

Liberty University

Don't Kill *Mockingbird*

An Educator's Guide to Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the Twenty-First Century

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## Introduction

As high school students, we all must face certain academic rites of passage: dissecting a frog in biology, failing an algebra test, giving a shaky demonstration speech, taking a field trip to the capitol (state or national, location allowing) as a giddy social studies teacher plays tour guide. For better or for worse, these learning experiences can be among the most memorable moments of adolescence. If we embrace them fully, these traditions may even be formative, taking up residence in our souls and forever informing our way of seeing and being in the world. The rites of passage in English classes tend to be a bit less flashy, but if we are willing to invest ourselves in them, they can be among the most formative of all. In English, we read stories—coming-of-age novels such as *Great Expectations* and, in edgier classrooms, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. By following the characters' rites of passage into maturity, we participate in a literary rite of passage of our own.

For many of us, one of the most beloved such stories was Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We watched Scout Finch as she learned to consider other points of view and face prejudice with courage, and by the story's end we felt she could be a friend, even a reflection of our own childhood selves, lost now to the passage of time. Though the novel was published in 1960, it remains a cherished text among Americans, who voted it the best loved Great American Read in a 2018 PBS competition ("The Great American Read Results"). It also appears on other, more ignominious lists, such as the lists of most frequently banned books from the American Library Association (ALA), though the reasons for its banishment vary.

When I first read the novel in the twelfth grade English class at my small private high school, I remember that before we even started, my teacher gave us a talk about the content. This book talks about rape, she told us, and there are going to be words in this book we don't say, although she did not go into extensive detail on the history of the racial language or its modern connotations. We read the novel without incident, and while I was the kind of English student who not only read but actually enjoyed just about every text I encountered in my literature classes (hence the reason I became an English teacher), I found *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be the most charming story of all. I loved the narrative voice, the humor, the themes, and of course the characters, Scout especially. Four years later, when I as a college senior undertook a literature capstone course in which I would analyze a work of literature and its author, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was the only book I considered. At some point in my future career, I reasoned, I was likely to teach the novel, so it seemed like the most practical choice. The more deeply I studied it in my last year of college, the more convinced I became that this story was not only excellent but also necessary, for it deals with many of the same fraught topics and eternal conflicts with which we, generations later, must contend.

I finished the course. I got an A. Unlike my previous classes, which occupied no further space in my mind after I had finished them, I often found myself thinking about my capstone course and the ideas I had studied in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The notion of seeing things from other people's points of view and walking around in their skin was no longer merely a pithy quotation to me, but a practice I desired to cultivate in my daily interactions. Even so, I thought my study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* had come to an end. I did not anticipate ever returning to the book for any reason other than to introduce it to my students or reread it for fun.

Yet in the time since my college days, the broader world of English language arts (ELA) education has shifted in ways that have complicated teaching a text such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Concepts such as decolonizing the curriculum, teaching for justice, decentering whiteness, and practicing anti-racism are now promoted in notable organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and they have filtered into ELA classrooms. Galvanized by the racial unrest that resurfaced in the summer of 2020, teachers around the country have found themselves reconsidering their professional practice in light of race, and English teachers especially have been encouraged to “lead the way through our teaching” in counteracting racism (Zuidema et al.). In professional development modules, educational publications, and social media groups, teachers are carrying out this anti-racist mandate by swapping ideas, sharing resources, diversifying their classrooms, and retiring problematic practices.

To my shock, some teachers are now categorizing the use of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their English curricula as one of those problematic practices that needs to be discontinued. Although in my initial research I occasionally encountered news stories about districts who were trying, with varying degrees of success, to ban the book, at that time it seemed as though most challenges to *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s place in the curriculum originated among parents. Yet more and more, the challenges are coming from teachers and administrators within the school system itself. We the teachers, who wear t-shirts declaring “I read banned books” and commend *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984*, are supposed to embrace controversy and condemn censorship, not quietly slip books off our shelves in the middle of the summer to banish them to an austere and

lonely storage room. Should this be the fate of the novel that in one poll beat out the Bible for the title of all-time most inspirational book (“To Kill a Mockingbird Beats Bible in Book Poll”)?

If we see *To Kill a Mockingbird* as problematic, it could be that we are not interpreting it effectively. Rather than retiring it altogether, we as English educators ought to reexamine and perhaps recalibrate how we teach the novel so it continues to inspire and challenge new generations of readers. Because *To Kill a Mockingbird* has faced multifaceted challenges to its inclusion in English literature curricula, English educators need a balanced, thoughtful approach to teaching the novel.

Since its publication over sixty years ago, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has drawn extensive criticism for portraying sensitive material—namely, discussing sexual assault and using profanity and racial slurs. Within a few years of the novel’s publication, the school board members of Hanover County in Virginia unanimously voted to remove it from their schools due to its “immoral” content, although they did retract their decision after pushback from the community at large and Harper Lee herself (Little). In this instance, the chief concern seems to have been the fact that the novel talks about rape, at times in unsavory terms. About fifteen years later, this complaint resurfaced in a New York school district, which challenged *To Kill a Mockingbird* for being a “filthy, trashy novel” (“Banned and Challenged Classics”). In 2006, the Brentwood Middle School in Brentwood, Tennessee, initiated a challenge over the book’s “adult themes such as sexual intercourse, rape, and incest” as well as its profanity (“Banned and Challenged Classics”). The profanity is another oft-cited concern, raised in Minnesota in 1977, in Missouri in 1985, in Louisiana in 1995, and in Georgia in 2001, although only the Louisiana challenge resulted in a ban (“Banned and Challenged Classics”).

Though the profanity in the book (e.g. “damn,” “whore lady,” and “hell”) seems quite tame compared to modern young adult fiction, the use of the word *nigger* has become increasingly taboo in the years since *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s setting in Depression-era Alabama. The majority of the recent challenges and complaints about the book center on the novel's inclusion of the n-word. In 2017, complaints about “some language in the book that makes people uncomfortable” led to its removal from the curriculum in Biloxi, Mississippi (Caron). James La Rue, who was the director of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom at the time, criticized this complaint against *To Kill a Mockingbird* for being “among the vaguest [challenges] that I've ever heard” (Little). In 2018, the school district in Duluth, Minnesota, announced it too would eliminate *To Kill a Mockingbird* from its curriculum, despite opposition from many of its English teachers (Passi). These individual stories are microcosms of ongoing conversations in school districts around the country. In 2011, 2017, and 2020, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has ranked tenth, seventh, and seventh, respectively, on the ALA's annual Top Ten Most Banned and Challenged Books list. In each of those three years, the racist language was listed as a main reason for the controversy (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”). The ALA notes that an estimated 82 to 97 percent of challenges go unreported, meaning that *To Kill a Mockingbird* may have faced additional, unpublicized complaints in the last decade (“Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books of 2010-2019”). These concerns about language, which originate largely in the community and deal with the text's objective elements, make *To Kill a Mockingbird* a controversial choice in the classroom.

Issues with the language seem to be the most prevalent threat to *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s place in the canon of literature taught in schools, but they are not the only one. Teachers

themselves are also questioning its use in their classrooms. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been demoted from many required reading lists because teachers believe it no longer relates to diverse modern readers. The story depicts a historical moment marked by repression and intolerance, while today's readers face new, different social challenges. Some teachers would rather devote their time to texts that grapple with contemporary social justice issues such as immigration, terrorism, and mass incarceration, which they hope will expand students' understanding of their own world (Whitmore et al. 8). Obviously, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has little to say about these topics. Additionally, teachers are concerned that *To Kill a Mockingbird* does not connect with today's multicultural, multiethnic students. Public school demographics across America have shifted substantially since the novel's release, growing more diverse even in the last twenty years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, white students comprised 61 percent of the total American public school population in 2000; as of 2017, they represent 48 percent. Black students are 15 percent, Hispanic students are 27 percent, Asian students are 5 percent, and the remaining 3 percent of the student population is either Native American, Pacific Islander, or multiracial ("Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools"). To serve this changing constituency, districts across the country are adopting the framework of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching can be defined as a "fundamental commitment to students' success," both for students "who are from a diversity of languages, cultures, racial/ethnic backgrounds, religions, economic resources, interests, abilities, and life experiences as well as students who are members of the society's 'mainstream' . . . groups" (Taylor and Sobel ix-x). By the logic of culturally responsive teaching, these diverse populations are represented in the classroom, so they ought to be represented in the curriculum as well. ELA teachers

specifically, mindful of the conception of literary texts as windows, mirrors, or sliding glass doors, have sought texts featuring diverse characters so all students can see themselves reflected in the literature they read (Bishop ix). Because *To Kill a Mockingbird* is written by a white woman and centers primarily on white characters, some teachers believe students who are black do not connect with the story (Shaw-Thornberg 101). Since other novels by black authors deal with similar themes but feature black characters more prominently, some teachers retire *To Kill a Mockingbird* in favor of a book that feels more relevant.

Other teachers take their criticisms of the novel even further. Increasingly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been condemned as racist over its focus on white characters and their failure to dismantle the racist system in which the novel takes place. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the African-American experience is mediated through a white narrator, and the predominant figure of the fight for justice is Atticus Finch, the white lawyer who represents a black defendant accused of rape. Since Atticus operates within the legal system and does not directly challenge segregation or racism, some critics argue that the novel promotes “problematic notions about racism and Whiteness” (Groenke 163). One English educator writing for NCTE touts her own decades-long endeavor to remove *To Kill a Mockingbird* from her school’s curriculum because “the messages about race and the status quo are so very outdated” (Franks). Teacher educator Susan L. Groenke inculcates this interpretation in her students, assigning a final assessment in which the pre-service English teachers prepare a mock school board meeting presentation arguing for the novel to be dropped from required reading in light of its problematic content (171). After taking a class that culminates with such a project, are these teachers likely to include *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their own classrooms once they begin their careers? These efforts to undermine *To Kill a*



*Mockingbird* are not isolated—NCTE, Disrupt Texts, Learning for Justice, and other professional organizations for English educators have also encouraged teachers to apply this critical perspective in the classroom. As this interpretation becomes increasingly mainstream, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is likely to quietly disappear from English classrooms around the country—not at the requests of parents, but at the behest of teachers themselves.

The fact that master teachers are training other teachers to fight against a text in their own curriculum suggests that a better approach to that text is desperately needed. While the novel is easy to misinterpret and difficult to read at times, teachers who drop *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the curriculum or interpret it through a critical whiteness lens à la Susan Groenke are cheating their students out of its valuable lessons. As Harper Lee’s friend and pastor, Reverend Thomas Lane Butts, said upon *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s fiftieth anniversary, the novel’s relevance does not have an expiration date. “You read that book and you see . . . how you ought to relate to your fellow citizens,” he reflects. “You see what your attitude should be toward people who are different. And that is an issue in every age. The persons may differ, but the issues are still there” (Murphy 73). Certainly, these ideas remain profoundly relevant to today’s students—why would we renounce a book that communicates them so well? Today’s students are capable of appreciating the novel just as much as previous generations; we as teachers simply have to give them that chance. By grounding our students in the novel’s historical context, navigating controversies gracefully and rationally, and creating meaningful learning experiences around the novel, we can help our students see *To Kill a Mockingbird* for what it is: not a literary Boo Radley to misunderstand and fear, but a necessary and timeless classic.

## Chapter 1: Understanding Historical Context

As English educators, we spend a great deal of time discussing context. We teach students to decipher unfamiliar words through context clues, to read quotations in the context of paragraphs, and to consider paragraphs and chapters within the context of the entire piece of literature. In the same way, we must contextualize whole texts themselves, especially when their context may be unfamiliar to our students. Since Harper Lee based *To Kill a Mockingbird* on elements of her own life, set it in the 1930s, wrote it in the late 1950s, and published it in 1960, its context is more complicated than that of, for example, *The Great Gatsby*, which was set, written, and published in the space of three years' time. Because of these complexities, *To Kill a Mockingbird* can confuse students if teachers do not allocate a generous amount of time to discussing its history before beginning the unit of study.

Although high school students do not need to know the precise number of Ku Klux Klansmen in Alabama during the 1930s in order to follow *To Kill a Mockingbird*, being familiar with the life of its author, the world in which she lived, and the America that embraced her writing will help them comprehend the novel more fully. To understand *To Kill a Mockingbird's* history, we need a sound understanding of Lee's life, the Great Depression-era South, and the novel's relationship to civil rights efforts.

### **The One-Novel Wonder: Harper Lee's Life and Literary Career**

Harper Lee makes for a notoriously difficult biographical subject. When media mogul Oprah Winfrey requested an interview with her during the last decade of Lee's life, Lee declined, reportedly saying, "You know the character Boo Radley? . . . Well, if you know Boo, then you understand why I wouldn't be doing an interview, because I am really Boo" (Murphy 204). Often

characterized as reclusive, Lee was in reality a personable woman who simply wanted to live as free of scrutiny as a public figure could (Murphy 71). Out of a desire to avoid attention and exploitation, Lee spent much of her life as a celebrity fending off curious journalists and biographers. Even her most comprehensive biography, Charles Shields's *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee, from Scout to Go Set a Watchman*, was produced "without Lee's permission, encouragement, or assistance" (3). With this reality in mind, we must acknowledge that many biographical accounts of Lee's life are highly interpretive and at times even speculative in nature. While she undoubtedly followed the classic literary dictum "write what you know" as she crafted both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its predecessor, *Go Set a Watchman*, readers and analysts should avoid making dogmatic statements about exact correlations between Lee's life and her fiction (Shields 10). As we introduce her in our classrooms, we may recognize that some of our own knowledge about Harper Lee is nothing more than conjecture disguised as historical fact. We as teachers are responsible to correct our misunderstandings and avoid passing them on to our students, helping them as best we can to know the true Harper Lee. Enigmatic as she was, Lee is not completely inscrutable. Her biography depicts a life lived in tension between two roles: the woman with deep connections to her home and the woman who, like Boo Radley, remained in many ways detached from the world around her.

In 1926, Amasa Coleman (A.C.) Lee and his wife Frances, née Finch, welcomed their youngest of four children, Nelle Harper Lee. The Lee family dynamic reflected both the traditions of the old South in which it was forged and the opportunities of the new century. A.C. Lee, born in 1880 as the son of a Confederate veteran, became one of the most respected citizens of Monroeville, Alabama, where he spent most of his adulthood. Despite never attending college,

A.C. attained many prestigious roles throughout his life: teacher, newspaper editor, bookkeeper, attorney, and eventually even state representative (Shields 20). Since Frances's poor health (possibly resulting from bipolar disorder) made it difficult for her to take an active role in raising their children, A.C.'s responsibilities as a father became increasingly important, especially in raising his youngest, most difficult child (Shields 22). Though she lacked a warm maternal figure, Nelle enjoyed a close relationship with her father. As Scout does with Atticus, she joined A.C. for his daily reading of the newspaper and called him by his first name (Shields 40). In temperament, however, Nelle and her father were quite different. She was an anomaly among her family members, a "changeling" in a "quiet and sober" family (Shields 21). Much like her heroine Scout Finch, Nelle was quite the tomboy, a "stomach-puncher, foot-stomper, and hair-puller, who could talk mean like a boy" (Shields 13).

Though Nelle was never popular among her classmates, she did have one constant, if eccentric, friend: Truman Capote. Capote, like Nelle, did not fit the gender stereotypes of the early 1930s; she was too aggressive and he "too soft" (Shields 17). Despite their differences, they united around a common interest in writing. On a hand-me-down typewriter from A.C., the young friends hammered out stories together, already caricaturing the citizens of their small town as they would eventually do in their published fiction (Shields 32). Their childhood alliance later blossomed into an adult partnership when she assisted him with researching the true crime novel *In Cold Blood*, a favor he returned by providing editorial comments on *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Shields 98). As a testament to their friendship, Capote memorialized Nelle as the character Idabel in his critically acclaimed debut novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and Nelle modeled Dill after him (Shields 26-27).

As she grew into adulthood, Nelle did not outgrow her differences. She began her postsecondary education at Huntingdon College, a women's institution. Unlike her fellow students, Nelle was no debutant. A classmate recalls, "She never had what we would call in the South 'finishing touches'" (Shields 50). And Huntingdon "was better attuned to young women who hoped to graduate with a 'Mrs.'" (Shields 48). After only a year there, Nelle transferred to the University of Alabama. While she had more in common with the men in her law classes there than with her Huntingdon sorority sisters, she remained an awkward, even nerdy outsider (Shields 54-55).

Although she did not distinguish herself socially while in college, Nelle did set herself apart through her writing. At Huntingdon, she published two short stories in the campus literary magazine—one about a child overhearing a lynching, one about eight black men arrested for gambling and the judge who hears their case (Shields 51). Both hint at concepts later developed in her novels—a child's loss of innocence, courtroom drama, and true justice for all, black and white alike. Once at the University of Alabama, she joined the campus humor magazine, the *Rammer Jammer*, where she eventually served as editor-in-chief. Through these experiences, she realized her calling in life lay in writing rather than practicing law. A semester before graduating, Nelle withdrew from law school. Following in Capote's footsteps, she moved to New York City to pursue writing in 1949.

