

# To Kill a Mockingbird

NOVEL UNIT

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**SECTION 2 — HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**SECTION 3 — STORY PREVIEW**

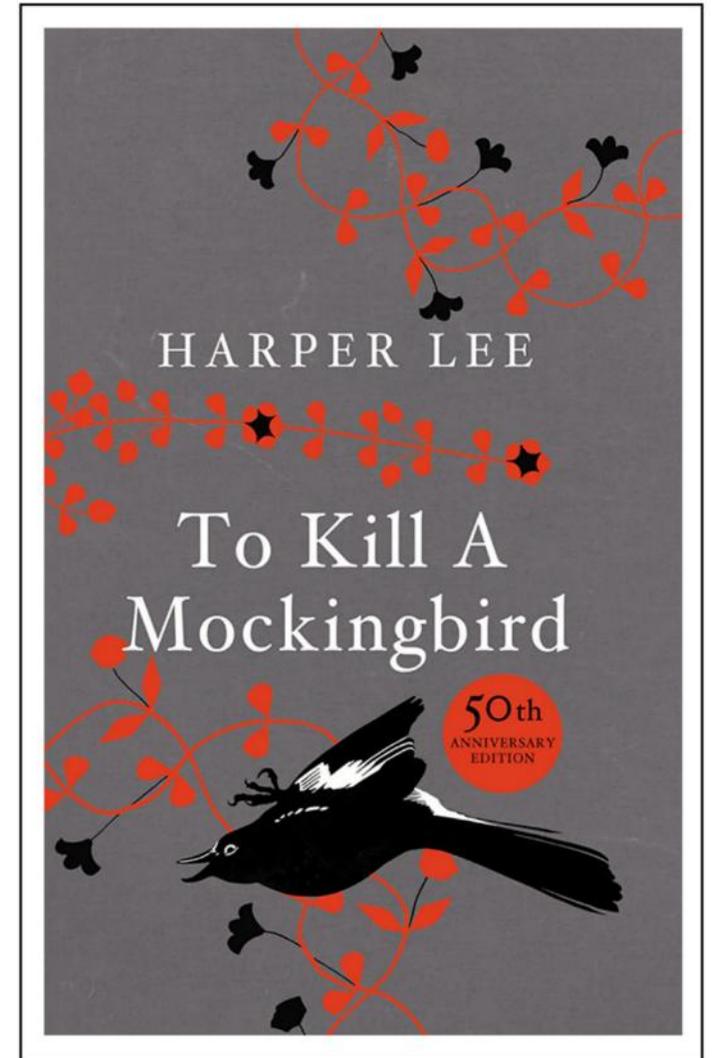
**SECTION 4 — KEY ELEMENTS & DEVICES**

**SECTION 5 — UNIT PREVIEW**

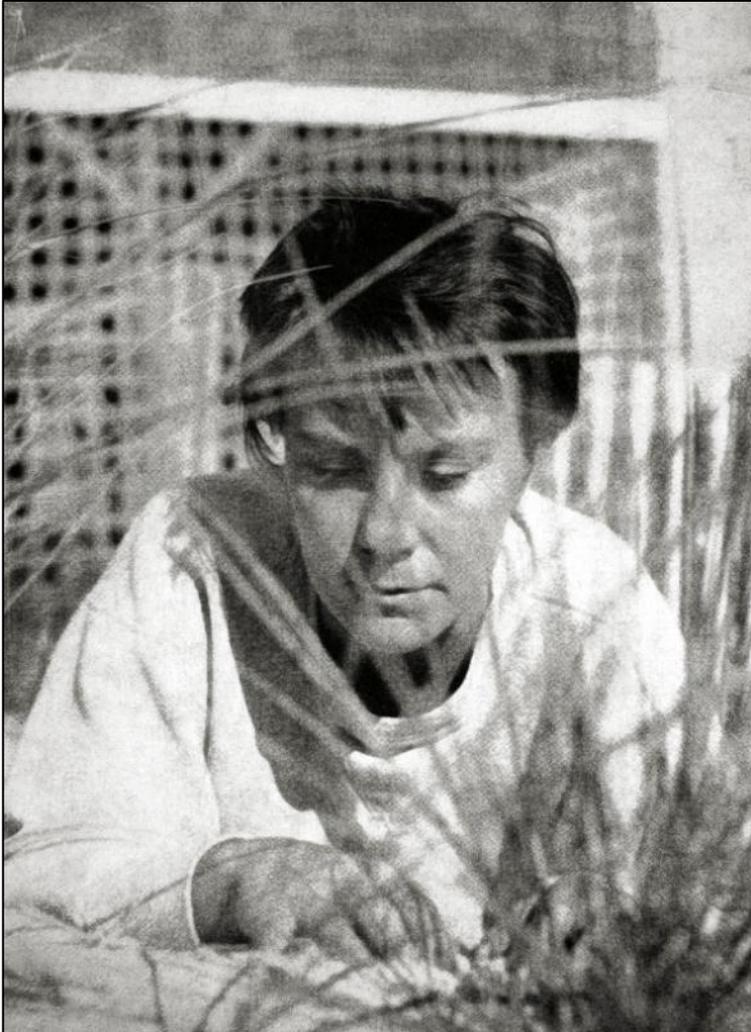
# NOVEL OVERVIEW

# A CORNERSTONE OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

- Published in 1960 and immediately acclaimed; won the Pulitzer Prize.
- Speaks to American issues across generations.
- Develops themes on morality, innocence, courage, empathy, and social inequality.
- Blends coming-of-age storytelling with American social history.



# THE AUTHOR: HARPER LEE (1926-2016)



Portrait by Truman Capote, 1960, PD

- Born Nelle Harper Lee in Monroeville, AL
- Father was a lawyer — inspiration for the character Atticus Finch
- Studied law at the University of Alabama before moving to NYC to pursue writing.
- Lee drew on real people and social issues.
- Due to her reclusive nature, Lee gave very few interviews.

# WHY THIS NOVEL MATTERS

- Examines race, class, gender, and justice in the U.S.
- Arrived during the Civil Rights Movement; influenced national discussions on race.
- Continues to be debated:
  - Praised for moral clarity.
  - Critiqued for centering on white perspectives.



