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To Kill a Mockingbird & the Segregation-Era South

Introduction

To Kill a Mockingbird in Illustration and Art

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee tells a haunting tale of the nameless fears and longings at the heart of the Jim Crow South of the 1930s. The novel, written in the late 1950s, is narrated by an adult, yet this adult relates events as she experienced them and reflected upon them when she was a child. This unique perspective helps to establish the novel as a commentary on two distinct times—the segregation-era Alabama of the 1930s and the Alabama of the early civil rights struggles of the mid-1950s. It is this dual historical context that makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* such a good candidate for the approach we take to teaching great novels in the MindSparks Great Literature in Illustration & Art series.

As with each of the other teacher's guides in this series, this one uses twelve illustrations to focus on a number of major themes in one great novel. The illustrations help provide historical or social context and a dramatic focus for activities exploring the novel in greater depth. That focus, however, is not solely on historical setting. The activities and discussion points that accompany each image relate that image both to the historical context and to key themes in the novel itself. Our goal is a unique fusion of art, literature, and historical background information.

The twelve illustrations are grouped into four lessons (three illustrations per lesson), and each of these lessons explores one broad topic in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Small-Town Life in the 1930s

The three illustrations in this lesson focus on the quality of daily life in small towns in the South during the Great Depression. The apparent openness and friendliness of such places often masked sharp divisions of race and social class. Nevertheless, the strengths of small-town life also allowed for the kind of growth and independence seen in some of the novel's main characters, children as well as adults.

The Jim Crow South

The era of Jim Crow segregation was at its height in the 1930s. The three illustrations in this lesson focus on the way in which segregation split small communities throughout the South.

Race and Justice: The Scottsboro Incident

The trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* mirrors the famous Scottsboro case in many important ways. A full understanding of the case is helpful in appreciating the meaning accorded the Robinson trial in the novel.

The System Starts to Crumble

To Kill a Mockingbird was written as the era of segregation was starting to crumble during the mid-1950s. The dual voice of the narrator, at once that of an adult and a child, can be better appreciated as a way of contrasting these two eras. The strong hold of tradition, both positive and negative, is seen from the perspective of both the past and the ever-changing present.

The MindSparks Program

*Using Visual Images
in the Classroom*

Many textbooks today contain colorful visuals, but, all too often, these images function primarily to fill space or offer little educational value. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable, often doing little more than providing simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, school materials pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help the students master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as social or historical documents. The lessons in MindSparks booklets focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, and their emotional power and ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

After using the booklet, you may wish to look at some of the many other MindSparks products using editorial cartoons, photographs, posters, and other visual images. To order MindSparks products, or for more information, just call toll-free: 1-800-421-4246.

How This Booklet Is Organized

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three cartoons per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND-INFORMATION SHEET

This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY PAGES FOR EACH VISUAL DISPLAY

Each page includes one image, and a sequence of questions is provided to help you plan an all-classroom discussion while examining the image. The questions take students step-by-step through an analysis of the visual. For students who require more support to answer the questions, you may hand them an entire discussion-activity page, reproducible in order to provide more visual support. For students who need less support to answer questions, keep the page yourself, and ask the questions of the class as a whole in order to provide a listening and response-writing activity. In addition to these questions, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. The instructions for these activities are directed to the student. Some are individual assignments while others work best as small-group or all-class activities. You may reproduce any of these pages for classroom use. Answers to factual questions are also provided on the inside back cover of the booklet.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND OTHER VISUAL ART

Images are printed alongside discussion questions and follow-up activities on reproducible pages, making them readily available to students. Stand-alone versions of all images, also reproducible, can be found in the appendix. Using images without the text may prove useful for testing or to encourage students to formulate their own analyses before consulting the text.