Nelle spent much of the next decade alone. When she was not working her day job as an airline reservationist, she was cloistered in her sparse Manhattan apartment, writing (Shields 73). Not until November of 1956 did she approach an agency to inquire about selling the short stories she had produced in her seven years away from home. Seeing promise in her writing ability, the

agents advised her to work on a novel, which would be easier to sell (Shields 77). But this sacrifice of time seemed impossible. If it had taken Nelle seven years to write a handful of short stories while working full time, how could she possibly write an entire book?

The answer to that question came on Christmas morning that year. Unable to return home to Monroeville, Nelle spent the holiday with her New York friends Michael and Joy Brown, whom she had met through Capote. That morning, Nelle found an envelope with her name on it nestled in the branches of the Browns' Christmas tree. The note inside read, "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas" (Shields 78). Confused, she asked her friends what this meant. Exactly what it says, they told her—they were paying her a year's salary so she could quit her job and write her novel.

Overwhelmed by her friends' generosity and their belief in her, Nelle spent 1957 drafting what would become *Go Set a Watchman*. Although this novel features the same characters as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it takes place in the 1950s rather than the 1930s. Jean Louise Finch, much like Nelle herself, is an independent young woman who has traveled from New York City to visit her childhood home in Maycomb, Atticus Finch is a racially paternalistic retiree in his seventies, and the plot is a rather meandering collection of memories and anecdotes that culminates in an explosive argument between father and daughter about race relations. Both agree with the typical Southern position of the time that federal intervention threatened the integrity of states' rights guaranteed under the tenth amendment, but Jean Louise does not hold the racial prejudices that this concern often masked (*Go Set a Watchman* 243). Jean Louise is described as "unable to think racially"; she sees "only people" (*Go Set a Watchman* 270). Because she does not ascribe significance to racial characteristics, she argues that the maxim "equal rights for all; special

privileges for none” ought to apply to African-Americans, while Atticus believes African-Americans are “unable to share fully in the responsibilities of citizenship” and thus do not deserve its privileges (*Go Set a Watchman* 242). Although Jean Louise has the moral high ground in the argument, she loses her temper and tells her father she despises him before she storms out (*Go Set a Watchman* 253). When she later asks Atticus’s forgiveness, he tells her he is proud of her for standing up to him and defending what she believes is right (*Go Set a Watchman* 277). This resolution, though perhaps unpalatable in our “absolutist twenty-first century moral discourse,” speaks to a theme that *To Kill a Mockingbird* refines: that even though we may disagree strenuously with our loved ones or neighbors, we must never dehumanize them even when we perceive that they are dehumanizing others (“Nelle Harper Lee on Law” 639).

Notably, the novel mentions the court case that is the cornerstone of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Jean Louise recalls that Atticus, despite his distaste for criminal law, took on a case decades earlier in which a black man with only one arm was accused of raping a white girl, and he defended him successfully, something “never before or afterwards done in Maycomb County” (*Go Set a Watchman* 109). Despite the parallels between this lawsuit and Tom Robinson’s, the acquittal represents a significant change in continuity between the two novels, making *Go Set a Watchman* less of a sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, though it was unfortunately billed as such when the long-lost draft debuted in 2015, and more of an alternate reality.

The draft of *Go Set a Watchman* that arrived at the publishing house J.B. Lippincott in late spring of 1957 was in many ways unpolished, but the editors there nevertheless recognized the talent behind it. For three years, editor Tay Hohoff worked closely with Nelle to reshape the story, a process that required three rewrites. The strength of the flashbacks in *Go Set a*

*Watchman*, which provide glimpses of Scout, Jem, and Dill's childhood antics, convinced Hohoff that the true story was not Jean Louise's to tell, but Scout's, with the adult Jean Louise providing "only the connective tissues of memory and hindsight" (Santopietro 20). Under Hohoff's direction, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was born. As publication approached, Nelle decided to release the book under her old college byline "Harper Lee," an androgynous-sounding name that Northern audiences were unlikely to mispronounce (Santopietro 24).

Though Nelle later confessed that she anticipated "a quick and merciful death at the hands of the reviewers" and "never expected any sort of success," *To Kill a Mockingbird* defied her expectations (Newquist 405). The book debuted on July 11, 1960, and by the month's end it was a top ten bestseller (Shields 152). A movie adaptation soon began production. By May of 1961, the novel had sold nearly half a million copies, and that month Nelle won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction (Shields 168).

Initially, *To Kill a Mockingbird* seemed to be the first milestone on the path to a prolific and illustrious writing career. After all, how many writers land a prime spot on bestseller lists, a movie deal, and a Pulitzer with their first book? The overwhelmingly positive public response to her novel should have been exactly the "little [encouragement]" Nelle had secretly hoped for (Newquist 405). Yet her stardom seems to have had the opposite effect. As Shields explains, "Before she had published anything, Nelle imagined the writer's life as the best possible for someone like her who loved independence and shunned conformity. Now she was discovering that expectations of success could be a ball and chain" (207). Those expectations—both her own and those of others—proved crippling. Unable to believe she could write another *Mockingbird*, she never did. "She says you couldn't top what she had done," her sister Alice shares (Murphy



128). Nelle was, in her own words, “a one-novel-wonder” (*Mockingbird Songs* 74). She insisted another book was in progress when the public pressed her for a follow-up, but the project never reached an editor’s desk (Shields 245).

Occasionally Nelle would appear at special events, such the ceremony to accept her Presidential Medal of Freedom or the local high school’s performance of the dramatized *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but for the most part, she preferred to be left alone. She set her own event calendar, attending only the gatherings that interested her. Although she had divided her time between New York and Alabama for decades, a stroke in 2007 forced her back to Monroeville, where she remained for the rest of her life (*Mockingbird Songs* 115). The staff at her nursing home did their best to protect her privacy, even labeling her door with an alias, but a new Harper Lee tell-all book of dubious accuracy, Marja Mills’s *The Mockingbird Next Door*, dragged the aging writer back into the public eye in 2014. Though Mills insisted the Lee family had given their blessing to the book’s publication, Nelle threatened Mills with legal action, refusing to allow such a breach of her privacy (Shields 263).

The 2015 release of *Go Set a Watchman* invited new intrusions into her privacy as some questioned Nelle’s physical and mental capacity. Some journalists and critics speculated she was too senile to authorize the novel’s publication, and around this time the Alabama Department of Human Resources received an anonymous claim that Nelle was a victim of elder abuse. Judging from her response, which was to tell the investigators to “go to hell and leave her alone,” she seems to have been herself, and both her friend Wayne Flynt and her nephew Hank Conner confirm that Nelle was indeed mentally competent enough to provide her informed consent to the

novel's release (*Mockingbird Songs* 194). Seven months after *Go Set a Watchman* entered the world, Nelle Harper Lee left it. She died peacefully in her sleep on February 19, 2016.

To introduce the author in a classroom setting, show students the contrasts between Harper Lee's public persona and her private life. Together, analyze sources that reveal both sides of her. Start with an objective source such as her obituary from the *Washington Post*, and contrast it with a more intimate one: her 1964 interview with Roy Newquist, which WQXR made publicly available following her death, one of Harper Lee's letters to Wayne Flynt that is printed in *Mockingbird Songs: My Friendship with Harper Lee*, or her sister Alice's essay about her in *Scout, Atticus, and Boo: A Celebration of Fifty Years of To Kill a Mockingbird*. The contrast between her public and private selves invites discussion and reflection. How do the two images differ? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the fierce commitment to privacy that characterized Harper Lee? Do all people, whether prominent figures or not, have both a public self and a private one? Discuss these ideas corporately or write about them individually. Though some authors' introductions in a literature lesson could fit on two lines of a PowerPoint, authors whose lives are echoed in their writing deserve a more sustained introduction, and Harper Lee is one of them.

### **The Mockingbird's Nest: Alabama in the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Era**

In both Harper Lee's life story and her novel, the setting is so important to the story's development that it is almost a character in its own right. The fictional town of Maycomb reflects Southern culture as it really existed in Monroeville during Lee's girlhood. Lee saw her rural Alabama hometown as a world all its own, and she believed it deserved to be documented before it disappeared. "All I want to be is the Jane Austen of south Alabama," she declared in a 1964

interview (Newquist 412). In other words, she wanted to, as Jane Austen had done for Georgian-era England, “preserve her own small, circumscribed social sphere, to reveal the value . . . inherent in an ordinary and commonplace little world, to discover the universal in the local community” (Blackall 20). Like Austen, Lee memorializes her particular and transitory milieu with honesty, affection, and humor.

To document regional history and culture is always a delicate task. It requires generalizing but must avoid stereotyping; it demands specificity but cannot devolve into pedantry. Individual stories do not always denote widespread trends, and every general principle has its exceptions. Historians must allow the facts to speak for themselves and, in Lee’s own words, “trust the reader to have the wherewithal to form an opinion” about the history (*Mockingbird Songs* 40). This is not to say that students of history ought not interpret historical data, but it does suggest that those who teach history (even those of us whose role as English teachers oftentimes requires us to dabble in teaching history as well) ought to carefully avoid skewing our students’ historical understanding as we communicate that data.

Though Southern culture has of course changed significantly since Harper Lee’s girlhood, becoming less monolithic and more inclusive, it retains some elements she writes about, especially its strong regional pride, religious inclination, and individualism (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* xiii). To understand *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students need to understand the unique and often ugly cultural setting of rural Alabama in the twentieth century.

The Alabama Harper Lee knew was a place marked by “community, family solidarity, history, pride, folk culture, religious homogeneity, hospitality, and neighborliness” and governed by “rural folkways of personal honor and independence” (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 178-179).

These values can be traced back to the Scotch-Irish settlers who, along with English colonists, populated the South during its formative years. An estimated quarter million Scotch-Irish, who were for the most part ethnically Scottish people residing in Ireland's Ulster province, immigrated to North America during the colonial era (Virágos 107). The second-most prevalent ethnic group after the English, the Scotch-Irish became the “archetypal’ Americans in the sense that their attitudes and ideals, virtues and vices, proved to be common national characteristics” as the nation coalesced over the next century (Virágos 108). These attributes proved to be especially concentrated in the South, where many Scotch-Irish ultimately settled. Furthermore, a topography split by mountains and farmland often kept Southerners isolated, making them “frontiersmen long after the passing of the frontier” (Goldfield 1). Such an independent and at times chaotic society needed a civilizing, unifying force, so Southerners adopted elaborate regional codes of etiquette in order to “create an orderly means of discourse in a disorderly society” (Goldfield 1). These ethnic, geographic, and social influences created a South that was both highly self-reliant and community oriented, polite yet rebellious.

Unfortunately, this individualistic and isolated Southern culture created conditions in which poverty could thrive. In Alabama, poverty “defined much of the state’s history,” and the rural poor, isolated from the public eye and therefore from public services, were especially vulnerable (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 185). Generally, the upper classes stereotyped the poor in one of two categories—the “poor but proud” who conducted themselves with dignity (e.g. the Cunninghams in *To Kill a Mockingbird*), and the “po’ white trash” (e.g. the Ewell family) whose personal failings had contributed to their poverty (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 186). The Great Depression, however, disrupted these notions as the entire nation plunged into poverty, with the

South being the region most harmed. During the Great Depression era in which *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place, the region's yearly per capita income dropped from \$372 to \$203, exacerbating the problem of Southern poverty (Robinson 110). About a third of the South's workforce was unemployed, though middle-class professionals such as Harper Lee's lawyer father suffered the least (Robinson 114-115). Despite Southerners' typical distrust of federal intervention, they were desperate enough to embrace New Deal programs. Even so, they received only 15.4 percent of the federal government's aid dispersion in a typical depression year despite comprising 28 percent of the national population (Robinson 112). After the Depression ended, the South, and Alabama particularly, still struggled to overcome poverty. The year *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published, the rate of white Alabamians earning less than \$2,000 per year was nearly 45 percent compared to the national average of 38 percent (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 186). Even today, Alabama remains among the poorest states in America.

Ironically, Alabama's poverty created a rich folk culture that influenced some of its most famous citizens: its authors. Reflecting on how her upbringing shaped her as a writer, Harper Lee remarks, "We are a region of natural storytellers. . . . We did not have the pleasure of the theater, the dance, of motion pictures. . . . We simply entertained each other by talking" (Newquist 407). In the absence of high-culture entertainment, Alabama's citizens created their own cultural traditions "on a thousand Alabama front porches" where families gathered to tell stories (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 494). Though this way of creating culture may seem simplistic or even backwards, Flynt argues it was nevertheless legitimate:

Culture is generated at many levels. Uneducated, even illiterate, folk produce culture often as rich and satisfying as wealthy, well-educated people. . . . Southern writers in

particular owe much of their ear for language and their gift for storytelling to the rich oral tradition of the region's poor people. The very poverty that was so much a liability in building decent schools and colleges, educating a literate public, or establishing libraries and book publishers produced its own remarkable culture. (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 494)

Among the writers of this period who hailed from Alabama were Zelda Fitzgerald, 1933 Pulitzer Prize winner T.S. Stribling, Truman Capote, and, of course, Harper Lee herself. They joined a broader Southern literary tradition including William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty, who used fiction to capture and critique Southern culture. And there was much to critique.

Virulent racism against the African-American population defined the South in this era. Despite the promises of new constitutional amendments and the Reconstruction efforts that followed the Civil War, Southern society repeatedly and intentionally denied African-Americans their civil liberties for the hundred years after the war's end.

As freedmen attempted to exercise their hard-won civil rights during the Reconstruction era, Southerners who feared losing their political power and the way of life it guaranteed resorted to intimidation and violence to suppress black citizens. The violence often ended in lynchings, in which a mob would capture people (usually black people) who had allegedly committed crimes and murder them before they could be legally tried. During the 1890s, Alabama led the nation in lynchings, and the majority of victims were black (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 318). Across the South, an estimated one-sixth of all lynchings took place to avenge alleged sexual assaults (Payne 11). For the mob, however, "sexual assault" was a term so nebulous it could refer to anything from raping a white woman to making eye contact with her (Payne 12). The Ku Klux

Klan often executed the mob justice that ruled the South. Born during Reconstruction, the KKK saw its mission as “keeping the black man in his place” (Feldman 15). Though the organization waned around the turn of the century, it returned in the 1920s with a broader focus on “anyone who deviated from . . . ‘one-hundred percent Americanism’”—Catholics, immigrants, Jews, women suffragists, and, of course, African-Americans (Feldman 15). At the Klan’s peak in 1926, 115,000 members donned the trademark white hood in Alabama alone. During this era, the Klan’s activities and interests were as diverse as the groups they opposed (Feldman 88). They supported progressive causes such as public education and prohibition, encouraged civics education and political involvement, and hosted gatherings and fundraisers for their communities even as they also corrupted government institutions and terrorized citizens. The brutal beatings and lynchings that came to characterize the Klan proved to be poor advertising, and the organization’s membership plummeted (Feldman 117). About 5,500 members remained in Alabama through the 1930s, concentrating their efforts on maintaining the racial and economic status quo through business and government (Feldman 220). Because many government and law enforcement offices were either sympathetic to or staffed by Klansmen, their reign of terror went largely unchecked.

While the KKK has become the most infamous symbol of anti-black ideology in American history, racism was not limited to the Klan alone. Mob violence effectively stifled black aspirations, but white Southerners feared that their power over the black citizenry would be short-lived without political fortification. To legally enshrine racist dogma, Alabama politicians drafted a new state constitution in 1901, which “proposed to do with legislation what politicians and white terrorists had done with corruption and violence” (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 318).

The president of the constitutional convention, John B. Knox, explicitly stated in his closing address that the document's purpose was "disfranchising the ignorant and incompetent negro and establishing upon a permanent basis the supremacy of the white race in Alabama" (34). To that end, Alabama's politicians instituted restrictions on voting: requiring a poll tax of \$1.50 per year, disqualifying criminals (including people convicted of misdemeanors such as adultery or vagrancy) to vote, requiring registering voters to own either 40 acres of land or \$300 worth of personal property, and other measures that seriously limited voting eligibility among both black and poor white Americans, although most of these statutes were enforced only for blacks (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 9). The new constitution also banned interracial marriage and required segregated schools (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 9).

Though these measures blatantly violated the United States Constitution, the federal government had all but abandoned the South to its own devices when it came to race relations. Not even the Supreme Court could be trusted to uphold the new constitutional amendments. "The Supreme Court . . . considered popular will and its own notions of racial hierarchy more compelling than the promise of equality under the Constitution," historian Lawrence Goldstone writes in his book *Inherently Unequal: The Betrayal of Equal Rights by the Supreme Court, 1865-1903*. "On the altar of strict adherence to the law, they ruled time and again to deny fundamental rights to black Americans" (196). The infamous 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson* encoded the "separate but equal" principle that led to Jim Crow laws, which Southerners eagerly implemented to segregate black and white Americans. Jim Crow created a South "less violent than what preceded it, but . . . no more just or humane" (*Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* 319).