Lee receives the presidential medal of freedom, 2007, PD

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

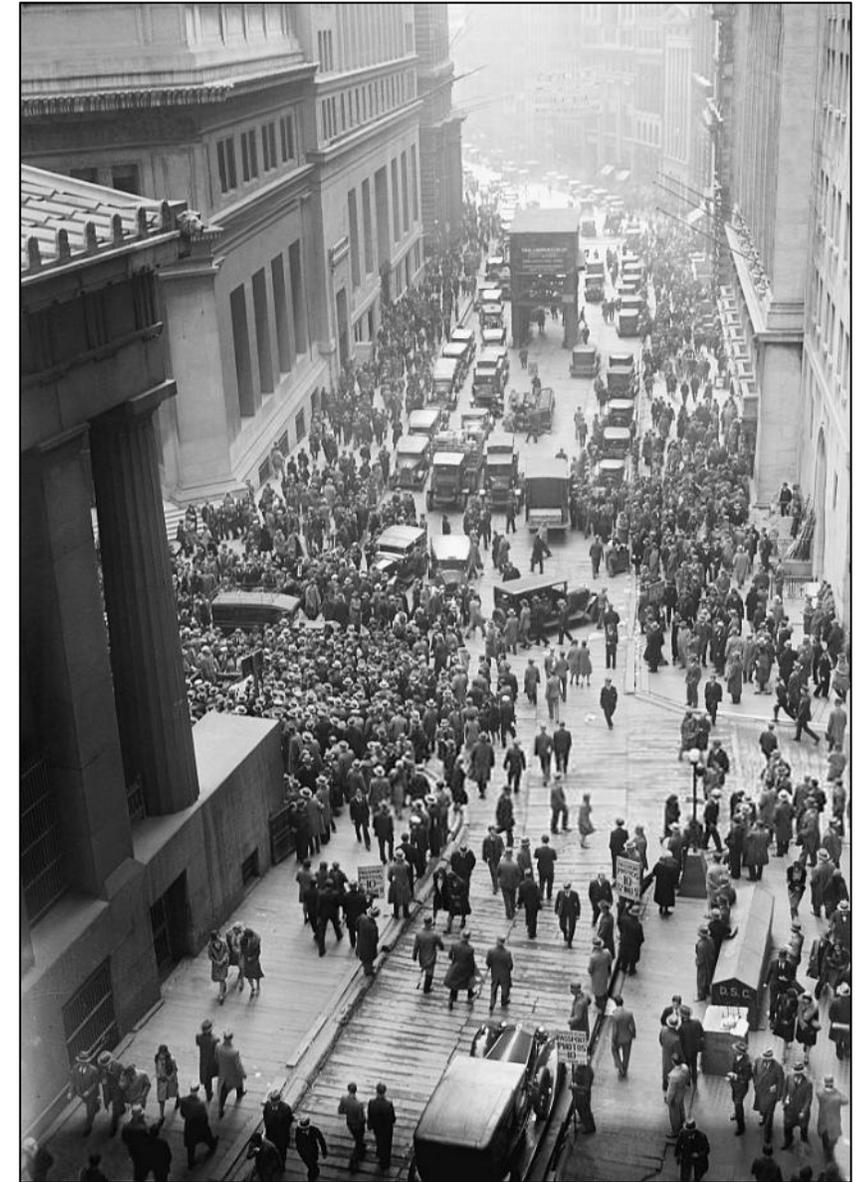
Set in the 1930s

Published in 1960



# THE 1930s (THE SETTING)

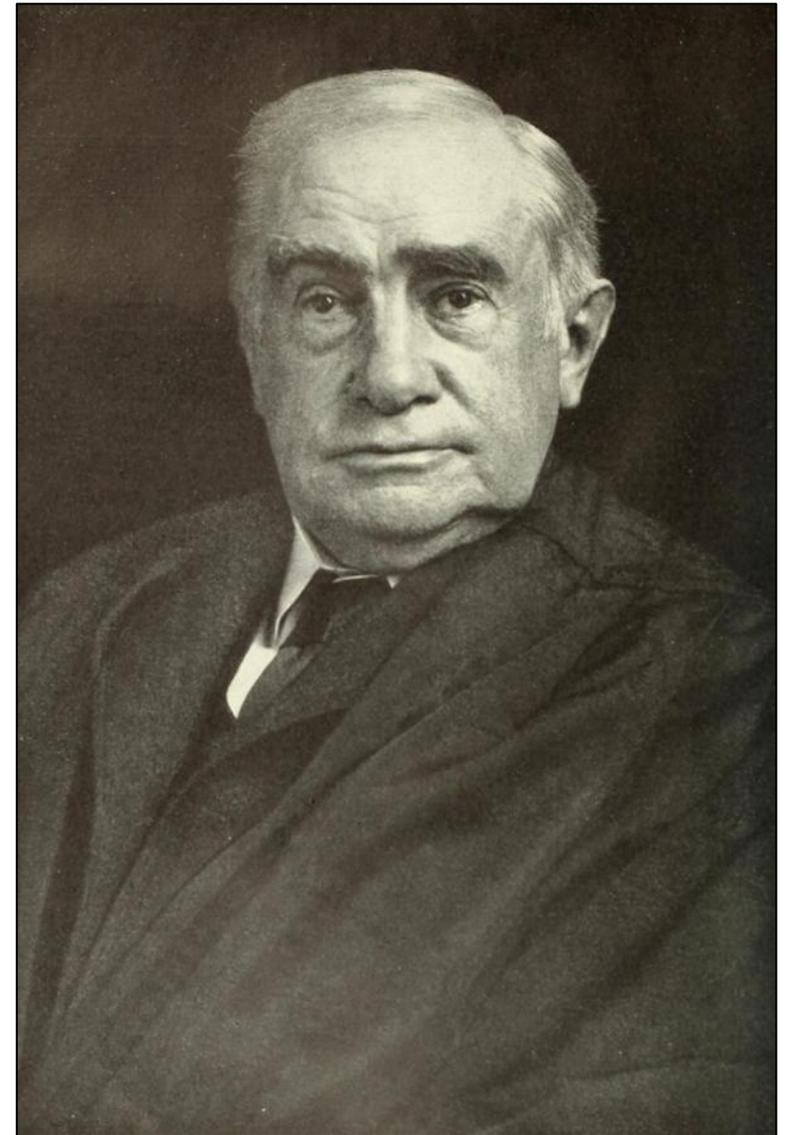
- Slavery ended in 1865, but prejudice and discrimination against Black people continued in new legal, economic, and social forms.
- The novel takes place during the Great Depression (1929–1939). Most people faced unemployment, poverty, and food scarcity.
- While women had achieved voting rights, they were restricted and marginalized in many ways.
- So-called “science” about racial superiority and eugenics (positive breeding) gained popularity.



Wall Street panic, 1929, PD

# WHAT WERE JIM CROW LAWS?

- After Reconstruction (the era following the Civil War), many states passed laws enforcing racial segregation.
- Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) was a case that upheld “separate but equal” doctrine (U.S. Supreme Court) which supported these laws.
- These laws restricted where Black Americans could live, learn, travel, vote, and work.
- Sustained through violence, intimidation, and prejudicial courts.