To Kill a Mockingbird & the Segregation-Era South

OBJECTIVES

1. Students will better understand the nature of social life in small Southern towns in the 1930s.
 2. Students will discuss the effects of setting on the story told in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
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Small-Town Life in the 1930s

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 1

To Kill a Mockingbird takes place in the 1930s in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama. The time and setting are important. There were hundreds of communities like Maycomb in the South in those years. This photo shows the downtown section of a similar town in South Carolina in 1939. People in small towns like this knew each other by name. Life moved at a slow pace. Such places seemed relaxed and friendly. However, these were also the years of the Great Depression. The nation's economy was in deep trouble. Millions were out of work. Many were wandering the country in search of jobs. Nevertheless, the town in this photograph seems unaffected by the national catastrophe, as does Maycomb in the novel. However, Maycomb's small-town friendliness only hides real tensions and deep divisions between people. It is these tensions and dividing lines that *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores.

Illustration 2

Together, justice, courts, and the law make up another key theme in the novel. A large part of the story is taken up with the arrest, trial, and punishment of a black man who is falsely accused of raping a white woman. The trial takes place in a courtroom much like the one shown here. Again, the atmosphere in small-town courtrooms like this was often informal and friendly—or at least it seemed to be. In this setting, however, the deep divides in a small community often surfaced in dramatic and even deadly ways. These divides—between rich and poor, blacks and whites, men and women—all play a part in the courtroom scenes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Illustration 3

This photo captures another feature of the easygoing pace of small-town America in the 1930s. In such towns, children spent large amounts of time on their own, away from the direct supervision of any adult. This is an important aspect of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The narrator in the novel is an adult, but she retells events as she remembers experiencing them as a child. Adults do have an impact on the children, teaching them good and bad lessons about life in Maycomb, but the children learn the lessons in their own way. This gives the reader a unique, somewhat more objective view of the ways of life in this small Southern town.

Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. This is a photo of a small town similar to Maycomb in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The photo was taken in the 1930s, the same era as the story in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. How can you tell this photo is from the 1930s?
2. This town may seem peaceful and relaxed, but the 1930s was actually a very difficult time for the whole nation. From your knowledge of history, can you explain why?
3. In this town, as in Maycomb, many people knew each other by name. Small towns like this are often thought of as friendly, relaxed places. Why do you think such towns are seen this way? Do you think they actually are this way? Why or why not?
4. How would you compare this town to the one in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Are they exactly alike? In what ways, if any, are they different?
5. What would you like about living in this town? What would you not like? Explain your answers.

Follow-up Activities

1. At the start of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the narrator, Scout, describes Maycomb as “an old town, but it was a tired old town. . . .” Find this passage and read all of it. Look for other descriptions of Maycomb in other parts of the novel. Based on the picture you get of Maycomb, compare that town to the one shown in the above photograph. In what ways are the two towns alike? In what ways do they seem different? Either write a short essay about Maycomb or draw a picture of how you think Maycomb might have looked. Share your essays and drawings in a class discussion about the setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
2. What if the setting for *To Kill a Mockingbird* had been a larger Southern city, such as Montgomery, Alabama? How would that have changed the novel? Would it have improved the novel? Would it have made the novel worse? Would it have had little effect on the novel? Discuss these questions in class.

Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Discussing the Illustration

1. A very important part of *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place in the courtroom of the Maycomb County courthouse. This photo is of another courthouse in a small Southern community in the 1930s. In what ways does this courtroom remind you of the one in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?
2. In courts in small Southern communities during the 1930s, it was common for most people to know one another personally. That is, the judge, members of the jury, people in the audience, lawyers, and the person on trial might all know one another. Is that similar or dissimilar to trials that take place in your community today?
3. Do you think fair trials are more or less likely when people all know each other in a court trial? Why or why not?

Follow-up Activity

1. The description of the county courthouse in *To Kill a Mockingbird* stresses the influence of the South's past. That is, the building is a strange mixture of past styles of architecture, some going back to the days of plantations and slavery before the Civil War. This effect of the South's past on Maycomb and on its people is stressed in many other ways throughout *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For example, read or reread parts of the book dealing with one of the following:

- The Finch family history
- Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose
- Arthur "Boo" Radley and his family

Write an essay on the topic you have chosen. In the essay, answer these three questions:

- A. How does the past continue to affect the present in this case?
- B. Is this influence of the past good or bad?
- C. In this case, how does the past add to the overall story in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?