The American court system itself, which was supposed to operate on the principle of equality before the law, saw and treated some humans (i.e. white ones) as more equal than other humans. For black defendants who escaped the lynching tree and ended up in the courtroom, the ultimate outcomes were often sadly similar. Tom Robinson's fate in *To Kill a Mockingbird* mirrors many African-Americans' real life trials. Accused of a crime on scant evidence, Tom is tried by a jury that is anything but impartial and quickly sentenced to death, the penalty for rape under Alabama law at that time. This steep sentence for rape was not unusual in the South, but it disproportionately affected black men since white men often escaped conviction for the same crime. In Virginia, for instance, dozens of rapists were sentenced to death between 1908 and 1963, and all were black (Gladwell). These death sentences, handed down after sham trials, were essentially a legal form of lynching.

Two such high-profile rape cases took place in Alabama during the Depression era: the Walter Lett case and the Scottsboro boys case. In Walter Lett's case, a white woman accused Lett of raping her, and he was convicted despite his strong alibi. Though Alabama's governor did eventually commute Lett's sentence to life imprisonment, life in prison drove Lett insane, and he died in an asylum of tuberculosis within four years of the alleged crime (Shields 93-94). The Scottsboro case, which advanced to the national Supreme Court, tried nine young black men for the alleged gang rape of two prostitutes. Even after the defendants had to be moved from the Scottsboro jail to protect them from a would-be lynch mob, their trial did not change venues; it took place in the Scottsboro courthouse while thousands of people, including many who had been among the mob, crowded outside. Eight of the nine were sentenced to death despite contradictory testimonies from the victims and the lack of medical evidence that the crime had in

fact occurred. Though litigation began in 1931, appeals and retrials continued for the better part of the decade. The ongoing legal battle revealed that African-Americans, even those with education and a good reputation, were systematically denied the opportunity to serve on Alabama juries while illiterate white men were free to (Carter 195). This exclusion meant that black Americans in Alabama were not truly being tried by a jury of their peers, a serious breach of legal ethics. Though Harper Lee explicitly denied that Tom Robinson's trial was a retelling of either of these high-profile cases, these situations show that quite a bit of history lay behind the fiction (*Mockingbird Songs* 93).

Racial discrimination was not confined to the political sphere in the South. Elaborate social mores evolved to complement segregation laws. Segregation and the customs that enacted it "made race the supreme fact of life" for African-Americans, robbing them of their liberties and dignity (Newby 19). Racial etiquette "bound whites together, though not equally, and it relegated blacks to a permanent status of inferiority. The code of etiquette governed every social situation from hunting to casual meetings on the street" (Goldfield 2). Both white and black children learned their roles in the racial pageantry early. Blacks encountering whites knew they were expected to appear happy and reverential, "always exhibiting a demeanor that would make a white comfortable in believing that this deferential mien was not only right but the way things ought to be" (Goldfield 2). Whites, on the other hand, learned their own superiority. In his memoir, *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South*, American historian Melton McLaurin recounts the racial values he learned from his white middle-class family. "Whites were superior to blacks (and . . . members of my family were superior to most whites)," he explains. Nevertheless, "one should never mistreat a black, insult a black, or purposely be rude to a

black . . . unless, of course, they acted in a manner that whites deemed worthy of chastisement” (30-31). Ironically, white Southerners were more likely to punish African-Americans not for theft, laziness, or violence, all of which they saw as natural for blacks, but for demonstrating ambition, leadership, or intelligence (Goldfield 3, 6). These social expectations all stemmed from the ugly root of racism. In the introduction to the 1968 anthology *The Development of Segregationist Thought*, historian and professor I.A. Newby defines racism by the following tenets:

Racists believe that race is the transcendent fact of life; that human nature is fixed by heredity and immune to environment and therefore related to race; that intelligence and behavior are genetically determined and also related to race; that races differ fundamentally and the differences are relevant to public policy. (2)

To support these contentions, segregationists used “an amalgam of science, social science, history, and religion” to uphold white supremacy (Newby 4). Many segregationists, such as Democrat congressman Frank Clark, believed segregation was “better for everybody” (92). “No country having within its borders two distinct races, alien to each other in every essential respect can long exist with any degree of harmony between the two upon the beautiful theory of perfect equality of all before the law,” he argued in 1908 (95). His testimony encapsulates the racial ideology of his time, blissfully unaware of its own self-contradictions. The perfect equality of all before the law ought to mean that, regardless of race, intellect, or origin, all human beings deserve the same legal rights, which is exactly Atticus Finch’s argument in his closing remarks before the jury. Unable to accept this conclusion, however, white supremacists simply refused to accept black people as truly and completely human. They “fully understood the moral

implications of the fundamental inequity in their society” but chose to pretend “that racism and segregation were . . . the natural, immutable order of things” (McLaurin 89). And for the first half of the twentieth century, that indeed seemed to be the case. Not even racial moderates, characterized by a paternalistic sense of pity toward African-Americans, supported full social equality between whites and blacks (Newby 17). The iteration of Atticus that appears in *Go Set a Watchman* summarizes Southern moderates’ typical position on race relations: “The Negroes are still in their childhood as a people. . . . They’ve made terrific progress in adapting themselves to white ways, but they’re far from it yet” (*Go Set a Watchman* 246-247). This argument typifies the circular reasoning of segregation. Rather than allowing black Americans to advance themselves individually and corporately, white supremacists trapped them in conditions that bred more ignorance, poverty, and degradation.

For most segregationists, the ultimate fear was that black and white people would become socially equal, a status which interracial marriage and sex came to represent. “Sexual relations between blacks and whites became both the ultimate temptation and the ultimate taboo, a symbol of both the reality and the futility of segregation,” McLaurin explains (65). If society were to desegregate, Southerners feared that black men, whom they saw as sexually animalistic and violent, would threaten the purity of white Southern women (Goldfield 14). Miscegenation (whether consensual or not) and interracial marriage were the ultimate adulteration of white supremacy. Segregation kept black people subservient and white people racially pure, so white supremacists sought to maintain the system of segregation as long as they could.

The totality of black oppression made Jim Crow laws difficult to resist. Because white people controlled the institutions, they could wield the full power of the labor and housing

markets, social services, education, and the law itself against black citizens who refused to submit (Goldfield 6). Although organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) emerged in the early twentieth century, they did not truly take root in the deep South for decades. In Alabama specifically, the organization nearly died out in the 1920s for lack of committed support, and while it revived during the Great Depression, by the end of the 1930s, it still had fewer than two thousand members—less than half the KKK’s membership at that time (Verney 111). The majority of NAACP members in this era were middle rather than working class, meaning that rural African-Americans in communities like Monroeville would have been unlikely to join (Autrey 7). NAACP membership invited even worse treatment from whites, and few black citizens, especially those whose livelihoods depended on staying in their white bosses’ good graces, wanted to take that risk. As a result, black resistance against segregation often took fairly subtle forms. African-Americans had to find “a delicate balance between appearing to comply with prescribed norms and finding ways to subvert those norms” (Chafe et al. xxxiii). But the potentially high stakes of these schemes made most black people in the South unwilling to demand equality for generations after the Civil War. “To challenge white people was just the wrong thing to do,” recounts one black man who grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1930s. “You just automatically grow up inferior, and you had the feeling that white people were better than you. . . . Most blacks in the South felt that way, until the late fifties and sixties” (Chafe et al. 8). With the fifties and sixties came the civil rights movement, essentially “the Civil War of the twentieth century,” which shattered the superficial peace of the Jim Crow era (Seligman 6). For over a decade, black citizens fought for full realization of the freedoms and rights the Constitution guaranteed them.

Though, like many revolutionary periods of history, the civil rights era began incrementally, one of its first nationally significant moments was the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which directly challenged the Southern system by declaring segregated schools unconstitutional. This victory emboldened African-American activist groups to demand equality in other areas. In the decade following *Brown v. Board of Education*, some of the movement's most iconic moments took place in Alabama, including the Montgomery bus boycotts, the University of Alabama desegregation in which Alabama governor George Wallace famously stood in the schoolhouse door to block black students from registering, the bombing at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that killed four young girls, and the Bloody Sunday march from Selma to Montgomery. Though white Southerners had long believed that the façade of the happy Negro was a reality, civil rights demonstrations gave them “an education about the blacks in their midst. . . . The oft-heard rationale about contented blacks living in good environments could no longer be maintained when those same blacks were marching in the streets” (Goldfield 169). With their eyes newly opened to the South's cultural reality, some white citizens joined the fight for civil rights themselves, but most remained unsympathetic to the movement if not outright opposed.

Hoping to win this race war, white Southerners needed a strong, unified response. Their fight was not only against the NAACP and federal interventions, but also against the white moderates in their own ranks who “represented an existential threat to . . . the idea that all white southerners . . . were uniformly devoted to racial segregation” (Crespino 107). To cow them into silence or goad them into conformity with segregationist orthodoxy, segregationists harassed and

ostracized the Southern moderates who, though not actively championing civil rights advances, at least tolerated them (Crespino 107).

As Harper Lee drafted and revised amidst this hostile racial climate, her social justice sermonizing in *Go Set a Watchman* became increasingly untenable. Because it addressed school desegregation and voting rights, which are central to Jean Louise and Atticus's conflict, in real time, the novel would have been gasoline on these fiery issues. "By the late 1950s, [Lee] could never have published that kind of thing and then come back to Monroeville," historian Joseph Crespino contends, saying it would have been "a slap in the face" to her neighbors and loved ones back home (112). So Lee shifted the story back in time to the distant 1930s of her girlhood rather than the immediate and volatile 1950s. This adjustment softened the civil rights message to a volume that would speak to her intended audience: "not northerners . . . nor the Klan, whom she knew didn't read books anyway, nor Negroes . . . who it wouldn't have occurred to her might be an audience for her stories. The people who needed to hear her most were her own tribe, the otherwise decent white folks" (Crespino 112). To these white Southerners, the author gave two heroes: Atticus and Scout Finch. Courageous, empathetic, and principled, Atticus embodies "humanity at its best" ("Atticus's Vision of Ourselves" 203). Scout, impressionable and innocent, represents the next generation's potential to "look and reach outward" and "embrace difference" (*Threatening Boundaries* 101). This "careful, selective, and allusive evocation of a principled, decent white southerner . . . provided cultural reinforcement for a quiet oppositional politics in the white community" in defiance of militant segregationists (Crespino xviii). And because Lee was herself a daughter of the South, she "passed the authenticity test" (Santopietro 28). She knew what she was talking about, and she did not have to yell to be heard.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*'s reception—both as a novel and as a film—illustrates the resonance of its message. In its review, the *Washington Post* comments, “A hundred pounds of sermons on tolerance, or an equal measure of invective deploring the lack of it, will weigh far less in the scale of enlightenment than a mere 18 ounces of new fiction bearing the title *To Kill a Mockingbird*” (qtd. in Shields 152). Robert Mulligan, who directed the film adaptation, praises the book for its subtle yet perceptive stance on the issues of the time. “The book does not make speeches,” he remarks. “It is not melodramatic with race riots and race hatred. It deals with bigotry, lack of understanding and rigid social patterns of a small southern town” (qtd. in Crespino 134). Such favorable comments demonstrate the power of a good story—it does not deliver its themes via indictment or homily, but rather relies on strong plotting and characterization to communicate its message about the human experience. And *To Kill a Mockingbird* spoke to precisely the issues the country was facing in those fraught years. Like many prominent civil rights groups of the time, Harper Lee’s message “appeal[s] to conscience and stand[s] on the moral nature of human existence,” showing the prejudice within American society at the time and encouraging everyday Americans to embrace justice, mutual respect, and love for one another without resorting to violence (“Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Statement of Purpose”). *To Kill a Mockingbird* complements the civil rights mission so well that Martin Luther King Jr. actually commends Atticus Finch as morally courageous for holding fast to his personal integrity and appealing to the mob’s humanity rather than attacking them, exactly as King encourages his followers to do (34-35).

The story proved transformative for many in its initial, primarily white audience (Santopietro 31). *To Kill a Mockingbird* showed white Americans in the 1960s “what was wrong



with the system” and gave them “a way to understand the racism that they’ve been brought up with and to find another way” (Murphy 78-79). It inspired some, like Southern Poverty Law Center cofounder Morris Dees, to pursue legal careers in order to become “that lawyer” like Atticus (Santopietro 226). In fact, many attorneys still see this character as “a hero and a model . . . on a very personal plain” (*Threatening Boundaries* 17). Yet the story’s impact extends far beyond the legal system. It emphasizes “that there is more than one way to be a civil rights advocate,” that “fostering changes in the individual heart are just as significant, if not even more important” than demonstrations, court decisions, and civil disobedience (Wood 83). These changes begin within ordinary people—even children, who, like Scout, can choose to turn away lynch mobs rather than joining them (Murphy 143). Because so much of the Southern system of racism depended just as much on white civilians perpetuating injustice toward black Americans as it did on legal codes, true civil rights for all would require common people to find a different way of relating to one another. *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided its original audience a glimpse of what that could look like. For this reason, the novel has become “a symbol of the civil rights movement itself” (Santopietro 37).

To be sure, racism and injustice did not vanish the moment Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. This piece of legislation did, however, give black Americans grounds for taking legal action against racism and injustice, and because of people who insisted civil rights laws be enforced, state-sanctioned racism as it existed in the South during Harper Lee’s life faded into the past (Payne 218-219).

To help students understand the American South during the Great Depression and the civil rights movement, take time to contextualize both historical eras. With scheduling demands

being what they are (there never is enough time to teach everything that should be taught, is there?), you may be able to devote only a day or two to this process. If that is the case, use these days to explore primary sources from the segregated South and the civil rights movement. The Library of Congress curates a set of posters, photographs, pamphlets, and other papers that could easily be displayed around a classroom for a gallery walk (“Primary Source Set: Jim Crow and Segregation”). Give students time to circulate around the room and read each source, jotting thoughts, reflections, or facts gleaned from the experience. During the next class period, immerse yourself in accounts from the civil rights movement. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute has archived interview footage with activists who advanced the cause of civil rights—watch their accounts together to immerse your students in those experiences (“Resource Gallery”). Reflect—how does living through those events shape individuals’ lives? How does observing those events shape the onlookers? Even in a short time, students can still familiarize themselves with the history behind the novel.

If, however, you have the luxury of a longer timeframe to introduce the novel, it may be worthwhile to take one to two weeks and immerse yourselves in researching the historical elements at play in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A historical research project could be completed in collaboration with your students’ history teachers, or solely in your classroom, and it could take numerous forms: a visual display (digital or physical), a PowerPoint presentation, or a traditional research paper. Give students a buffet of potential project topics: the Ku Klux Klan, the Great Depression, Jim Crow laws, Alabama’s 1901 constitution, the Scottsboro boys’ trial, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Birmingham bombing, Bloody Sunday, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and others that connect to this era of history. At the project’s culmination, students should present

their findings, whether in a virtual discussion forum where they share their digital project files or in a presentation classmates can watch so the class as a whole understands the history behind *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Grounded in the novel's historical context, your official study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* can begin.

## Chapter 2: Navigating Controversies

Among English teachers, it is a truth universally acknowledged that one of the worst emails to receive reads something like this:

Hello, [Mr. / Ms. / Mrs. Teacher]. Under no circumstances is my child reading [title of text]. I personally may or may not have actually read it in decades, but I draw the line at subjecting my student to it because it contains [an element I find objectionable, though I have not considered the context of this element or whether it is included for a legitimate artistic or thematic purpose]. I do not have an alternative title to suggest in its place, but you are the professional, so I'll let you figure it out since my child has to have something to do over the next however many weeks. Have a wonderful day!

Upon receiving this missive, we instinctively roll our eyes and go kvetch to our colleagues about parents these days before picking their brains about how to thoughtfully acknowledge the concern while also refuting the argument and, if that strategy fails, what alternative texts could be offered. (If you haven't done this, congratulations—you are a more mature teacher and human being than I.)

Whenever I hear such complaints, I instantly recall Harper Lee's invective against the first publicized challenge to the novel: "What I've heard makes me wonder if any of its members can read" (qtd. in *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird* 215). I am then, however, chastised when I think about the author's oft-cited reminder to consider other points of view, as we must do whenever such concerns are raised, whether by students, parents, or, increasingly, fellow members of our educational communities who have decided that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is no longer acceptable to use in the classroom.

We who teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* will likely receive a variation of this email at some point in our careers, so we need to know how to respond to objections against this specific text. The three primary concerns are the racial language, the novel's relevance to today's students, and the racial themes themselves. Though these issues do not all fit into the same category since only one deals with objective elements of the text and the other two with its interpretation, we can approach them all in the same strategic sequence: understand the concern, articulate a respectful yet robust response to it, and explain how we will address the controversy in our classrooms.