Justice Henry Billings Brown, author of the majority opinion in Plessy

Photo by Frances Johnston, 1905, PD

# DAILY LIFE UNDER JIM CROW



A Farm Security Administration photo of a “cropper” family chopping the weeds from cotton near White Plains, in Georgia, US, 1941, PD

- Segregated schools, public spaces, buses, neighborhoods
- Racial “etiquette rules”: Black citizens had to defer to white people in speech and behavior.
- Violating these unwritten rules could lead to arrest or violence.
- Extremely limited economic opportunity and social mobility

# VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE

- The first Ku Klux Klan (1865) was a secret, vigilante society. Its primary goal was to resist Reconstruction-era policies and preserve white control. The KKK was revived in 1915 and expanded its targets to include immigrants, Catholics, and Jews.
- Lynching was used as a tool of terror.
  - *To lynch (verb): to put to death (as by hanging) by mob action without legal approval or permission. (Merriam-Webster)*
- Black communities resisted through churches, mutual-aid societies, educational and social institutions, journalism, and activism.



KKK rally in the 1920s, Underwood & Underwood, PD

# THE SCOTTSBORO CASE (1931–1937)

- Nine Black teenagers were falsely accused of sexually assaulting two white women in Alabama.
- Despite weak evidence, eight were initially sentenced to death. (ACLU, “The Saga of the Scottsboro Boys.”)
- The case showed how race influenced courtroom outcomes.
- Harper Lee grew up while these trials were ongoing.



From *The Daily Worker*, 1931, PD

# ECONOMIC HARDSHIP: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression (1929-1939) was a severe, worldwide economic downturn. The period was marked by massive unemployment, widespread bank failures, industrial collapse, and extreme poverty. Eventually, the circumstances led to significant government intervention programs.



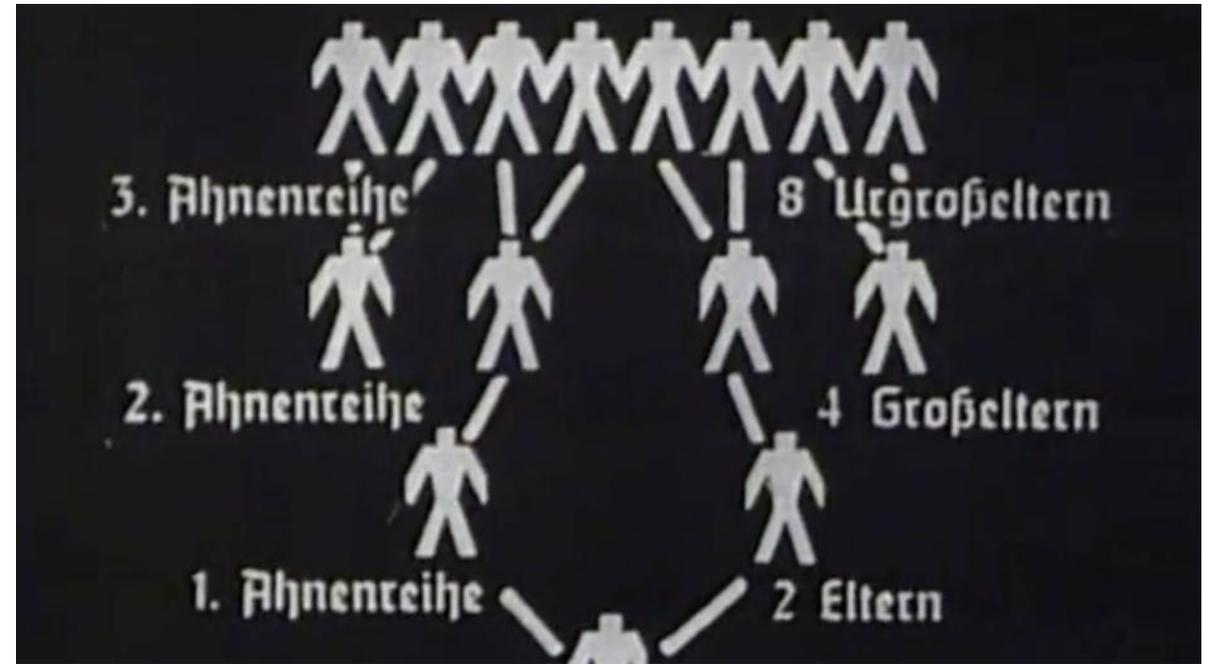
# GENDER EXPECTATIONS IN THE 1930s



- Women were expected to be homemakers, teachers, nurses — limited opportunities.
- Social expectations included being quiet, morally upright, polite, and submissive.
- Women gained the right to vote just 13 years before the novel's setting (19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, 1920).
- By 1960 (publication), Western society was on the cusp of Second-Wave Feminism.
- Gender norms are important in the novel.

