

Name : _____

Period: _____

Context

ADVICE FROM LEE

"As you grow up, always tell the truth, do no harm to others, and don't think you are the most important being on earth. Rich or poor, you then can look anyone in the eye and say, "I'm probably no better than you, but I'm certainly your equal."

- Harper Lee, in a letter to a fan.



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Summarize the social context of the time during which the novel is set.

2. Refer to Lee's advice to a fan above. How might this advice relate to the time and context into which Lee was writing?

3. When and where was Lee born? How might this have influenced her writing?

4. In one of the extracts it says that black people were often forced to do 'dirty jobs'; what does this mean and why were they the ones forced to do such jobs?

5. One of the most prominent themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is prejudice and discrimination. Does that mean that it will be all about race? Explain why or why not.

Background Information



The Author

Harper Lee (*FULL NAME: Nelle Harper Lee*) was born on April 28 1926 and is an American author. Lee only published two novels: one of which was the widely successful and critically acclaimed *To Kill a Mockingbird* (the other being *Go Set a Watchman*, which was published over 50 years later).

Lee's personal life clearly informed her novel: she was born and raised in Alabama; her father (known as 'Finch') was a lawyer who once defended two black men who were convicted of murdering a storeowner.

Lee studied law at the University of Alabama, but dropped out in order to focus on her writing.

In 1960 the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published and has sold over 30 million copies.

Lee never married; she still resides in Alabama.

Understanding the world of the 1930s

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in the 1930s in a small southern town in America. The 1930s were a time of the **Great Depression** when people were struggling to make ends meet and life was particularly difficult in rural towns.

In 1929 the economic prosperity of the '20s was halted by the stock-market crash known as the **Wall Street Crash**, which resulted in the Great Depression. This was a dark and depressing time in American history as many people lost their jobs, banks failed, people became homeless and many went hungry. It lasted for about ten years.

And this is the time in which Lee chose to set her novel. It informs the situation of the poor farmers in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who have no money to pay a lawyer but pay instead with produce like hickory nuts and turnip greens.

RACISM in the 1930s

Although slavery was officially abolished in the late 1800s, in the 1930s racial discrimination was still very much alive. The **Jim Crow Laws** meant that black and white people were officially segregated (*not allowed to sit in the same areas of restaurants, not allowed on the same buses, not allowed to marry etc.*)

Moreover, black citizens were treated as second-class citizens: they were not paid the same wages as their white colleagues, they were often required to do 'dirty jobs', and lived on the outskirts of society.

Not only were they officially discriminated against, but black people also had to contend with the many prejudices and stereotypes within society: lynch mobs often attacked African Americans and the Ku Klux Klan was still active.

Although it was set in the 1930s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960 - a time when racial tensions were still highly prevalent and the civil rights movement was very much underway.

The Scottsboro Boys

In 1931, when Lee was five years old, nine young black men were accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. The trials went on for years with many appeals, convictions, reconvictions and eventual pardons. Many prominent lawyers and other American citizens saw the sentences as false and motivated only by racial prejudice (they were convicted by an all-white jury). It was also widely believed that the women who had accused the men were lying, and in appeal after appeal, their claims became more and more doubtful.

There can be little doubt that the **Scottsboro Case** (as the trials of the nine men came to be called) served as a seed for the trial that stands at the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.