#### **Forty-Eight Opportunities for Conversation: The N-Word in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

After the novel's first three lighthearted chapters, the interjection of the word *nigger* in chapter four feels like an intrusion. When Jem tries to convince Dill of the supernatural phenomenon known colloquially as Hot Steams, Scout responds, "Calpurnia says that's nigger-talk" (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 41). By my count, Lee uses *nigger* a total of forty-eight times and in a variety of contexts, including characters quoting or paraphrasing other characters, black characters addressing one another or referring to themselves, and in a few rare instances, white characters addressing black characters. Interestingly, the most common usage is "nigger-loving" or "nigger-lover," a favorite insult for when "ignorant, trashy people . . . think somebody's favoring Negroes over and above themselves" as Atticus explains to Scout (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 124).

Although forty-eight times in the space of 323 pages pales in comparison to the 219 uses in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which often appears alongside *To Kill a Mockingbird* in discussions about the n-word in classic literature, the slur nevertheless makes for a rather jarring reading experience, as many teachers can attest. English educator Christina Torres, writing for

NCTE, admits, “As someone who reads the book aloud to students, I feel uncomfortable every time I say the N-word while reading.” Kristin Warmanen, an English teacher who opposed her district’s decision to remove the novel from its curriculum, states that Lee’s use of the n-word “makes all of my students uncomfortable, no matter what their race” (Passi). In the TED Talk “Why It’s So Hard to Talk About the N-Word,” historian Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor asserts that the n-word has the potential to “[poison] the entire classroom environment,” violating “the trust between student and teacher.” In her article “When the Mockingbird Becomes an Albatross: Reading and Resistance in the Language Arts Classroom,” English teacher Carol Ricker-Wilson relays a black student’s comment that it was “disgusting, embarrassing and depressing” to read the n-word so many times (69). While this comment was shared in writing rather than publicly, the feelings of discomfort it discloses do not always stay in the tidy pages of spiral-bound notebooks. Nichelle Tramble, an African-American novelist who grew up in the Bay Area in the 1980s, recalls a fellow student in her high school English class who started crying after a few classmates laughed at her refusal to read the n-word aloud (36-37). Pryor references a similar situation in which a student hid in the bathroom for “most of the unit” to avoid reading the word aloud at the teacher’s insistence. Alabama educator Louel C. Gibbons, who wrote the NCTE’s 2009 teaching guide for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, recalls a particularly intransigent student who objected to reading the novel because it uses the n-word. Neither Gibbons nor the assistant principal (whom, Gibbons notes, was herself an African American woman who had lived through the Civil Rights Movement) could change the student’s mind, and he ultimately chose an alternate assignment. Gibbons recounts that she felt “sickened by the thought that a student with whom I had always enjoyed a pleasant, mutually respectful relationship probably now

considered me a racist” (ix). These situations are likely not isolated, nor are they ones teachers would like to repeat for themselves. A genuine and natural desire to avoid causing students distress may lead teachers to ignore the n-word, expurgate it with a few neat lines of permanent marker, or drop the texts including it entirely, as has often been the case with *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

These decisions result from a well-intentioned but erroneous way of thinking about students’ ability to navigate the emotional and historical baggage associated with the n-word. Toni Morrison, reflecting on her experiences with *Huck Finn*, calls the removal of such books on the basis of language “a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution” (386). In their bestselling book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt and attorney Greg Lukianoff trace the development and implications of this mindset, which they term “safetyism.” By their definition, safetyism is “a culture that allows the concept of ‘safety’ to creep so far that it equates emotional discomfort with physical danger,” thereby encouraging systemic protection “from the very experiences embedded in daily life that [people] need in order to become strong and healthy” (29). The idea of “concept creep” that this definition notes comes from a trend psychologists have observed for many years, in which

Concepts that refer to the negative aspects of human experience and behavior have expanded their meanings so that they now encompass a much broader range of phenomena than before. This expansion takes “horizontal” and “vertical” forms: concepts

extend outward to capture qualitatively new phenomena and downward to capture quantitatively less extreme phenomena. (Haslam 1)

Although many concepts follow this trend, among the most noteworthy is trauma. As traditionally understood, trauma lies outside the range of usual human experience and thus would significantly distress anyone, but now that term has broadened to encompass less extreme circumstances (Haslam 6). Beneath the widened umbrella term of trauma are terms such as “racial trauma” and “educational trauma.” Racial trauma can be defined as “a type of physical or emotional injury uniquely impacting Black and Brown [people]” (S. Jones). Schools themselves “are a consistent source of individual and systemic experiences of racism for Black youths” (Jernigan and Daniel 123). Educational trauma, defined as “the cyclical and systemic harm inadvertently perpetrated and perpetuated in educational settings,” often intersects with racial trauma (Gray 13). One type of educational trauma has been termed “curriculum violence,” which takes place “when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally” (S. Jones). The justification for this term represents concept creep at work:

When we reserve the word violent as a descriptor for physical violence only, we fail to recognize the many ways in which non-physical injury happens, is normalized and, in the case of destructive pedagogy, harms students’ learning and how they see themselves in it. This kind of violence leaves an indelible mark on students and compromises their emotional and intellectual safety in the school setting. (S. Jones)



Because the definitions of trauma, harm, and violence have expanded, emotionally detrimental experiences such as reading a text with racial slurs can now be categorized as traumatic, harmful, and violent.

This heightened sensitivity to trauma has led educators to make their classrooms “safe spaces.” In an ELA classroom specifically, safetyism can manifest as trigger or content warnings (sometimes abbreviated TW or CW) that preface texts. These state that the text contains potentially distressing material and briefly describes it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be labeled with multiple trigger warnings: “racism and racial slurs, rape, substance addiction mentioned, murder, gun violence, knife violence and stabbing, animal death,” according to one website (“*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee”). Theoretically, when students with a family history of substance addiction, for example, consult this list before reading the novel, they can recognize its potential to trigger a stress response to that past trauma and decide how to approach the novel in light of that knowledge.

The problem with this concept creep and the safetyism it engenders is twofold. First, equating the hearing or reading of words with harm and trauma creates “a logical error” that fails to establish that words are actually violent acts (Haidt and Lukianoff 95). To be sure, there are hostile, potentially even traumatic situations in which somebody threatens a black person or screams the n-word at them, but those are categorically different than simply hearing or reading the n-word in an academic context. Second, shielding young people from words or ideas that make them uncomfortable is actually psychologically counterproductive. Research from the Trauma Center at the Justice Restoration Institute suggests that trauma’s psychological effects are stronger than trigger warnings, meaning that forewarnings do not actually prevent negative

responses to triggering content (Wolfsdorf 41). Trigger warnings not only fail to accomplish their purported purpose but also introduce a number of negative consequences in a classroom context, such as encouraging students to avoid intense or emotionally charged literature, depriving students of “critical, aesthetic, and transformative moments in a text,” drawing undue attention to controversial scenes and thus skewing the text’s inherent balance and structure, and “arbitrarily sanctioning what is and what is not appropriate for class discussion and student experience” (Wolfsdorf 40). For these reasons, NCTE itself strongly discourages content warnings, calling them “blatant forms of censorship” (“NCTE Position Statement Regarding Rating or ‘Red-Flagging’ Books”). Perhaps the most detrimental repercussion of content warnings is that they ultimately create “a culture where student fragility is promoted over the development of resilience” (Wolfsdorf 40). Safetyism ultimately relies on an erroneous view of human nature and trauma dynamics, Haidt and Lukianoff explain, since survivors of violence must ultimately adapt to daily triggers in order to heal. “Avoiding triggers is a symptom of PTSD, not a treatment for it,” they state (29). When teachers base their pedagogy on avoiding psychological distress, they deny students “opportunities to develop intellectual antifragility”—i.e. the quality of learning, adapting, and growing through challenges and becoming rigid, weak, and inefficient in their absence (Haidt and Lukianoff 206, 23). Students who are fragile rather than antifragile according to this definition “may come to find even more material offensive and require even more protection” (Haidt and Lukianoff 206). Thus, avoiding the emotional discomfort that accompanies discussions about difficult topics such as the n-word or slapping a trigger warning on every potentially controversial topic is, in the long run, a losing strategy.

This is not to say, of course, that students cannot possibly experience racial trauma in school, that students' emotions are unimportant, or that students should not be emotionally affected by a word that has come to symbolize the racist idea of black inferiority. There are healthy ways to approach the n-word, and there are unhealthy ways, one of which is avoidance. As English teachers, we are responsible to "bring elephants into the classroom . . . topics so incendiary that they shake students from the comforts of their normative experiences, push them to reconsider their own ideologies, and . . . bring about real changes in thought and experience" (Wolfsdorf 39). The classroom

is quite possibly the best environment on earth in which to come face-to-face with people and ideas that are potentially offensive or even downright hostile. It is the ultimate mental gymnasium, full of advanced equipment, skilled trainers, and therapists standing by, just in case. . . . If students came to see themselves as fragile, they would stay away from that gym. If students didn't build skills and accept friendly invitations to spar in the practice ring, and if they avoided these opportunities because well-meaning people convinced them that they'd be harmed by such training, well, it would be a tragedy for all concerned. (Haidt and Lukianoff 9)

Our students are capable of pushing past discomfort and difficulty in order to grapple with disagreeable ideas. Our role as teachers is to design an environment conducive to this task and to give our students opportunities, with our warm support, to strengthen their minds and characters as they rise to the occasion of dealing with challenging material. As you begin this process of uncomfortable learning together, it is of course essential that your classroom culture is already

characterized by mutual respect, without which not even the most brilliant plans and the most masterful execution can succeed.

When dealing with the n-word in the classroom, Tramble argues, “Dialogue, real dialogue, about its origins and history, its significance in both the past and the present, is the only way to deal with it. A whispered word is an empowered word” (39). And since it makes its first appearance in the novel fairly early, the n-word needs to be discussed sooner rather than later during the unit of study.

*Nigger* has fairly straightforward origins, a rarity in the complicated linguistic sphere of profanity. Etymologically, *nigger* entered the English lexicon in the 1500s by way of the Spanish word *negro*, rooted in the Latin word *niger*. Both words simply meant “black” (*Nine Nasty Words* 176-177). *Niger* and its alternate spelling *nigger* were used interchangeably with *negro* for two centuries after their introduction into English (K. Allan 4). Into the 1800s, *nigger* “was simply the way one said ‘Black person’” in casual speech (*Nine Nasty Words* 179). In fact, *nigger* was the “default term” for black people even among black Americans as late as the 1930s (*Nine Nasty Words* 190). *To Kill a Mockingbird* reflects this usage pattern; Calpurnia and Lula both use *nigger* during their tense conversation at church, and Tom Robinson refers to himself as “nigger” in his testimony. Even today, some black people still call one another *nigger*. Pronouncing it with an elided final syllable (*nigga* as opposed to *nigger*), black communities have appropriated the word as a term of affection, creating a second meaning that coexists alongside its more unsavory usage (*Nine Nasty Words* 194). This linguistic phenomenon turns a term of abuse used by outsiders into “a badge of honor to mark identification with and

camaraderie within the in-group,” as has also been the case with words such as *queer* (K. Allan 5). Thus *nigger* spans the semantic range from neutral to positive to downright abusive.

But even its abusive meaning is more nuanced than our aversion to *nigger*, our modern “Voldemort term,” might suggest (*Nine Nasty Words* 174). *Nigger* took on a sense of impropriety among both black and white Americans only after World War I, and it was not considered truly profane until the end of the twentieth century (*Nine Nasty Words* 181, 184). In linguistic terms, it underwent a process of semantic change known as *pejoration*, in which a word becomes associated with a negative meaning (Traugott). This connotative shift is exhibited in *To Kill a Mockingbird* when Atticus rebukes Scout for using the term. “Don’t say nigger, Scout,” he admonishes her. “That’s common” (85). Melton McLaurin’s memoir substantiates this viewpoint. “One didn’t say ‘nigger,’ not because the use of that word caused blacks pain but because to do so indicated ‘poor breeding,’” he explains, noting that it was “a word poor whites used, a term they hurled at blacks” (31). Indeed, Bob and Mayella Ewell are the only white characters who directly address black characters in the novel as *nigger*. The book, then, does accurately depict historical usage patterns for *nigger*. As civil rights leader Andrew Young acknowledges, “*To Kill a Mockingbird* was the reality of that time. I don’t think it makes us any wiser or smarter to deny that” (Murphy 208). If anything, the fact that Harper Lee’s reality is for us an ignominy illustrates the progress Young and other civil rights activists helped bring about.

The history behind the n-word, though valuable, does not necessarily give us a framework for referencing and discussing it during class. Moreover, it would be foolish to assume that there is in fact a one-size-fits-all approach to the n-word in academic contexts. The

best approach is one developed together as a class. To create a framework for dealing with the n-word, take time together to analyze varied perspectives on it.

The best method for this process is a Socratic seminar, in which students pose and respond to questions based on a text or texts (“Socratic Seminar”). Socratic seminars can be structured as either a whole-class discussion or a fishbowl-style discussion in which one group discusses while another observes before switching places. Prior to the discussion, students receive the texts, a list of open-ended questions, and time to work through both. The following texts would provide rich opportunities for discussion: John McWhorter’s essay for *The Root* entitled “Who Are We Protecting by Censoring ‘Huck Finn’?”, Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor’s TED Talk called “Why It’s So Hard to Talk About the N-Word,” and the *Washington Post*’s article “Redefining the Word: Examining a Racial Slur Entrenched in American Vernacular That Is More Prevalent Than Ever.” If you have not already introduced your students to the broader notion of handling offensive materials and ideas in education, you may include an additional source such as the University of Chicago Statement on Freedom of Expression or the video clip “Van Jones on Safe Spaces on College Campuses” from University of Chicago’s Institute of Politics’s YouTube Channel. If time constraints or student needs make this amount of reading unrealistic, excerpting longer pieces (particularly the *Washington Post* article) would make the task more manageable, and taking time to read in class is essential.

As you create questions to guide the Socratic seminar, consider including the following questions: Why is the n-word offensive? What factors make banning the n-word difficult? What approaches to the n-word do the texts outline or prescribe, and what are their pros and cons? Is it possible to discuss offensive material in a way that is not offensive, and if so, what does that

approach look like? Additionally, invite students to generate their own questions to bring to the seminar. As they prepare, students choose a few of these questions and draft evidence-based preliminary responses, giving themselves a point of reference during the seminar. Only students who complete this pre-seminar material can participate in the actual discussion. At the seminar's conclusion, students rate their participation and reflect further on the discussion or the questions. This Socratic seminar approach to the issue benefits your class in multiple ways: it broadens students' position on the issue beyond their gut reactions to the n-word, and it helps you as the teacher understand students' perspectives. More importantly, it lets students practice civil debate in an authentic way, helping them develop empathy for one another as they deal with this sensitive topic. This experience can then help your class generate guidelines for handling the n-word when it comes up during the unit of study on *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

While you should tailor these standards to your classroom based on your students' feedback, at minimum the guidelines should include your assurance that you will not breach professional ethics or students' trust by compelling speech (e.g. forcing a student to read the n-word aloud from the novel), and that students who use the n-word pejoratively will face consequences in accordance with your school's code of conduct. The guidelines may also acknowledge that, in line with linguistic norms that govern referencing slurs, the n-word's use "should only be condemned when the speaker/writer is recognized to [intend] to slur . . . [which] can only be surmised from the utterance context" (K. Allan 3-4). Essentially, this guideline would allow students to quote directly from the novel where it uses the n-word when it is appropriate to do so. These parameters protect students from violating their own consciences or their classmates' ability to learn without fearing racial harassment, but they do not unduly censor

the text. The n-word, despite its fraught history and connotations, should not be empowered to shut down conversations in your classroom.

### **A Book for All Seasons: The Continued Relevance of *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Among the funnier one-liners in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the opener to chapter ten: “Atticus was feeble: he was nearly fifty” (102). Comparing him to her classmates’ fathers, Scout feels that Atticus does nothing “that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone” (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 102). In a way, it seems as though *To Kill a Mockingbird* itself has fallen victim to this same mindset Scout has toward her father—it is too old to be powerful or admirable any longer. Now beyond its sixtieth birthday, the novel memorializes a historical moment nearly one hundred years in the past. It depicts a society in which prejudice was not something to mask in polite company, but in which prejudice set the laws, dictated all social interactions, and smothered the development of an entire people group on the basis of something they could not change: the color of their skin.

From its first chapter, *To Kill a Mockingbird* immerses readers in that world, chatting matter-of-factly about the Finch ancestors’ slaves, introducing the family’s colored help (as Calpurnia would have been categorized), and hinting at the racism that becomes even more pronounced and ugly as the novel unfolds. Although some critics posit that “the institutional and systemic racism Lee depicted in 1930s Alabama still endures today,” others suggest that American society has outgrown Maycomb’s brand of racism (Groenke 163). “What can a novel written in the midst of the modern civil rights movement have to say to a reader of today?” educator Angela Shaw-Thornberg wonders, going on to ask, “Is there a moment when the context of composition and publication becomes so far removed from the context of reading that



the novel becomes unintelligible as such, when it becomes historical document, as opposed to literature?” (99). While she concedes that the American racial climate is “still fraught with tensions, still riddled with clear instances of lethal unfairness, but nevertheless showing signs of progress in some areas,” she ultimately sees such a profound distance between the novel’s setting and her own version of America that she doubts students can overcome it (99). This gap between America today and Maycomb in the 1930s makes some critics believe the novel does not speak to modern readers.