# THE RISE OF RACIAL “SCIENCES” AND EUGENICS

- In the 1900s - 1930s, many people endorsed eugenics (“good genes”), the idea that society could be improved by controlling who reproduced.
- Supporters claimed traits like intelligence, morality, and criminal behavior were inherited.
- Eugenics influenced segregation laws, immigration laws, economic practices, and led to forced sterilization programs of those considered “unfit.” (Kelves, 1995)



This table from Nazi Germany illustrates their requirements regarding racial purity.

# THE NOVEL'S PUBLICATION IN 1960

- The Start of the Civil Rights Era
  - Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56)
  - Little Rock Nine (1957)
  - Sit-in Movement (1960)
- Readers saw strong connections between the novel's fictional trial and real-life events.



Rosa Parks being fingerprinted after her arrest.  
Gene Herrick for the Associated Press, 1953, PD

# STORY PREVIEW

# SETTING: MAYCOMB, ALABAMA

- Fictional rural town modeled after Harper Lee's real hometown
- Slow-moving, tradition-bound, deeply segregated
- Community values reputation, family history, and strict social categories



Old Monroe County Courthouse — Photo by Redditaddict62, 2018

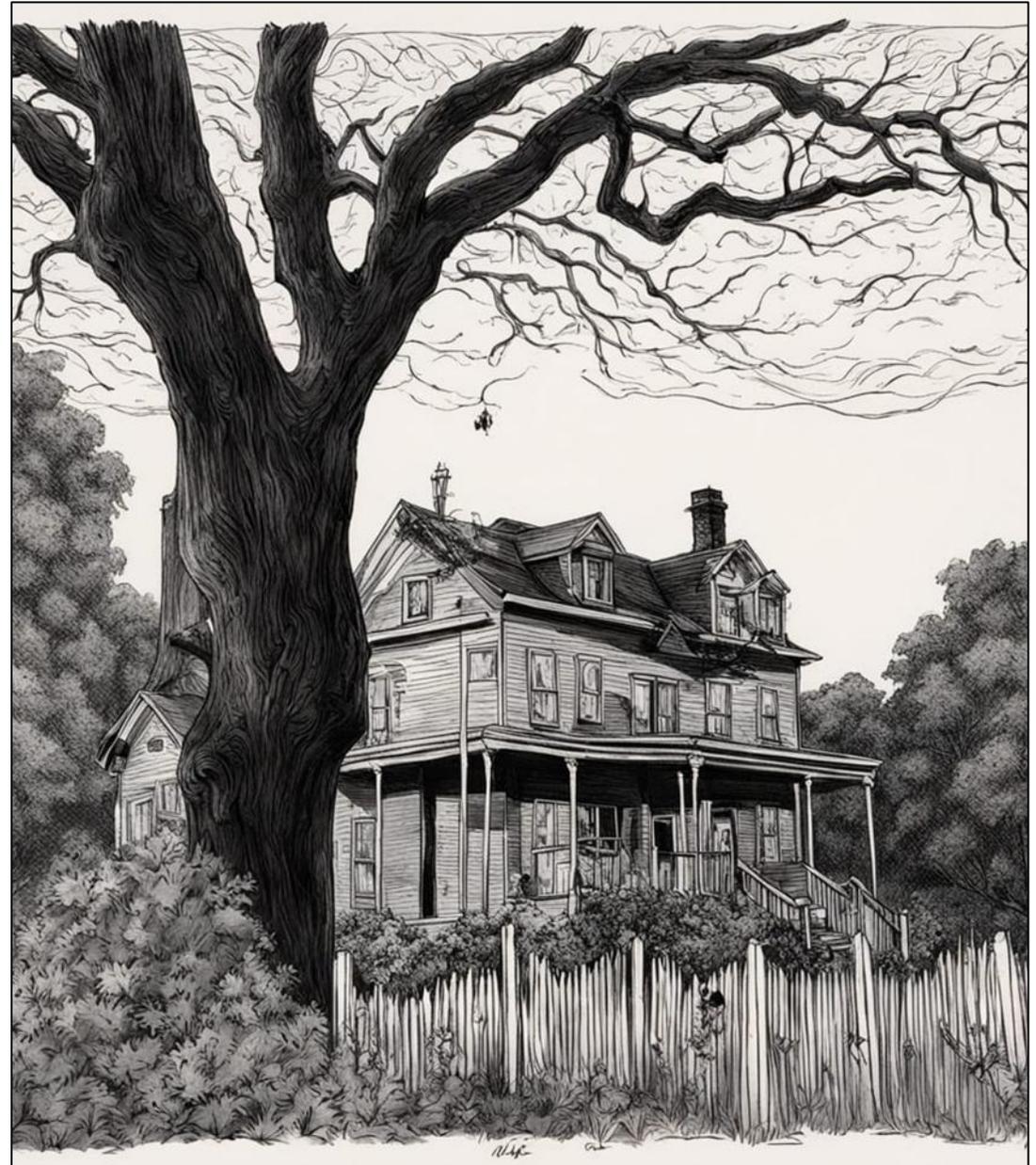
# MAIN CHARACTERS (NO SPOILERS)

