is his struggle to come to terms with the co-existence of good and evil in the world. Where figures like Boo Radley and Tom Robinson become victims of cruelty and prejudice, other characters like Atticus provide morality, humanity and tolerance. Atticus teaches the children to learn to understand and accept others by looking at life from their point of view; teaching them to acknowledge and respect human strengths as well as weaknesses. Although Jem really struggles, becoming disillusioned and frightened of the cruelty in the world, Scout finally learns Atticus’s lesson when standing on the Radley porch.

### Narrative form

The novel is often described as a ‘*Bildungsroman*’, an ‘education’ novel where the central character undergoes a growing up – a rite of passage into an adult place of greater wisdom and perspective. Perhaps Dickens’ *Great Expectations* is a more traditional example of this genre than *To Kill a Mockingbird*, because Scout’s rite of passage is secondary, and certainly more subtle, than Jem’s disturbing journey into the adult world.

### Narrative perspective

The adult Scout retells events from her childhood memory. However, it is the adult voice, with adult language and vocabulary, that is prominent; the childlike perspective is displayed completely through dialogue.

## Example task

### Group task

Consider the advice of Atticus that ‘we never really understand a person until we consider things from his point of view’. Atticus wants to teach his children to develop tolerance and understanding of others. How does this help us, as readers, develop our tolerance and understanding of the following characters:

- Mrs Dubose
- Bob Ewell
- Nathan Radley.

Ask groups to consider these three characters and present a ‘case for the defence’ for each of them.

## Analytical approaches/Creative approaches

1. Many editions of the novel often include a map of the area, designed to show how Scout, Jem and Dill’s whole existence is condensed into two/three streets of this small American town. Ask students to do the same for their own childhood world with their significant places marked: home, houses of friends/family, places they played when they were little. Ask students to consider the significance of Lee’s provision of a map – why does she want to draw attention to the size of Scout’s world?

2. The deceptively mundane opening sentence sets the tone for the whole of the novel. Without reading on, ask students to predict and hypothesise on points such as narrative perspective, possible causes of Jem's injury, the significance of Jem's age, etc. This task requires students to employ the level of analysis required for A/A\* potential.
3. The striking contrast between the narrator/reader's adult perspective and Scout's innocent, childish point of view is apparent throughout the novel, but highlighted dramatically at certain key moments. For example, it is Scout's childish innocence that so disarms and shames the lynch mob outside the courthouse the night they had come to kill Tom Robinson. Analysis of other key moments in the novel which draw attention to Scout's innocence will enable candidates at a higher level to deepen their understanding of narrative perspective: for instance the scene in the public balcony when Scout is asked to stand, as her 'father is passing'.
4. As narrative perspective is so intrinsic to study of this novel, there are several places where students could consider a different character's point of view and thereby deepen their own understanding:
  - Dill's letter home to his mother and step-father after his first meeting with Scout and Jem
  - Boo Radley's description of the three children and their game, possibly centring on his father blocking up the hole in the tree
  - Jem's account of the night of the school pageant
  - Atticus's account of the night outside the jail house.
5. Conduct some online research into the origins of the Civil Rights Movement. Students could work in groups, each investigating and producing a report on:
  - the American involvement in the Atlantic slave trade
  - the Scottsboro Boys and other famous racial trials in the American Deep South
  - the Ku Klux Klan
  - the Great Depression
  - the legal position of Black Americans leading up to the Civil Rights Movement.
6. Create a timeline around the classroom with the first Atlantic trade journey of the seventeenth century at one end, and the election of Barack Obama at the other. Ask students to all provide an item for the timeline. This can be undertaken as an independent research study.
7. Watch the Oscar-winning film version of the novel and undertake some comparisons of the differences. The class could create a bank of differences and then choose three to consider in detail. Among the notable differences are the omission of Chapter 12 (Mrs Dubose) and the character of Miss Caroline, the schoolteacher.

## Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question

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- use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
  - use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

### **Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit**

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!*. The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

*Mister Pip*

*Romeo and Juliet*

*Martyn Pig*

*Of Mice and Men*

*An Inspector Calls*

*Lord of the Flies*

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