Even if they disagree about the contention that America has changed too much to make *To Kill a Mockingbird* relevant in this historical moment, critics on both sides of that debate believe *To Kill a Mockingbird* is irrelevant to African-American readers because it does not truly represent them. “The presence of blacks in the book, mediated through Scout’s narrative, is never equal to that of whites,” argues Gerald Early, a scholar of African-American studies. “Readers are never really permitted to walk in the shoes of Tom Robinson, his family, Calpurnia, or any of the other black characters” (100). Because the black characters are not as prominent in the narrative, they do not have opportunity to “express how they feel about Maycomb’s culture of white supremacy; nor do white citizens express interest in hearing about these feelings” (Guest Pryal 151). As a result, people of color “feel unvoiced” by such pieces of literature (Shaw-Thornberg 100). The black characters’ underrepresentation in *To Kill a Mockingbird* leads to concerns that the novel will “traumatize African American students, causing them to experience grief and anger in the English classroom” (Groenke 163). In light of these concerns, teachers have come to see the book as not culturally responsive, so they choose other texts “in alignment with students’ . . . cultural perspectives” (Taylor and Sobel 112). Rising online movements such

as #DisruptTexts and #OwnVoices have encouraged “a more inclusive, representative, and equitable language arts curriculum” (“What is #DisruptTexts”). These movements stress that tokenism (i.e. including one minor character from an underrepresented group) is insufficient, and some voices within them suggest authors should not write from a group’s perspective unless they are part of that group. True representation is “someone with lived experience” who is “from the same group as one or more of its main characters” telling that group’s story—hence the term #OwnVoices (Faruqi). By this logic, Harper Lee, “a privileged white woman” is not really the person to tell the stories of black characters such as Tom Robinson or Calpurnia—after all, “How could she possibly understand what it felt like to live the life of a second-class citizen?” (Santopietro 146).

Admittedly, it is fair to say that Harper Lee did not tell the full story of African-Americans’ experience in the Jim Crow South, and perhaps fair to add that she would not have been the best candidate to do so had she tried. All authors are limited in their perspectives, and thus their stories are limited as well. Making *To Kill a Mockingbird* “the race-relations book for the year” and thus the only novel that features any black characters to speak of is not the best way to ensure African-American students are represented in your literature curriculum (Franks). And they should be represented—we all want to see ourselves mirrored in literature; we all want to hear our stories told accurately.

In light of *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s representational limitations, some educators have proposed teaching the novel in order to “open up a discussion about the complexities of white identity” or “provide guidance on what progressive Whiteness can look like” (Shaw-Thornberg

110; Groenke 172). If the novel is not relevant to black Americans, they seem to be arguing, then it can at least be relevant to white ones.

Yet this interpretive lens is flawed in a number of ways. With *To Kill a Mockingbird* specifically, a singular focus on race upsets the narrative's internal balance. According to its own author, the book "had a universal theme. It's not a 'racial' novel" (qtd. in Leerhsen). Thus, as educator Edgar Schuster writes, "Interpretations [that] stress the race prejudice issue to the exclusion of virtually everything else" prohibit readers from "see[ing] [racism] as an aspect of a larger thing" (7, 15). In other words, looking only at race creates a myopic understanding of the novel's themes—exactly the opposite of the multi-faceted interpretation we want our students to construct. More troublingly, this notion that only white students can learn from the novel while black students cannot suggests a kind of racial essentialism, in which students' ultimate identities and abilities (including their abilities to appreciate and learn from a specific text) can be prescribed according to race. Such an approach is hardly inclusive.

The study of the humanities has long been predicated on the notion that our common humanity transcends our group identities (e.g. ethnicity, sex, status), allowing us to learn from people who are not like us. As English educators, we need to reaffirm that even limited perspectives can be valuable, and that authors can speak to people who do not share their group identity. An immoderate focus on textual mirrors can lead to a sort of literary narcissism in which we listen only to people who look like ourselves. As W.E.B. Du Bois famously wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk*, black people are intellectually and emotionally capable of connecting with writers "across the color line" to learn from the great minds of the ages (52). Indeed, the entirety of *To Kill a Mockingbird* rests upon this idea that our shared humanity makes it possible for us to

learn from others. That is precisely why black Americans can attest “I related to the characters and to the story” and “I wanted to be Scout. I thought I was Scout” (Murphy 131, 200). These readers connected with the novel because they found in it something essentially human. Not all readers will connect with the story, of course, but teaching it in a way that focuses exclusively on racial identity almost guarantees that readers will feel alienated from the text rather than drawn into it. This attitude robs students of both a meaningful learning experience and the novel’s great insight into humanity.

In just over three hundred pages, Lee masterfully deals with essential human values: “tolerance, kindness, civility, charity, justice, the courage to face down a community or a family when they are wrong and the compassion to love them despite their flaws” (“Atticus’s Vision of Ourselves” 209). When we teach students from all walks of life to embrace these values through studying this novel, we are returning to storytelling’s essential function: “binding society by reinforcing a set of common values and strengthening the ties of common culture. . . . Story homogenizes us; it makes us one” (Gottschall 137-138). Though diversity has its merits, the tradition of American public education has long held that diversity must be organized around universal principles in order to unite fractious communities (Mann 237). While we may quibble over these principles’ metaphysical origins, most educators would agree that we need to hold a common vision and common values in order to effectively teach the next generation. Reading and analyzing stories is perhaps the most powerful method for shaping students’ values and motivating them to love virtue, so our book choices are vitally important (Guroian 20). The values *To Kill a Mockingbird* espouses are the sort which counter human suffering and promote human flourishing—do we truly believe there are any people in our classrooms, regardless of

their cultural histories, who could not benefit from a story that champions empathy, courage, and fairness? “To disavow *Mockingbird*,” writes one critic, “. . . is almost to confess that one has outgrown basic decency as a theme” (Betts 141). Because this idea lies at the novel’s core, its messages remain relevant even for those who find its setting foreign. “Maycomb’s usual disease” is in reality a pestilence of prejudice that infects human hearts around the world and across history (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 100). As Wayne Flynt so eloquently states,

What happened in Maycomb did happen everywhere. To Jews in Prague; to homosexuals in Berlin; to Gypsies in Romania, Pentecostals in Russia, Muslims in Serbia. And it happened to Okies and Arkies in California’s Imperial Valley in the 1930s, to Appalachian whites in Detroit in the 1940s, and to people from Birmingham moving to New York City and Los Angeles in the 1960s. It happened to all people everywhere who talk funny, look strange, have a different color skin, worship God differently or not at all, people who stay in houses and refuse to come out and conform to our expectations or allow us to stare at them. It happens to the different, the strange, the other. That is the reason the novel still sells nearly a million copies a year nearly half a century after publication: because it continues to ring true to human experience. . . . The story is a story of the human experience, not just the story of what happened in Maycomb, Alabama. (“Atticus’s Vision of Ourselves” 207-208)

Because the story speaks to the universal human experience, its message that we must “walk in another’s shoes” challenges readers to understand their own societies’ othered people, “who seem to be ‘strange’ and whom we fear out of ignorance rather than any concrete proof that they are threatening or ‘scary’ individuals” (Meyer 10). The Tom Robinsons and Boo Radleys of the

world still exist, and seeing them in *To Kill a Mockingbird* may help us identify them in their present-day forms and care for them as Scout learns to do.

Our task as teachers who are introducing our students to this story is to balance the particular locality of Scout's world with the universal nature of its conflicts and themes and to balance Harper Lee's understanding of her world with other perspectives and experiences within it. The work your class has done in understanding historical context gives your students that broad perspective; the work you do as you experience the novel together must emphasize the messages *To Kill a Mockingbird* communicates to its readers past and present.

Because *To Kill a Mockingbird* is so much about seeing and understanding other people as they are, it actually can be the perfect starting point for future book studies that deal more specifically with African-American experiences. As one teacher lamented after her district pulled *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the curriculum, "I wish we could bring in a strong African-American voice to read alongside it, instead of in place of it" (Passi). This strategy seems like a balanced solution to the issue of representation. Following *To Kill a Mockingbird* with a text or texts from black authors (see Appendix C for suggested titles) allows your students to hear about African-American experiences without sacrificing the enrichment they could gain from studying Lee's novel. Having learned the value of considering things from other points of view through studying *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they will be prepared to practice this skill in their reading.

### **When Not Racist Becomes Racist: Antiracism and *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Among the rising concerns about *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that it does not, in fact, communicate wholesome universal values. The American Library Association reports that many challenges in the last ten years condemn the book's racism—not just that it depicts racism, but

that it actually condones or even promotes racism (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists”). Increasingly, the novel and Atticus in particular are being interpreted as an apologia for the racial paternalism that characterized many Southern moderates at the time, while the black characters are being interpreted as cardboard “happy Negro” cutouts propping him up as a White Messiah (Groenke 167). If it is true that, as Lee said, Atticus’s moral viewpoint is “the heart of the novel” and this view is found to be problematic, then it follows that the novel as a whole is racially problematic (qtd. in Shields 197).

Atticus, though once ranked among American literature’s greatest heroes, has fallen out of favor among modern critics. In their minds, he is “a morally problematic character” (Zwick 1353). He appears to have been desensitized to the horrors of racism; “the best he can muster is placid sadness” when confronted with “the very real evil that invades his community” (Zwick 1361). His ability “to censor his own conscience,” evidenced by his decision to conceal Boo Radley’s involvement in Bob Ewell’s death, suggests that his values may not be as deeply held as they seem, making him a hypocrite (Zwick 1362). Other critics believe Atticus passively perpetuates systemic injustice. They criticize him for viewing people as individuals and upholding legal institutions rather than demanding change from them (Miller). His failure to challenge the legal order makes him “complicit in the racism that undergirds the legal system” (Shaw-Thornberg 100). Some critiques of his passivity imply that he is ignorant, whether willfully or otherwise, unable “to see racism as a large-scale problem . . . [or] the connections between the unsuccessful lynch mob in Maycomb and the horrific lynchings . . . in other parts of the South” (Guest Pryal 154). Critic Monroe Freedman goes even farther: he claims Atticus simply does not care about the black community in Maycomb. “Atticus Finch

knows about the grinding, ever-present humiliation and degradation of the black people of Maycomb; he tolerates it; and sometimes he even trivializes and condones it,” he says (459). Susan Groenke bluntly labels Atticus “White supremacy” and argues that his racial blind spots directly contribute to Tom Robinson’s death (169-170). Lorena Germán, writing for #DisruptTexts, repeats this accusation: “He lets Tom die. He is a part of the very system that let Tom die.” At the center of such arguments is Atticus’s perceived failure to “publicly disrupt the legal system” (Germán). The least of the criticisms is that Atticus is a white savior naïvely attempting to bring about “racial salvation through hearts and minds” (Gladwell). Even if he is a genuinely good man, critics argue, by centering Atticus the narrative minimizes its black characters and “actively erases” the historical black activists who pursued justice in the South (Miller). The views the prototypical Atticus Finch espouses in *Go Set a Watchman* seem to confirm that the more negative interpretations were correct all along: Atticus is no hero.

The black characters create further opportunities for criticism. Along with the complaints about representation, many critics find fault with how Lee develops her black characters, seeing “some degree of stereotyping” in them (*Threatening Boundaries* 15). Lula, the only black character who demonstrates anger over the social and political situation, is presented negatively (Germán). The others are “docile and loyal followers” or “such paragons of virtue that they cease to be fully human” (Groenke 166; Santopietro 31). Calpurnia and Tom Robinson, as the most prominent black characters, garner especial criticism. Tom lacks agency, making him a sympathetic (or possibly just pathetic) character (Macaluso 280-281). Likewise, Calpurnia is “largely unseen” in her role as the Finches’ housekeeper; “only her usefulness to the family is visible” (Murray 85). Because Atticus treats both characters well, their interactions help “sell the



myth of the great White Messiah” (Groenke 166). Thus, the argument goes, the black characters uphold a white supremacist paradigm, making the novel too racist to teach.

The novel’s reclassification as racist rests on a fairly recent cultural movement known as anti-racism, which has in effect redefined racism. When *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written (and even for decades afterwards), racism was defined more in terms of individual prejudice, which any person could demonstrate toward members of other races. Now, the term has been assigned a new definition: “prejudice plus power” (Belknap 309). This definition necessitates a level of institutional power, levied through social systems and used to oppress people based on race (DiAngelo 20). By the logic of anti-racism, because only white people possess collective social and institutional power and privilege in America, all white people are complicit in institutional racism, with whiteness being synonymous with racial oppression (DiAngelo 22, 150). Gone, too, is the traditional understanding that people are either racist or not; the opposite of “racist” is no longer “not racist,” but now “anti-racist.” Anti-racism stresses taking action to oppose racism in systems (“White Anti-Racism: Living the Legacy”). True anti-racism results in power and policy changes (Kendi 209). Racism’s broad redefinition provides the grounds for rebranding *To Kill a Mockingbird* as racist, since its white characters, and Atticus in particular, fail to wield their institutional power against oppressive systems. As a white man who holds a respected position in the community (he is an elected state representative as well as a lawyer), Atticus bears the brunt of this criticism since readers never see him using his position to create structural change. To be fair, “it is difficult to discuss what is not in a novel, and the reader cannot assume that because something isn’t mentioned, it must not have happened” (Petty xxvi). But because anti-racism

prioritizes the visible political action that *To Kill a Mockingbird*, being a novel narrated by an eight-year-old, does not depict, the book does not meet the movement's standards.

While the merits of defining things as anti-racist as opposed to merely not racist are debatable, it is certainly anachronistic to hold Harper Lee and her characters to a standard which did not exist until decades after her novel's publication and did not become mainstream until after her death. Furthermore, in the blunt words of one critic, doing so "misses the point" of the novel (Wood 74). If it is true, as Haidt and Lukianoff contend, that "assuming the worst about people and reading their actions as uncharitably as possible" is a poor strategy in interpersonal relationships, then it follows that assuming the worst about fictional people and interpreting them uncharitably is equally unwise in literary analysis (41). A charitable analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* must interpret its characters appropriately.

Atticus, who is at the center of these complaints about racism, must be understood in light of a few guiding principles: Atticus's historical basis, his own values, and his actual role in the novel. Like his historical counterpart, A.C. Lee, Atticus is "a man of honor and personal decency . . . who treat[s] all people fairly and with respect" (*Mockingbird Songs* 5). Harper Lee memorialized her father in fiction "not because he was ahead of his time . . . but rather because he was of his time and of his place, and yet still aspired to worthy ideals and noble values" (Crespino 19). In that time and place, the suggestion that all people, black or white, truly are created equal in dignity and thus deserve access to American rights such as liberty and due process made the book "groundbreaking, even shocking" (Petry xxiii). Even more incredible to the original audience was the image of a white attorney risking not only his own life but also his children's lives to defend this principle (Fine 64). While men in his historical context almost

unilaterally espoused racist views, such sentiments are conspicuously absent from Atticus's characterization in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Rather, in the words of screenwriter Horton Foote, who adapted the book for film, Atticus "is surely a man that has had to fight the prejudice in himself . . . a man who has shared [Maycomb's] prejudices, struggled with them, and who is determined to be free of them at all costs" (qtd. in Crespino 145). If anything, overcoming prejudice and social pressure to become the sort of man who "do[es] [his] best to love everybody" makes Atticus more admirable than today's armchair quarterbacks who criticize him for not doing enough (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 124).

In light of his historical background, Atticus's guiding moral principles become even more unusual. Atticus Finch models a life governed by empathy. While he staunchly believes in equality and justice, he claims neither of these ideals as his highest law. In fact, with the exception of his famous courtroom address, he barely mentions them. But this idea of considering other perspectives is so woven into his being that it cannot help influencing his words and actions. By seeking to understand other perspectives, Atticus connects with people very unlike himself, affirming their inherent dignity as human beings. Perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of his empathy are his children, but he extends the same courtesy to Maycomb's citizens as well—the Cunninghams (father and son both), Mrs. Dubose, Boo Radley, even the Ewells who epitomize the prejudice antithetical to Atticus's own rule of life. His particular brand of empathy emerges most strongly in his interactions with the Ewells. He empathizes with Mayella, taking no pleasure in exposing the grim truth of her life to the jury (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 214). Yet while he feels for her, he cannot justify her deceitful behavior (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 232). Even Bob Ewell, whose racist views Atticus condemns as evil, benefits from

his commitment to empathy (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 233). After Bob accosts Atticus for disgracing him in court, Atticus still urges Jem to “stand in Bob Ewell’s shoes a minute” (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 250). In his eyes, even his enemy deserves to be understood. Herein lies the defining mark of Atticus’s empathy: it does not condone wrong, but it still endeavors to understand the wrongdoer’s perspective. This approach seems foreign to modern readers—doesn’t considering others’ perspectives, even if morally reprehensible, validate them? Atticus undergoes extensive criticism for seeking to understand even the would-be lynch mob at the jail. Yet his insistence that the mob is made up of people, most of them “basically . . . good,” speaks to the principle that underlies his empathy: a fundamental respect all human beings deserve (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 180). He gives this respect graciously and unconditionally. While today’s audience may believe the Walter Cunninghams and Bob Ewells of the world do not deserve respect, Atticus disagrees. “On every moral issue in the book,” writes one critic, “Atticus chooses the side that most nearly preserves human dignity, the common good, love of neighbor, equality, fairness, and the progress of humanity toward these values” (Wood 74). Though we may question or even fault his choices, these values drive them, and his unbiased application of these values is laudable.