- Scout Finch: Curious, feisty girl; 6 years old.
- Jem Finch: Older brother (age 10); beginning to examine how the adult world works.
- Atticus Finch: Their father; lawyer.
- Calpurnia: The Finch family's housekeeper, practically a member of the family
- Dill: Friend to Jem and Scout.
- Boo Radley: A mysterious neighbor.
- Tom Robinson: A Black man accused of a crime.



# STORY PREVIEW (NO SPOILERS)

- A young girl and her brother growing up
- The mystery surrounding a reclusive and possibly sinister neighbor
- The power of empathy (learning to understand others)
- A small-town court case that challenges everyone's beliefs
- A struggle between justice and prejudice



# KEY ELEMENTS & DEVICES

# POINT OF VIEW: SCOUT AS NARRATOR

First-person narration blends childhood innocence with adult reflection.

# CHARACTERIZATION

Direct and indirect characterization reveal motivations and conflicts. Pay attention to how some characters change over the course of the story and some remain the same.



Harper Lee with Mary Badham, NYWT&S Collection, 1961



## IMAGERY

Lee uses imagery (descriptions that help you imagine with your senses) to build the setting and create feelings.

## MOOD

At points the novel feels silly, reflective, remorseful, eerie, jubilant...

## SYMBOLISM

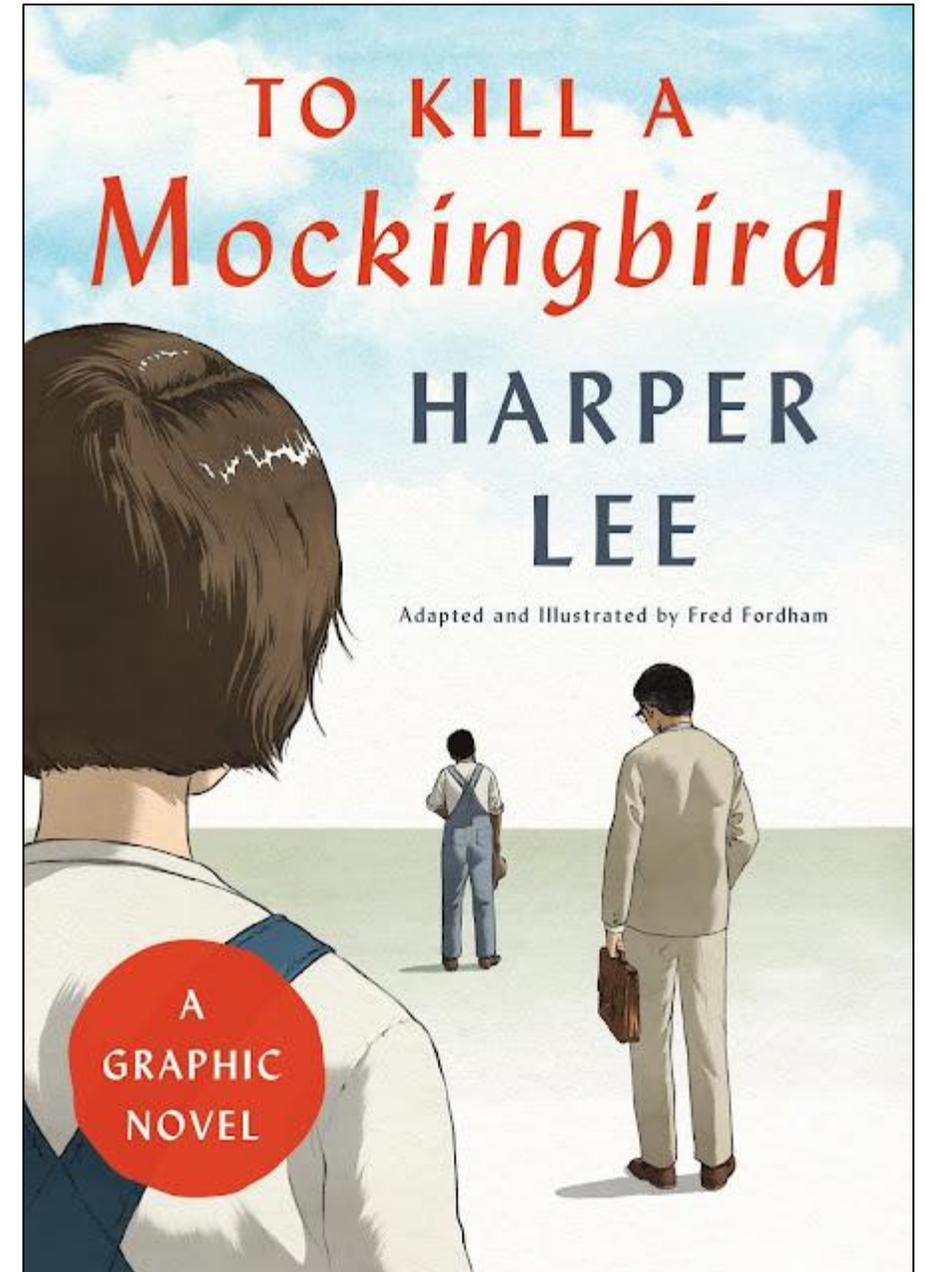
Many details in the novel are loaded with added meaning; they represent something more than what they are.

## STRUCTURE:

Lee structures the book in two parts and 31 chapters. There are main plots, sub-plots, and stand-alone episodes working together.

## THEME DEVELOPMENT

In literature, a theme is a message about life. Lee develops her themes through a variety of overlapping elements.



Harper Publishing, 2018

# UNIT PREVIEW

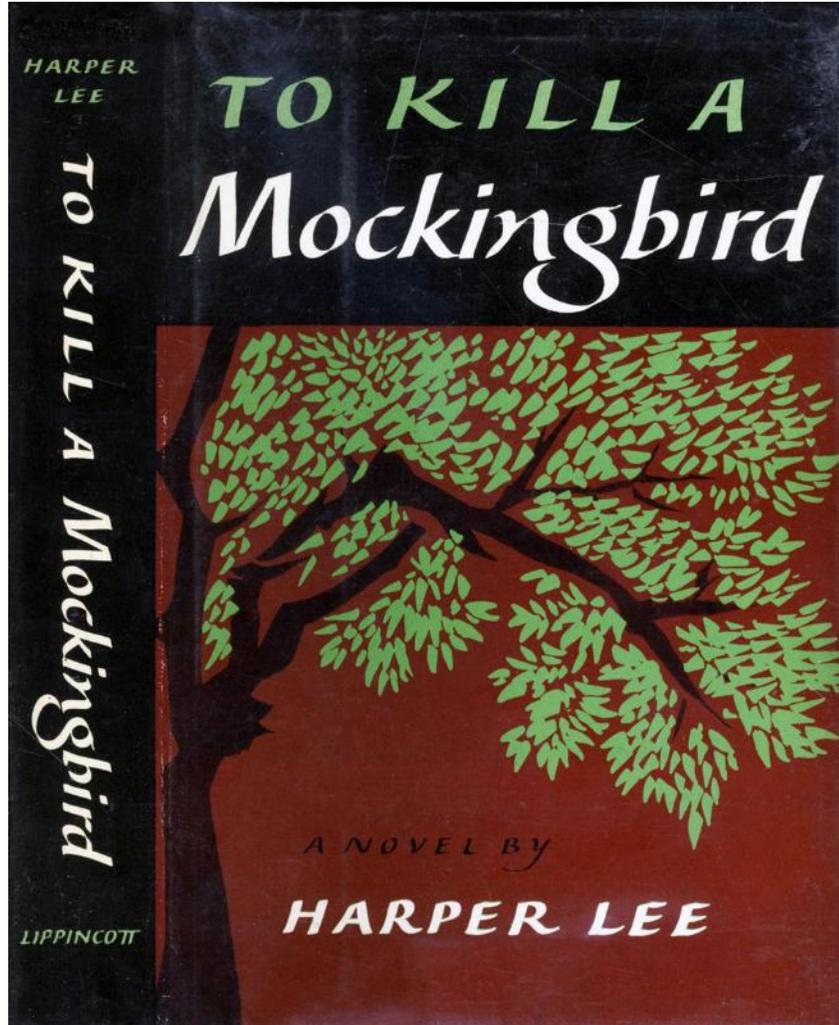
# SENSITIVE TOPICS & EXPECTATIONS

The novel focuses on Jem, Dill, and Scout, but the content is not kids' stuff.