Atticus’s principles take on particular importance when readers consider his role in the novel. When we think of Atticus, we typically see Gregory Peck’s Oscar-winning movie performance, not realizing that the film was re-cut twice in order to make him the center figure rather than the children (Santopietro 112). Yet Atticus is not the story’s true protagonist—Scout is. Thus, Atticus’s primary responsibility is not civil rights hero or political leader or even legal professional. He is “an ordinary man living his life in a community” who is seeking to instill his

code of ethics in his children (C. Jones 100). For this reason he assumes Tom's defense—so he can live out his principles with integrity before his children and neighbors (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 86). He is determined both to shield them from “catching Maycomb's usual disease” (i.e. prejudice) and to keep them from becoming bitter against their fellow citizens (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 100). His desire to accomplish both goals, coupled with his sensitivity to Scout's combative personality and her age, may explain why he seems at times to downplay Maycomb's sins (e.g. explaining the KKK or discussing the attempted lynching). Naturally, he experiences “mixed feelings about revealing to his children the awful truth regarding hatred and bigotry” (Chotiner). He tells them what he believes they need to know, and they learn the lessons he intends for them. Thus, he functions more as an archetypal mentor than hero.

Notably, Calpurnia and Tom are among the most prominent adults in the novel who share Atticus's values. Though they exhibit some stereotypical black characteristics, they are nevertheless “not the typical portraits of African-Americans that white southerners held at the time” (*Threatening Boundaries* 16). When interpreting these characters, we must observe how they defy black stereotypes and reinforce the novel's moral code. Calpurnia seems at first glance to fit the mammy stereotype—the obedient, nurturing hired help (Brown Givens and Monahan 93). Further analysis, however, reveals that she actually subverts this convention. She acts as Atticus's equal in raising the children, disciplining them rather than indulging them (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 6, 155, 156). Yet her life is not confined to the Finch household. “Because she has a family and her own social group, Calpurnia is many steps away from the mammies of southern literature who exist only for the sake of the white family,” one critic comments (Seidel 87). In fact, she actually brings the Finch children into her community, where they see her challenge the

embrace of racial separation among the South's black population, a view the character Lula embodies. Calpurnia exemplifies a "steady, wise, compassionate, and open-minded approach" to integration, emphasizing that "color barriers will only be broken down by steady and persistent effort to seek a remedy for wrongdoing even in the face of strident, separatist opposition from both races . . . who want to remain separate out of anger, fear of change, and self-importance" (Wood 81). Through her actions, Calpurnia models the nonviolent, common-humanity civil rights attitude Harper Lee so admired in Martin Luther King Jr. (Shields 193). Calpurnia's principled stance makes her views the perfect complement to Atticus's.

Tom Robinson, too, contradicts a popular stereotype of the time: the buck stereotype, a savage, sexually violent black male (*Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird* 177). The Ewells' efforts to smear Tom as a rapist play into white Southerners' worst fear—"that the secret desire of every black male was to ravish every white female" (McLaurin 67). Yet as Tom's testimony reveals, he refuses to take advantage of Mayella even when she forces herself on him (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 222). Rather, he treats her with courtesy and dignity, trying to disentangle himself from the situation without harming her. This image skillfully counters the buck stereotype and highlights Tom's honorable character. Significantly, Tom parallels Atticus: "Both men are hardworking, possessed of infinite patience, and devoted to their families" (Santopietro 150). Furthermore, Tom is compassionate, able—like Atticus—to walk in Mayella Ewell's shoes and feel "right sorry for her" (*To Kill a Mockingbird* 225). Ironically, the jury condemns Tom for doing precisely what they fail to do: empathize with somebody unlike themselves. Though he lacks legal agency, Tom possesses moral agency, making him not a victim to be pitied but a model to be emulated. He, too, promotes the novel's moral.

While Atticus, Calpurnia, and Tom can all be interpreted critically, the best classroom approach to these characters will encourage students to evaluate the messages the story is communicating through them and reach their own conclusions. While it may be natural for us to wish *To Kill a Mockingbird* conveyed exactly the messages about race we feel are needed today, we must not expect the book to be a proof-text for our modern brand of anti-racism. After all, “a work of literature doesn’t assert but presents” (Prior 21). If Harper Lee had been more concerned with hammering home a political message about how specifically to handle the racial issues of the 1960s than with telling a good story, her sermonizing would have sacrificed “aesthetic integrity . . . character . . . and drama” (Scruton 110). Because she chose to give her story a more timeless focus, communicating universal principles with subtlety and grace, *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains a valuable study for today.

### **When the Challenge Comes: Responding to Censorship Attempts in Your Classroom**

When that dreaded parent email lands in your inbox or when your administration tells you it’s time to retire *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you do not need to immediately begin searching for a replacement text. As challenges arise, seek first to understand the concerns they represent. Ask the challenger to clarify the specific problem if it is initially vague. Once you know the concern, explain your philosophy and approach to addressing it. If language is the problem, describe your plan for educating students about the language and developing an approach to it together. If relevance is the concern, explain how your unit of study emphasizes universal ideas that apply to all students and lays the groundwork for studying works by black authors. If the messages about race are the issue, clarify that your approach to the novel encourages students to interpret charitably and contextually but evaluate critically.

Ideally, this conversation will dispel the concerns raised, but it may not. If an individual parent or student remains unwilling to change positions, it may be appropriate to provide an alternative title from the list in Appendix C, as much as it may pain you to do so. If, however, the challenge escalates beyond the individual level, you may want to report it to the ALA, which maintains a database of challenged materials and provides free resources to support teachers facing censorship (“Challenge Reporting”). Students deserve the opportunity to meet Scout, Atticus, and Tom and determine for themselves what they think of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and part of our responsibility—and our joy—as educators is making the introduction possible. Controversies do not have to result in censorship. The best thing we can do is to turn them into conversations. When we can talk honestly and rationally about these issues, we can not only understand this novel more effectively, but also each other, just as Harper Lee would have wanted.



### Chapter 3: Creating Meaningful Learning Experiences

On my bookshelf sit no fewer than four teaching guides for *To Kill a Mockingbird*: one from SparkNotes, a thick paperback from Facing History and Ourselves, a skinny booklet from Prestwick House, and the old NCTE one from Louel Gibbons. Though all focus on the same text, their objectives and perspectives diverge. SparkNotes hopes to “make classic literature engaging and relevant” (5). The Facing History and Ourselves guide endeavors to help students “wrestle with complex choices in the past and present so that they will better understand the social mores of our time” (viii). Prestwick House’s teaching guide challenges students “to examine, question, and consider” the text through Freudian, feminist, and New Historicist lenses (3). Gibbons encourages teachers to “mak[e] the most of every class period we have with our students” (xiii). While the guides’ goals may diverge, each is packed with essential questions, writing prompts, paired texts, worksheets, and other activities to fill the unit of study.

For teachers who have never used the novel in class before, these teaching guides may seem at first like a godsend. Everything is right there for you, meticulously prescribed and neatly packaged for your convenience. As you set your guide of choice side-by-side with your course calendar and your class roster, however, you start to wonder how you’ll make these plans a reality. It’s a lot to get students to read a full novel, much less the novel plus all the supplemental reading plus a full showing of the film so they can write a compare/contrast essay to satisfy the elusive CCSS.ELA.RL.9-10.7 standard. You just don’t know how you’ll fit it all in.

On the other hand, more experienced teachers may find these guides contrived. You’ve taught *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the last twenty years; all you have to do is dig the shabby stack of paperbacks out of storage and print a round of reading schedules. Kids don’t need anything

fancy, and you certainly don't want to fool with all the extras. As long as students have the book and the schedule, they'll be fine.

These two attitudes represent two approaches to novel studies, which ELA educator Kelly Gallagher labels over-teaching and under-teaching (38-39). The first method turns a timeless piece of literature into “an extended worksheet” by breaking books into tiny chunks of reading followed by stretches of exhaustive analysis (Gallagher 39). Many curriculum guides for classic novels promote this sort of over-teaching, to students' detriment. “If I were to follow [such a] curriculum guide step-by-step in my own classroom,” Gallagher contends, “there is little doubt my students would exit my class hating *To Kill a Mockingbird*—and possibly all reading—forever” (38-39). Yet the second system, under-teaching, is little better. When teachers fail to provide adequate framing and support, students do not read thoughtfully (if they read at all), and they dislike the experience (Gallagher 39-40). Over-teaching smothers students with assistance, leaving no room for growth, while under-teaching gives students too much freedom and no fortification. Though these two methods seem wildly dissimilar, both over-teaching and under-teaching bring about essentially the same result: students do not enjoy or engage deeply with the novel. This, of course, is not the outcome we want.

Whether our blueprints for novel studies come from our own memories of high school literature classes or from our Platonic ideals of what a high school literature class should look like, we need to consider whether these systems are actually turning students into readers or whether they are simply creating the illusion of student growth. If we think about our own adventures in classic literature, we would probably conclude that our best experiences occurred when we had the freedom to enjoy the story coupled with help understanding it. An effective

study of *To Kill a Mockingbird* requires more than a copy of the text and a reading schedule, but it does not demand teaching guides that are two thirds of the novel's own length in order to help students understand the text. Instead, we need to organize the unit of study around meaningful learning experiences that promote both understanding and authentic engagement.

If our goal in reading instruction is to create independent readers, as Donalyn Miller and Susan Kelley write in *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer's Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits*, we must consider how independent readers read and recreate that process as much as possible in our classrooms (xviii). When we read novels, we typically don't pause at the end of each chapter to answer five questions. We don't create dioramas of the setting. We don't annotate every page with check marks for parts we understand and exclamation points for moments that surprise us, as some annotation anchor charts on Pinterest might have us believe. Yet we engage with our reading nevertheless. We read consistently (or we try to, anyway) so the story stays fresh. We add notes as the spirit moves, developing our own systems of annotation. We look up words we don't know. We savor beautifully constructed passages and insightful quotations. In more difficult books, we may reread sections and consult resources such as SparkNotes to make sure we're getting it. Once we finish, we reflect on the story's themes and the characters' development. We share our thoughts with other readers and learn from their insights. These practices, though they may seem simple, are foundational to the life of an independent reader. What we as English educators need is a system of reading literature that promotes these habits, making the novel study we complete as a class mirror the kind of reading we want our students to do individually.

To that end, the best approach to a class novel such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the whole novel approach as laid out in Ariel Sacks's *Whole Novels for the Whole Class: A Student-Centered Approach*. This method "is built on the idea that students must first read and experience a work of literature wholly and authentically . . . [before the] process of analyzing the work and their reactions to it" (Sacks 3). This analysis process takes place largely during classwide discussions, which form the basis for independent literary analysis. After reading the entire novel, Sacks observes, "the work of critical analysis that many teachers labor at doing with students along the way can be done much more efficiently, powered by intense student motivation" (24). To help students prepare for the culminating analytical essay, the whole-novel approach does require some note-taking and direct instruction during the reading process, but on the whole, it bypasses much of the busywork that many curriculum guides recommend.

Informed by Sacks's framework, this guide to teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* lays out how to set up the unit of study, how to support students during the reading process, and how to conclude the unit.

### **Beginning the Unit**

The beginning of a new unit of study, for me, is always filled with a mix of anticipation and trepidation—the excitement of starting something new coupled with the knowledge that we will have to finish it together, and not even my best laid plans are guaranteed to get us from start to finish in the timeframe allotted. As any seasoned teacher can attest, standardized testing, early dismissals, vacation days, and other factors that seem to materialize out of nowhere can make it complicated to set and adhere to a consistent schedule. Further complicating the scheduling is the amount of time in a period—planning for a block period is, of course, significantly different than

planning for a fifty minute period—and the other curricular needs (e.g. daily writing or vocabulary) you must balance with the time for a novel study. For guidance on scheduling the unit, see Appendices A and B. Appendix A maps the entire unit of study, complete with suggestions for daily writing prompts and poetry pairings, while Appendix B outlines how to divide the class period during the whole-novel study. If you need to adapt these resources to fit your classroom, you are certainly welcome to, as one of my colleagues says when sharing resources, use, revise, or toss.

As you set the schedule, you must also consider the learning outcomes you hope to reach by the unit's end. For a novel study such as this one, there are of course any number of objectives teachers could set for the unit. Since many of us follow the Common Core State Standards in our discipline, this guide bases its objectives on those standards for ninth and tenth grade, when *To Kill a Mockingbird* is commonly taught (Burke 15). If your school uses different standards, you will likely find that the Common Core standards overlap with the ones you rely on. With a few possible exceptions, just about all the grades nine and ten Common Core State Standards for reading literature could apply to *To Kill a Mockingbird* (“English Language Arts Standards”). Collaborative analysis activities, vocabulary building exercises, and writing opportunities allow teachers to target even more ELA standards. Although our desire to address all standards is only natural, this zeal is likely to contribute to over-teaching as teachers adopt a “teach all things in all books” mindset (Gallagher 39). Since the standards at a high school level are designed to be addressed over the course of two years, we do not need to cram them all into one unit. Although you are likely to touch on many standards while discussing the novel, this unit plan focuses on the following:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific detail.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10 By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. (“English Language Arts Standards”)

Emphasizing these five standards keeps the unit manageable for both teachers and students. At the end of the unit of study, students should be able to comprehend the novel with appropriate scaffolding, discuss the novel corporately, analyze the novel’s themes and other literary elements, and compose an evidence-based analytical essay about the book.

Although establishing objectives is of course essential, even the most perfectly aligned learning outcomes are ineffective if they are not coupled with clear and positive expectations for students. Positive expectations are the first key to success in the whole novel approach (Sacks 25). Perhaps the most important expectation is that all students will read the entire book—not the

SparkNotes, not just the first and last chapters, but the entire book. Because it's best for students to know your expectations prior to a given activity, you should make this requirement clear when you first begin the novel (Sprick 137). Students must complete the reading prior to participating in the discussions, and since the discussions lay the foundation for the literary analysis essay, students will feel the consequences of their failure to take responsibility in this area. Although it can be tempting to fret over whether students will actually complete the reading, this model actually tends to increase students' motivation to read since most want to participate fully in discussions along with their reading community (Miller and Kelley 130). Your positive expectations and appropriate scaffolding coupled with this constructive peer pressure will maximize student participation, and the unit's structure will keep students who fail to participate accountable.

The unit's first day is essential to prepare students for what lies ahead—and pique their interest. Since students benefit from having at least an idea of what they will gain from a text they're about to read, the first day should introduce some of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* universal ideas in addition to introducing the text itself (Gallagher 40). Following the opener, which deals with childhood, discuss the idea that, even though childhood has changed to a degree, some adolescent experiences are universal. Learning to understand and connect with other people (i.e. developing empathy) is one such universal experience, and it can be the most difficult one. Together, watch Brené Brown's TED Ed video "How to Be More Empathetic," and talk through how Brown defines empathy and what can be done to cultivate this quality. Share that the novel you're about to begin together is the story of a young girl (and be sure to stress that Scout is, in fact, female, since that's a detail many readers miss at first) who develops this important quality

as a child growing up in the segregated South. Of course, Scout learns other lessons along the way as well, but since this idea is so central to the novel, it makes a logical point of entry for students.

At this point, you can distribute students' copies of the novel as well as a reading schedule. Sacks also recommends including a letter introducing the novel and your expectations during the unit of study (181-185). This letter, distributed to each student along with the novel and the reading schedule, can also be shared with parents, administration, and other community members as a rationale for the novel's inclusion in your curriculum (see Appendix D for a sample introductory letter for *To Kill a Mockingbird*). Once students have these resources in hand, you're ready to begin the journey of reading together.

### **Reading the Novel**

During the first days of the unit, you are packing your students' bags with resources, telling them what to expect and equipping them with the background knowledge that will help them reach that final destination. Though you will of course continue to support your students as the study progresses, in the whole novel approach, "the real work happens between them and the text" (Sacks 26). As they immerse themselves in the story—its characters, conflicts, symbols, and style—they encounter "the power of the novel" (Sacks 22). Such immersion requires time and support.