- Racist slurs (the n-word)
- Systemic racism
- Sexual assault
- Profanity / strong language
- Graphic violence
- Child abuse / neglect
- Sexist attitudes
- Violence to animals

What expectations can we set as a class to make sure that this content is discussed appropriately? (For example, saying “n-word” instead of the word.)

# READING SCHEDULE



**Reading 1: Chapters 1-5**

**Reading 2: Chapters 6-9**

**Reading 3: Chapters 10-14**

**Reading 4: Chapters 15-18**

**Reading 5: Chapters 19-23**

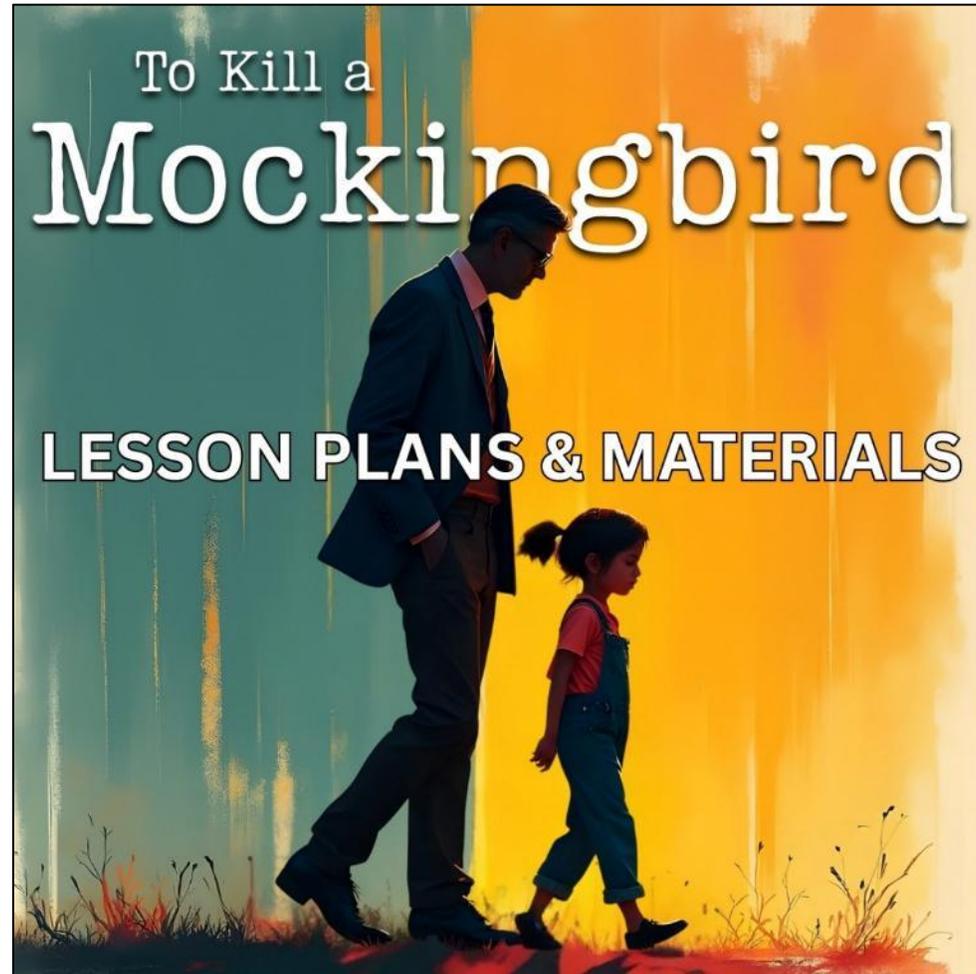
**Reading 6: Chapters 24-31**

# UNIT GOALS



- Analyze the effects of point of view.
- Explain how historical context (setting and publication) shapes literature.
- Interpret symbolism and imagery.
- Trace theme (message) development.
- Engage respectfully in discussions on sensitive topics.
- Produce analytical, creative, and argumentative writing.

THIS PRESENTATION COMES FROM...



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