Because time is perhaps the rarest commodity in our classrooms, the ways we spend it reveal our educational priorities. In a whole novel study, the best investment of this precious resource is in giving students time to read—lots of time (Sacks 103). During the three weeks scheduled for reading the novel, the majority of each class period (at least thirty minutes) should



be devoted to reading, whether independently or corporately. Students who do not complete all assigned reading in class must do it as homework. Although there are instances when you will want to read aloud together (e.g. potentially difficult sections such as the first chapter or dramatic moments such as the trial and the climactic “Hey, Boo”) so you can share the experience, reading the entire book aloud is not recommended for reasons both professional and practical. Students’ reading the book aloud is unlikely to boost their comprehension, so a round-robin or popcorn class reading is unwise (Warner et al. 223). On the other hand, teachers’ reading the book aloud often devolves into us constructing meaning for the students rather than supporting them as they construct meaning for themselves (Maneka and Frankel 337). Moreover, reading the book aloud for thirty minutes a day adds nearly two full weeks to the study, provided you read at the same pace as the twelve-hour-long audiobook. The students who would benefit from audio versions of the novel can of course access them, but it is not necessary for you to read yourself hoarse every day for five weeks.

As students read independently, you can monitor their progress and support their comprehension through individual reading conferences. If you follow the reader’s workshop model when not reading a whole-class text, reading conferences may already be an everyday practice for you, but if not, this independent reading time gives you the opportunity to begin implementing them. During conferences, you simply ask readers how the book is going and listen to their thoughts, perhaps taking a look at their reading notes in the moment, and use that conversation to deepen their thinking (Kittle and Gallagher 34). If students have little to say, they may be signaling that they are struggling with the book, and you can take time to pinpoint the obstacles they are encountering and develop a plan for addressing them. Reading conferences

remind students that they are accountable for their reading, but they are not alone in their reading—you are there to support and challenge them through it.

Without traditional chapter-by-chapter lessons and read-alouds throughout the novel, the whole novel approach does not provide the level of teacher control we may be accustomed to, so we may feel as though we aren't doing enough to help students grow or to hold them accountable for the work. Although it is true that the whole novel approach requires “letting go of the preconceptions I have of what I want my students to ‘get’ from a work of literature . . . and surrender[ing] to . . . my students’ abilities to experience the work of fiction for themselves,” it does include built-in supports and accountability along the way (Sacks 26). Several times a week, if not every day, teachers should spend about five to ten minutes checking in with the whole class, inviting them to share questions and thoughts about the story (Sacks 104). If conferences indicate that students need to deepen their understanding of a particular literary element or plot point, teachers can introduce what Sacks terms “mini-projects,” short collaborative projects that build students’ comprehension and critical thinking as they explore the novel’s development (104-105). For *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one valuable mini-project might look into symbols in the first part of the novel (e.g. the titular mockingbird, Miss Maudie’s house fire, Mrs. Dubose’s death) and consider what conflicts they foreshadow and what themes they may evoke. Another mini-project could introduce students to judicial terminology and philosophy before reading the trial scene, using resources such as those found on iCivics (“The Judicial Branch”). If you would like your students to see the connections between Tom Robinson’s trial and historical trials, you could take time to compare the fictional testimonies and statements with real-life ones, such as the Scottsboro trial. Summaries and excerpted transcripts can be found in

the student casebook *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird* by Claudia Durst Johnson as well as the teaching guide from Facing History and Ourselves. These mini-projects promote critical reading and comprehension without burdensome busywork. Over the course of reading the novel, these supports can strengthen students' understanding.

While mini-projects, reading conferences, and check-ins will all show you how well students are connecting with the novel, perhaps your greatest source of insight during a whole novel study is students' reading notes. The whole novel approach does not demand color-coded, symbol-laden annotations, but it does require that students take notes to track their thinking throughout the novel. These notes not only serve as formative assessments but also provide a foundation for the summative discussions and essay. Though Sacks recommends students use sticky notes, a reader's notebook or digital document could be substituted as well. The notes should demonstrate inferential and critical thinking, not only literal thinking (Sacks 73). Notes can be open-ended, or they can follow a teacher-specified structure, of which Sacks suggests several (e.g. a theme note that lists universal ideas addressed in the day's reading and highlights the theme that is most prominent) (95). The beauty of these notes is that they promote student autonomy in interpreting the book. Rather than a paint-by-numbers list of reading questions that prescribes what readers should and should not pay attention to, reading notes with this sort of structure treat the reading experience as more of a treasure hunt, inviting students to apply their knowledge of literary concepts without stifling the delight of developing their own conclusions about the story. Although some students will write more (and they are encouraged to!), students should be writing between three and four individual reading notes for each day's reading (Sacks 186). Collecting these notes every day in class for grading may not be feasible, but you could

easily check notes at the end of each week and provide a quick formative grade. By inspecting students' notes along the way, you can hold them accountable for their reading and ensure they are prepared to discuss the novel at the end of their reading.

### **Assessing the Unit**

Though you will see snippets of their thoughts as your students read through *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the unit assessments will show you their reflections, opinions, and insights in full. The whole novel approach prescribes two types of unit assessment that work in tandem: group discussion and literary analysis.

Group discussion, like most teaching strategies that demand sustained student participation, carries with it a level of apprehension for both students and teachers. Students may fear putting themselves out there, while teachers may fear that not enough students will actually put themselves out there, rendering the discussion period an awkward stretch of silences punctuated by increasingly desperate invitations for students to just say something already. Having enough discussion material to fill one class period seems unattainable, much less the three days the whole novel approach allots for discussing the novel. These three days, however, do not have to be uncomfortable or aimless. The key is structure. Grouping students into smaller sections (e.g. half of the class) instead of running a discussion with twenty or more students is preferable; the half that is sitting out the discussion can work independently or observe and take notes on the discussion before the groups switch roles (Sacks 115). Structure encompasses not only typical discussion norms such as respecting others' opinions and taking turns, but also the topics of the discussion. During the first day, students focus on their responses, opinions, and questions, drawing from the notes they took during their reading. Although students may

naturally raise the topic, you may ask them what scenes in *To Kill a Mockingbird* they found shocking or upsetting—the verdict and Tom’s subsequent death are likely to come up. Talking about these moments in the novel allows students to see that it is natural, even good, to feel distress when we see genuine injustice. This kind of conversation reinforces the value of uncomfortable learning that began the unit. For the most part, however, let students ask the questions. You as the teacher primarily play the role of moderator and stenographer, taking notes on students’ comments and inviting students to deepen their discussion of topics that have been raised (Sacks 118).

The following day, students receive copies of the notes, which jumpstart the next round of discussion. In order to effectively address their own questions from the previous day, the group must support their analysis with evidence, often rereading sections of the book to clarify moments of confusion (Sacks 111). The last four chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in particular can be disorienting to read since they mimic Scout’s own confusion during Bob Ewell’s attack, so you may want to revisit this part together to ensure that all students understand the ending and its implications. Students’ analysis is only as deep as their understanding, so be sure this day’s discussion is grounded in sound comprehension of the text.

On the final day, the discussion focuses on the novel’s strengths and weaknesses, its author’s intentions, and its real-world implications (Sacks 111). During this final day of discussion, you may want to revisit the historical concepts that began the unit and talk about how *To Kill a Mockingbird* would have contributed to the civil rights conversation in the 1960s. You can also ask students how the novel’s messages connect to their own lives and contemporary issues more broadly. Through this conversation, even students who did not relate to the novel

while reading can discuss the disconnect they see between Scout's story and their own, while students who did find the story relevant can share the connections they made. As the discussion progresses from the first day to the last, students generate meaningful questions that they answer together, laying the foundation for the analytical writing to come.

These three days of discussion transition naturally into the literary analysis essay that serves as the unit's summative assessment. By responding to an open-ended prompt through their essay, students demonstrate their understanding of the novel and their ability to create an evidence-based argument. To generate essay prompts, you may reframe debates or ideas that emerged during the discussion as essay questions, tailoring them to your individual classes, or you may stick with more traditional prompts such as the following:

Discuss one big idea that can be found in your book. What is the author trying to say?

How does the author's craft enable this idea to emerge?

Choose any literary device and explain how the author uses this device to explore a central idea.

Choose a character and discuss a decision he or she made. What value does this decision highlight in the character? Discuss what the reader learns from studying this character's decision.

Discuss one significant issue found in this [classic], and explain how the issue is still important to the modern reader. (Gallagher and Kittle 119-120)

These kinds of prompts provide students a variety of potential topics to pursue while also allowing them to interpret the book independently. This setup safeguards students from feeling as though they have to regurgitate a specific interpretation of the novel (e.g. the critical whiteness

perspective) and promotes an interpretation based on universal values—exactly the kind of focus that broadens the novel’s relevance for all students.

Once students have chosen a focus for their essays, you can begin the writing process. Although the five-paragraph structure is by no means required, students’ familiarity with it makes it a convenient framework (Sacks 153-154). Whatever framework you choose, the body paragraphs of a literary analysis essay at the high school level should follow a basic CER structure: claims (i.e. reasons that support the central idea expressed in the thesis), quoted and paraphrased textual evidence to support claims, and reasoning that explains the connection between the evidence and claims as well as the relationship between the claims and the argument as a whole. While students should have already begun gathering evidence in their reading notes and the discussion, they will likely need support in turning these rudimentary ideas into a full-fledged essay. To walk students through this process, analyze a sample literary analysis essay of your choice together, identifying claims, evidence, and reasoning, then transition your students into outlining their own literary analysis essays (Filkins). As you go through the writing process, support students by providing in-class time to work and confer with you. Your observations during these conferences should inform the writing instruction you provide through the remainder of the unit. This instruction should be brief and targeted to your writers’ needs (Gallagher and Kittle 40). Once your students have submitted their essays, use an analytic rubric such as the one in Appendix E to score students’ writing and provide feedback.

Contrary to what many teaching guides may have you believe, meaningful learning experiences in an English language arts classroom do not have to involve reams of worksheets and checklists of literary devices. Rather, the most meaningful learning experiences we can

provide for our students are simple. They allow us to engage with others' ideas and teach us to communicate our own. When a unit of study focuses on these primary skills, students can interact with a book like *To Kill a Mockingbird* authentically. They can laugh at Scout's precocious spunk and grieve the jury's unjust decision. They can consider Atticus's advice and ponder its applications to their own lives. They can ask questions, develop opinions, and grow toward literary independence. Most wonderful of all, they can teach us about the novel, helping us to consider anew its insights.

If we are willing to continue introducing new generations to Harper Lee's novel, it will endure—not because it perfectly aligns with our own historical moment, or because it communicates every lesson about racism we might like it to, but because it is a genuinely beautiful, important piece of literature. In an aggressive and cacophonous world, *To Kill a Mockingbird* speaks gently. It stands as a timeless reminder to stop and listen, to look at the person across the table as exactly that—a person with inherent dignity and worth who longs to be listened to and understood. It shows that ideas ought to be fought, but the people who wrongly hold those ideas ought never be casualties. It teaches that citizens should not merely talk about their values, but live by them. And above all, it reveals the sense of compassion and wonder that arises when a person truly looks at others and, finally, sees them.



## Appendix A: The Unit Plan

For me, creating a unit plan always feels like tempting fate. I know how much I want to do and how much time I actually have, but I always fear that no matter how painstakingly I try to fit what I want into what I have, something is bound to come up and ruin it all. Considering this professional reality, keep in mind that this suggested unit plan is *suggested*. It allots one week for preparatory activities, three weeks for actually reading the novel, and two weeks for analyzing it, bringing the total time for the unit to six weeks. This path through the novel may work well for you, but you may find either that your class can take shortcuts or that you need to go the long way around.

For each day of the unit, the plan suggests readings and a writing prompt. Any readings not completed in class should be completed outside class by the following period. The writing prompts, some creative and some expository, may form the basis for graded assignments, but their primary function is “getting students in the habit of transferring thinking into words and sentences” (Gallagher and Kittle 36). Additionally, each week is paired with a thematically relevant poem, which can be analyzed over the course of five days (Burke 151, 300-301). It is not recommended to include both a daily writing prompt and a poetry pairing in the same class period—choose one or the other to implement throughout the unit. If you are accustomed to using another opening strategy, you are of course welcome to substitute that in place of these recommended openers.

Day	Readings	Writing Prompt	Poetry Pairing
<i>Note: If you choose to complete the historical research project discussed in Chapter 1, you may eliminate days 1-2.</i>			
1	“Primary Source Set: Jim Crow and Segregation,” Library of Congress	What do you know about race relations in the United States after the Civil War?	“Pantom of the Great Depression,” Donald Justice
2	“Resource Gallery,” Birmingham Civil Rights Institute	What character qualities does an activist need to be successful?	“Pantom of the Great Depression,” Donald Justice
3	“Harper Lee, Elusive Author of <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , Is Dead at 89,” Emily Langer “Harper Lee’s Only Recorded Interview About <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> ,” WQXR	What makes people different in private than they are in public?	“Pantom of the Great Depression,” Donald Justice
4	“Why It’s So Hard to Talk About the N-Word,” Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor “Redefining the Word: Examining a Racial Slur Entrenched in American Vernacular That Is More Prevalent Than Ever,” Dave Sheinin and Krissah Thompson “Who Are We Protecting by Censoring ‘Huck Finn’?”, John McWhorter “Statement on Freedom of Expression,” University of Chicago “Van Jones on Safe Spaces on College Campuses,” University of Chicago	How do you think people should respond to ideas that offend them?	“Pantom of the Great Depression,” Donald Justice

Day	Readings	Writing Prompt	Poetry Pairing
5	—	What comments can you contribute to today's discussion?	"Pantom of the Great Depression," Donald Justice
6	"How to Be More Empathetic," Brené Brown TKAM Chapter 1	Describe what you were like as a child (i.e. before the age of ten). What differences and similarities might there be between your childhood and the childhood of someone born 100 years ago?	"Courage," Anne Sexton
7	TKAM Chapters 2-3	What do you think of Scout so far? What kind of personality does she seem to have? Use evidence from the text to support your interpretation.	"Courage," Anne Sexton
8	TKAM Chapters 4-5	Respond to the following quotation: "Sometimes it's better to bend the law a little in special cases" (Lee 33). What does Atticus mean by this statement? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your rationale.	"Courage," Anne Sexton
9	TKAM Chapters 6-7	Describe an object that is valuable to you using specific imagery and detail.	"Courage," Anne Sexton
10	TKAM Chapters 8-9	Craft a scene (real or fictional) that shows someone overhearing a conversation. Use action, description, and dialogue to develop the scene.	"Courage," Anne Sexton
11	TKAM Chapters 10-11	How would you define courage?	"Strange Fruit," Lewis Allan
12	TKAM Chapter 12	Atticus argues that Mrs. Dubose is "the bravest person I ever knew" (Lee 128). Why does he make this claim? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your rationale.	"Strange Fruit," Lewis Allan

Day	Readings	Writing Prompt	Poetry Pairing
13	TKAM Chapters 13-14	Respond to the following quotation: “The idea that [Calpurnia] had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one” (Lee 143). What does this mean? Why is this realization significant for Scout?	“Strange Fruit,” Lewis Allan
14	TKAM Chapters 15-16	At the end of Chapter 14, Scout asks Dill why Boo Radley has never run off (Lee 164). What does this question suggest about Scout’s feelings toward Boo?	“Strange Fruit,” Lewis Allan
15	TKAM Chapters 17-18	What do you think a courtroom trial is like? What are your expectations for a trial based on (e.g. personal experience, books and films, etc.)?	“Strange Fruit,” Lewis Allan
16	TKAM Chapters 19-21	In the American justice system, a jury must be convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant is guilty. What does the standard “reasonable doubt” mean? Why is this standard in place?	“Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” Countee Cullen
17	TKAM Chapters 22-23	Respond to the following quotation: “Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal” (Lee 234). What does Atticus mean by this statement? Do you agree or disagree? Explain your rationale.	“Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” Countee Cullen
18	TKAM Chapter 24	What does it mean to be a hypocrite?	“Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” Countee Cullen
19	TKAM Chapters 25-27	Respond to the following quotation: “In the secret courts of men’s hearts Atticus had no case” (Lee 276). What literary device is used here? What does it suggest about the human heart?	“Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” Countee Cullen

Day	Readings	Writing Prompt	Poetry Pairing
20	TKAM Chapters 28-31	Are stories better when they are morally black-and-white or when they are morally gray? Explain your rationale.	“Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” Countee Cullen
21	—	What comments can you contribute to today’s discussion?	“Understanding,” Sara Teasdale
22	—	What ideas from yesterday’s discussion should be discussed further?	“Understanding,” Sara Teasdale
23	—	What ideas from yesterday’s discussion should be discussed further?	“Understanding,” Sara Teasdale
24	Example literary analysis essay	What universal ideas from the novel stood out to you as you were reading?	“Understanding,” Sara Teasdale
25	—	How prepared are you to begin your literary analysis essay?	“Understanding,” Sara Teasdale
26	—	Craft a lead for your literary analysis essay.	“Sympathy,” Paul Laurence Dunbar
27	—	What progress have you made on your literary analysis essay? What do you need to get to the next step of the essay?	“Sympathy,” Paul Laurence Dunbar
28	—	What progress have you made on your literary analysis essay? What challenges have you encountered so far?	“Sympathy,” Paul Laurence Dunbar
29	—	What progress have you made on your literary analysis essay? What is your plan for finishing it?	“Sympathy,” Paul Laurence Dunbar
30	—	Reflect on the process of writing the literary analysis essay. What did you do well? What could you have done better?	“Sympathy,” Paul Laurence Dunbar

## Appendix B: Daily Scheduling

When implementing a new approach in the classroom, teachers often find it helpful to see how what sounds good in theory actually looks in practice. This teaching guide for *To Kill a Mockingbird* proposes four primary instructional strategies (direct instruction and mini-projects, class discussion, independent reading, and literary analysis writing), making a one-size-fits-all daily schedule impractical. Each of these four instructional strategies has different time needs, so a different model schedule is needed for each.

Each model schedule assumes a fifty-minute class period. Those who teach longer periods may adapt extra time for independent choice reading, vocabulary practice, the historical research project suggested in Chapter 1, or other instructional priorities. Though these four schedules divide the bulk of the class period differently, they do share two common elements: time for an opener (see Appendix A for a list of daily writing prompts and poetry pairings that can be used during this time), and time for concluding comments. These commonalities give the unit a sense of cohesion and predictability so teachers know how to prepare and students know what to expect.

The first model schedule, for days with direct instruction or mini-projects, fits Days 1 through 4, Days 6 and 24, and any additional days throughout the unit when you decide to implement mini-projects as discussed in Chapter 3 of this teaching guide.

The second model schedule, designed for class discussions, fits Day 5 and Days 21 through 23. On Day 5, students will participate in the Socratic seminar on objectionable material as described in Chapter 2; on Days 21 through 23, they will discuss the novel according to the guidelines set out in Chapter 3.

The third schedule fits Days 7 through 20, when students actually read the novel. It includes time for your students to corporately discuss their progress, but the central focus is on the time for independent reading, which is essential for the whole novel approach and thus should be protected.

The fourth and final model schedule fits Days 25 through 30. During this period, students work on the literary analysis essay, with time allotted for brief mini-lessons on writing.

In each of these four models, all time prescriptions are general and thus adaptable to the needs within an individual classroom.

Table 1

Model Daily Schedule: Direct Instruction and Mini-Projects

<b>Time</b>	<b>Task</b>
8 minutes	Opener (Writing prompt or poem of the week)
10 minutes	Direct instruction
30 minutes	Independent work
2 minutes	Conclusion

Table 2

Model Daily Schedule: Class Discussions

<b>Time</b>	<b>Task</b>
8 minutes	Opener (Writing prompt or poem of the week)
20 minutes	Group 1 discusses
20 minutes	Group 2 discusses
2 minutes	Conclusion

Table 3

## Model Daily Schedule: Independent Reading

<b>Time</b>	<b>Task</b>
8 minutes	Opener (Writing prompt or poem of the week)
10 minutes	Comprehension check
30 minutes	Independent reading
2 minutes	Conclusion

Table 4

## Model Daily Schedule: Literary Analysis Workshop and Conferences

<b>Time</b>	<b>Task</b>
8 minutes	Opener (Writing prompt or poem of the week)
10 minutes	Mini writing lesson
30 minutes	Workshop and conferences
2 minutes	Conclusion



### Appendix C: Further Reading

The beauty of being an educator is that we love learning just as much as we love helping others learn. As you've perused this teaching guide, you've undoubtedly encountered a topic you want to learn more about. To deepen your own understanding of the historical context, the novel, and English language arts education, I recommend the following resources for further reading.

To better acquaint yourself with Harper Lee, the revised edition of Charles Shields's biography *Mockingbird* is a good starting point. Although it does include some inaccuracies, it is the most comprehensive account of Lee's life. Follow it with Wayne Flynt's *Mockingbird Songs: My Friendship with Harper Lee*, which corrects the record on many Harper Lee myths (including some Shields perpetuates) and gives readers a glimpse of her true personality.

For understanding Harper Lee's cultural context, a number of resources may be helpful. Wayne Flynt's *Alabama in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* is painstakingly thorough in its treatment of Southern culture and history in Alabama, and its discussions of poverty and race relations illuminate the complex dynamics in Maycomb. Joseph Crespino's *Atticus Finch, The Biography: Harper Lee, Her Father, and the Making of an American Icon* examines the parallels between Atticus Finch and Southern politicians, including A.C. Lee. Although it makes for dry reading at times, it is informative nevertheless. If you plan to spend significant time discussing the historical context in class, Claudia Durst Johnson, who produced one of the first significant pieces of scholarship on the novel, has compiled several excellent primary sources in *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*. This casebook includes critical essays, letters to the editor that discuss the novel's censorship, legal transcripts for cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Scottsboro trial, interviews with

Southerners (both black and white) who lived through the same era as Harper Lee, and excerpts of literature depicting the stock characters that *To Kill a Mockingbird* fleshes out. The *Teaching Mockingbird* guide from Facing History and Ourselves features additional interviews and historical documents. These texts would give students a starting point for the historical research project described in Chapter 1, or they could serve as the basis for a mini-project during the unit of study.

There are of course many standalone articles analyzing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but I have found that anthologies of literary criticism tend to provide the deepest insight into a text. Harold Bloom's anthology *Modern Critical Interpretations: To Kill a Mockingbird* includes several excellent essays from a variety of authors, as do *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Alice Petry, and *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays*, edited by Michael Meyer. *Threatening Boundaries*, Claudia Durst Johnson's 1994 collection of original essays on the novel, provides a beginner introduction to some key issues in Harper Lee scholarship. For more personal assessments of the novel's significance, read Mary McDonagh Murphy's anthology *Scout, Atticus, and Boo: A Celebration of Fifty Years of To Kill a Mockingbird*, which features reviews and reflections from notable figures. If you require students to include literary criticism in their own analysis essays, these books would provide a diverse range of perspectives to incorporate.

As you study the novel together, you may want to pair it with additional texts to expand students' understanding of its historical setting and themes. To that end, I recommend pairing the novel with poetry through the weekly poem opener strategy (see Appendix A for details). Based on my own adventures with poetry and Susan Jolley's article "Integrating Poetry and *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird*,” I recommend the following titles: “Strange Fruit” by Lewis Allan (a poem that was set to music and famously performed by Billie Holiday), “Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song” by Countee Cullen, “Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, “Pantomim of the Great Depression” by Donald Justice, “Courage” by Anne Sexton, and “Understanding” by Sara Teasdale. Even if you choose not to implement the weekly poem opener strategy, you could certainly substitute a poem for a daily writing prompt and examine it for one day rather than a full week. “Strange Fruit,” with its haunting imagery of the “strange and bitter crop,” would be a particularly poignant opener, especially if paired with audio of the song (L. Allan).

As Chapter 2 discussed, many teachers would like their curriculum to feature texts from black authors along with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This desire can be accomplished in a number of ways. If pressed for time, you could read a cycle of short stories such as “Marigolds” by Eugenia Collier, “A Party Down at the Square” by Ralph Ellison, “Salvation” by Langston Hughes, “John Redding Goes to Sea” by Zora Neale Hurston, and “The Flowers” by Alice Walker. Aligned with *To Kill a Mockingbird* in setting, theme, or both, these stories would allow students to explore the black experience that Harper Lee does not speak to. If, however, you have time for a more extended study, book clubs with stories from black authors may be an effective way to introduce many authors simultaneously since a book club unit typically offers between four and six choices.

If you would like your students to read novels that, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, have garnered significant critical acclaim, you may choose titles such as *Go Tell it On the Mountain* by James Baldwin, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *The Underground*

*Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. If you would like your students to read stories that parallel *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s coming-of-age arc, a young adult novel may be appropriate, although you should be aware that these, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, may face challenges in the classroom because of language or thematic material. You could offer choices such as *Allegedly* by Tiffany D. Jackson, *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and and Brendan Kiely, *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and *Punching the Air* by Ibi Zoboi. If you would rather move away from fiction for your book clubs, autobiographies and memoirs provide a perfect opportunity for your students to walk in someone else's skin, as Atticus puts it. Some titles worth considering are *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* by Anne Moody, *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northrup, *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson, and *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington. Like the whole novel study, book clubs grow students' ability to discuss books as a group, making them a logical follow-up to a class-wide novel.

As educational trends wax and wane, teachers must find the core principles and practices that sustain them through transient pedagogical movements. In my practice as an English educator, I have found several books particularly helpful. Jim Burke's *The English Teacher's Companion* helps in creating a balanced, standards-based curriculum, and his weekly poetry strategy is excellent for teachers who want to incorporate more poetry. Kelly Gallagher and Penny Kittle's *180 Days: Two Teachers and the Quest to Engage and Empower Adolescents* is always within reach of my desk. Their philosophy of English language arts inspires me, and they give practical, effective advice for setting up book clubs, daily writing practices, and reading

conferences. To look at the whole novel approach in detail, Ariel Sacks's *Whole Novels for the Whole Class: A Student-Centered Approach* is essential.

Our to-read lists will always surpass our lists of books we've read. For readers, this reality is both our eternal struggle and our great joy. There is always more to read, so there is always more to learn—and more to teach.

## Appendix D: Introductory Letter

Dear students,

Today, we begin studying Harper Lee's classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published in 1960 and awarded one of literature's most prestigious honors, the Pulitzer Prize, this book tells the story of a young girl named Scout growing up in segregated Alabama during the Great Depression. Headstrong, funny, and precocious, Scout must learn to see things from other perspectives as her lawyer father takes on a life-or-death civil rights case. Lee's book challenges stereotypes, brings readers face-to-face with injustice, and encourages us to walk in one another's shoes as we go through life together.

Some days we will read the novel aloud during class, and sometimes you will be reading independently. You are responsible to keep up with each day's assigned reading, and you are also responsible to track your thoughts about the book by taking reading notes. Remember, your notes are not only chapter summaries; they are primarily a record of your inferential and critical thinking about the story and characters. You will be expected to write at least three reading notes for each day's reading, and I will collect these notes once a week. The notes will prepare you for our class discussion and for your literary analysis essay, in which you will analyze a character, literary device, or theme that emerges in the story.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is considered one of the most powerful American novels ever written, and I hope it will inspire you to confront prejudice, defend the vulnerable, and embrace people who are unlike yourself. I look forward to hearing your insights on this story.

With love,

Your teacher

## Appendix E: Grading and Rubrics

By design, the unit plan prescribed in this teaching guide limits the busywork we so often use to pad our gradebooks. The only graded assessments required are the pre-seminar notes for the Socratic seminar described in Chapter 2 and the reading notes and literary analysis essay described in Chapter 3. Because these assessments are aligned to the standards and concepts this guide emphasizes, a pre-made rubric pulled from your files or a Google search is unlikely to be helpful in assessing students' work. To evaluate submitted assignments, I recommend using the rubrics in this appendix for the convenience of a pre-made rubric without all the editing (unless, of course, you are like me and you actually enjoy writing your own rubrics, in which case I hope mine will at least give you a solid starting point).

Table 1 features a rubric for evaluating both the pre-seminar notes and the reading notes. A leveled holistic rubric, it scores the notes overall rather than evaluating individual criteria, making it possible to assess formative work quickly. Students' work falls into one of four levels on this rubric: exemplary (100 percent of the points), proficient (90 percent of the points), emerging (75 percent of the points), and basic (50 percent of the points). The literal, inferential, and critical thinking this rubric speaks to is addressed in Chapter 3 of this teaching guide, and Ariel Sacks's *Whole Novels for the Whole Class: A Student-Centered Approach* gives more specific instruction on how to teach these skills in a classroom setting.

Table 2 features a literary analysis essay rubric. A leveled analytical rubric, it scores six criteria: introduction and conclusion, claims and organization, evidence, reasoning, style, and conventions. The first four criteria are worth up to twenty points while the last two are worth up to ten, meaning the entire assignment is scored out of a hundred points. Students' work falls into

one of four levels for each criterion: exemplary (100 percent of the points), proficient (80 to 90 percent of the points, depending on the category), emerging (70 to 75 percent of the points, depending on the category), and basic (50 percent of the points).

Table 1

## Reading Notes Rubric

<b>Exemplary 20 points</b>	<b>Proficient 18 points</b>	<b>Emerging 15 points</b>	<b>Basic 10 points</b>
The student demonstrates thorough, original inferential and critical thinking supported by textual evidence.	The student demonstrates inferential and critical thinking supported by textual evidence.	The student demonstrates some inferential and critical thinking but does not support thoughts with textual evidence.	The student demonstrates only literal thinking, summarizing the text rather than analyzing it.



Table 2

## Literary Analysis Essay Rubric

Criteria	Exemplary 20 Points	Proficient 18 Points	Emerging 15 Points	Basic 10 Points
Introduction and Conclusion	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>compellingly introduces and contextualizes the topic</li> <li>presents a clear, concise thesis</li> <li>summarizes argument effectively in the conclusion</li> <li>parallels introduction as appropriate in the conclusion</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>introduces the topic with some general context</li> <li>presents a clear thesis</li> <li>summarizes argument in the conclusion</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>vaguely introduces the topic with minimal context</li> <li>includes a vague or misplaced thesis</li> <li>summarizes argument in the conclusion but may include irrelevant or insufficient information</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>fails to include an introduction</li> <li>fails to include a thesis</li> <li>fails to include a conclusion</li> </ul>
Claims and Organization	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>thoughtfully, logically organizes body paragraphs throughout to support the thesis</li> <li>expresses central idea of each paragraph in a single clear sentence that controls the paragraph</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>logically organizes body paragraphs throughout to support the thesis</li> <li>expresses central idea of each paragraph in a single sentence that mostly controls the paragraph</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>somewhat organizes body paragraphs to support the thesis, although the organization may be redundant or confusing</li> <li>expresses central idea of some paragraphs, but central idea is inconsistent or unclear in others</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>does not organize the essay into paragraphs to support the thesis</li> <li>does not express central idea for most or all paragraphs</li> </ul>

Evidence	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides relevant, thorough textual evidence to support analysis</li> <li>• integrates a variety of quoted and paraphrased textual evidence</li> <li>• introduces textual evidence with varied, purposeful introductory phrases and clauses</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides relevant, sufficient textual evidence to support analysis</li> <li>• includes quoted and paraphrased textual evidence</li> <li>• sometimes introduces textual evidence with phrases and clauses</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides some textual evidence to support analysis, though textual evidence may be irrelevant</li> <li>• includes either quoted or paraphrased textual evidence</li> <li>• rarely if ever introduces textual evidence with phrases and clauses</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provides insufficient textual evidence to support analysis</li> <li>• summarizes the text rather than analyzing it</li> <li>• does not quote or paraphrase textual evidence</li> </ul>
Reasoning	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• thoroughly, logically explains how textual evidence supports claims</li> <li>• thoroughly, logically connects claims with thesis</li> <li>• uses varied transitional words, phrases, and sentences to connect ideas smoothly and logically</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• logically explains how textual evidence supports claims</li> <li>• logically connects claims with thesis</li> <li>• uses transitional words, phrases, and sentences to connect ideas logically</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vaguely or fallaciously explains how textual evidence supports claims</li> <li>• does not connect claims with thesis</li> <li>• sometimes uses basic transitional words or phrases to connect ideas</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• does not explain how textual evidence supports claims or thesis</li> <li>• does not use transitional words, phrases, or sentences to connect ideas</li> </ul>

Criteria	Exemplary 10 Points	Proficient 8 Points	Emerging 7 Points	Basic 5 Points
Style	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uses precise, vivid language</li> <li>• maintains appropriately formal tone</li> <li>• varies syntax to communicate effectively</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uses precise language</li> <li>• maintains mostly formal tone</li> <li>• usually varies syntax to communicate effectively</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uses vague or passive language</li> <li>• sometimes attempts formal tone</li> <li>• sometimes varies syntax, though at times ineffectively</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• uses vague, passive, and confusing language</li> <li>• uses an informal tone throughout</li> <li>• rarely varies syntax</li> </ul>
Conventions	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrates strong command of grammar, mechanics, usage, and spelling</li> <li>• commits few or no errors; issues do not affect readability</li> <li>• uses MLA style correctly (in-text citations, Works Cited page, spacing, font, headers)</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets all the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrates adequate command of grammar, mechanics, usage, and spelling</li> <li>• commits minor errors; issues do not affect readability</li> <li>• uses MLA style with minor errors (in-text citations, Works Cited page, spacing, font, headers)</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrates inconsistent command of grammar, mechanics, usage, and spelling</li> <li>• commits some errors; issues somewhat affect readability</li> <li>• uses elements of MLA style with substantial errors (in-text citations, Works Cited page, spacing, font, headers)</li> </ul>	<p>The student meets one or more of the following criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• demonstrates insufficient command of grammar, mechanics, usage, and spelling</li> <li>• commits many errors; issues interfere with readability</li> <li>• does not use MLA style (in-text citations, Works Cited page, spacing, font, headers)</li> </ul>
<b>Total</b>	<b>Exemplary: 92-100 points</b>	<b>Proficient: 80-91 points</b>	<b>Emerging: 70-79 points</b>	<b>Basic: 50-69 points</b>

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